

# RADICAL ENLIGHTENMENT NOW?

by Johnson Kent Wright

It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to respond to Henry C. Clark's essay, which comes on the heels of his and Christine Dunn Henderson's masterful selection and translation of political articles from Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*.<sup>[41]</sup> Clark and Dunn have rendered a tremendous service to Anglophone scholarship on the Enlightenment, for which we should all be grateful. As Hank points out here, the *Encyclopédie's* political message proved elusive from the start. Responses varied widely. In France, condemnation by ecclesiastical and secular authorities nearly derailed the enterprise at the outset. But it was seen through to completion, owing in part to skillful editorial tacking, but also to the protection by liberal reformers such as Malesherbes. Across the Channel, the *Encyclopédie* was regarded as a pedagogical feast by Adam Smith, and its political articles were seen as comprising "a noble system of civil liberty" by Owen Ruffhead, a Welsh critic of Wilkes. For Edmund Burke, on the other hand, benefitting from hindsight, the *Encyclopédie* was the very model of the arid and unbending rationalism that had led inexorably to the Revolution. Today, Burke's case for the essential *radicalism* of the *Encyclopédie* has been restated in magisterial fashion by Jonathan Israel -- though for purposes of celebration rather than commination. On Israel's account, Diderot and d'Alembert's work was indeed a "war machine": its publication marked the arrival on French shores of the militant "Spinozism" that served as the "one particular 'big' cause" of the entire cycle of political revolutions that convulsed the Atlantic world in the half-century after 1776.<sup>[42]</sup>



*Adam Smith*

What is Hank's response? First, to suggest that, far from any radicalism, what would have struck any "casual, ordinary eighteenth-century reader" on glancing at the *Encyclopédie's* political articles is "a certain pronounced strand of 'conservatism,'" easily overlooked today. How else to describe the role assumed by the jurist Boucher d'Argis? Pressed into service after the initial collisions with authority, he went on to contribute some 4,500 articles to the enterprise, all unfailingly moderate and reformist in outlook. Or take the case of Rousseau. His mature outlook got a try-out in the *Encyclopédie*, the Third Discourse first appearing as "Economie ou Oeconomie" in its fifth volume. But Rousseau subsequently took his ideas, including the "general will" itself, elsewhere. In the *Encyclopédie*, his own essay was trumped by Boulanger's far longer and thoroughly unradical "Oeconomie politique" in volume 11. But the chief test-case for the political profile of the *Encyclopédie*, Hank argues, lies in the work of Jaucourt -- author of some 17,000 articles total, more than half of those collected in *Encyclopedic Liberty*. To Jaucourt fell the task of introducing French readers to the harvest of a century of cutting-edge political thought from the Protestant world. But here Hank introduces a twist in his argument. Given Jaucourt's well-attested debt to Montesquieu -- "it was through the sieve of his close reading of of Montesquieu, and especially *The Spirit of the Laws* (*De l'esprit des lois*), that

Jaucourt offered up his political commentary" -- "it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that the overall 'radicalism' of the *Encyclopédie* depends largely on our assessment of the 'radicalism' of the Baron de la Brède." Alas, that is a subject for another occasion, Hank writes -- though he concludes by reminding us that Montesquieu was "radical" enough to get *De l'esprit des lois* condemned by the Sorbonne and the Papacy, "conservative" enough to fall afoul of French revolutionary egalitarianism, and "moderate" enough to win the embrace Anglo-Saxon liberalism.

As a demonstration of how to have one's rhetorical cake and eat it too, Hank's essay could hardly be bettered. After teasing us with the suggestion that the *Encyclopédie's* political message might be the exact opposite of that described by Israel, Hank appeals to Montesquieu in order to table the question, pending further inquiry, while hinting that we may well discover that what the text offers, in the end, is the benign pluralism summed up in Norman Hampson's phrase: "not so much an ideology as a quarry," with something for everybody. Of course, elegant fencing of this kind is probably the best one can do in responding to Jonathan Israel. No matter what is actually contained in its 77,000 articles, the *Encyclopédie* could never have been anything other than the very incarnation of "Radical Enlightenment," which Israel sees as the Prime Mover in the advent of "modernity" itself -- just as surely as Jacobinism would later turn out to represent a "Counter-Enlightenment." The publication of the *Encyclopedie* is indeed the pivot of the master-narrative that extends across Israel's pentalogy -- what made it possible for the radical "Spinozism" incubated in the late 17th-century Netherlands to unleash the "General Revolution" that swept around the globe at the end of the 18th.<sup>[43]</sup> A tidal wave of criticism from professionals in the fields he has traversed has left Israel completely unmoved. What remains to be explained is why this particular historiographic *image d'Epinal* -- the Radical Enlightenment *caused* the French Revolution -- has resonated so deeply with a wider reading public. No doubt Israel's capture, and domestication, of the term "radical" itself has something to do with his success. But if further proof of its enormous appeal in our time were

needed, it can now be found in Steven Pinker's *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* -- Bill Gates's "new favorite book of all time," praised for its "radical honesty" by David Brooks.<sup>[44]</sup>



**Bill Gates**

But perhaps Israel and Pinker are not quite the last word in "radicalism," at least where the *Encyclopédie* is concerned. Let me suggest two different avenues for approaching the issue anew, in regard to both form and content, in ways that might appeal to Hank and to Jonathan Israel alike. First, on the side of form, is it possible that what we are confronted with in the *Encyclopédie* is not just "esoteric" writing, but esoteric writing of a novel kind? That the question can even be posed in this way is owing to the recent appearance of Arthur M. Melzer's *Philosophy between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing*.<sup>[45]</sup> Melzer's serene and level-headed book -- the first comprehensive survey of the topic, surprisingly enough -- begins with the overwhelming evidence for the *existence* of the phenomenon of esotericism, not just in the West but around the globe, and concludes by considering the consequences for modern thought of the recovery of this "lost history." But Melzer's greatest service lies in the lucid taxonomy of four different kinds of esotericism set

forth in the middle of the text -- *defensive*, meant to shield its practitioners from persecution; *protective*, serving to insulate its audience from "dangerous truths"; *pedagogical*, in which obscurity and ambiguity are seen as teaching tools in and of themselves; and finally, *political* esotericism. The last is the joker in the pack, distinct from the other three in two ways: first, for being a thoroughly modern phenomenon, no more than three or four centuries old; and second, for being inspired by purely *political* rather than *philosophical* motives -- intended neither to promote and protect philosophy nor to shield society from its truths, but instead to use it as an instrument for changing the world. Thus *cloister* -- the "single word that best conveyed the essential characteristic of premodern philosophical secrecy" -- gave way to "*conspiracy*, which is initial concealment for the sake of future disclosure."[\[46\]](#)



**Sir Francis Bacon (circa. 1578)**

Exhibit #1 for "political esotericism"? Though it was preceded by a series of daring solo "philosophical conspirators" -- Machiavelli, Bacon, Descartes, Spinoza -- the "most surprising and illuminating case" of political esotericism is none other than the *Encyclopédie*, "the flagship of the modern Enlightenment and its project of political rationalization."[\[47\]](#) Here all Melzer has to do is introduce the basic evidence: not just the various articles directly addressing political esotericism in this sense ("Exotérique et sotérique," "Mensonge officieux," and

Jaucourt's own "Mensonge"), but also the specific avowals of editorial intent: in d'Alembert's famous letter to Voltaire:

"No doubt we have some bad articles in theology and metaphysics, but with theologians as censors ... I defy you to make them better. There are articles, less open to the light, where all is repaired. Time will enable people to distinguish what we have thought from what we have said",[\[48\]](#)

and in Diderot's explanation of the *Encyclopédie's* system of cross-references in his own article "Encyclopédie."

"When it is necessary, [the cross-references] will produce a completely opposite effect: they will counter notions; they will bring principles into contrast; they will secretly attack, unsettle, overturn certain ridiculous opinions which one would not dare to insult openly.... This means of undeceiving men operates very promptly on good minds, and it operates infallibly and without any detrimental consequence -- secretly and without scandal -- on all minds. It is the art of deducing tacitly the boldest consequences. If these confirming and refuting cross-references are planned well in advance, and prepared skillfully, they will give an encyclopedia the character which a good dictionary ought to possess: this character is that of changing the common manner of thinking."[\[49\]](#)

That is as far as Melzer goes -- but it is some distance, directly abutting Team ARTFL's work on the cross-references cited by Hank. Jonathan Israel gets a respectful nod from Melzer as well.[\[50\]](#) But that points us on from form to content. Is there anything more specific to be said about the aims of the *Encyclopédie's* "political esotericism" beyond the Israel conception of "Radical Enlightenment" -- "monism, "democracy," "human rights," and the like? For purposes of discussion, let me make a suggestion, inspired by the cohort of French scholars currently hard at work on what they call the "French exception" -- the exceptionally *radical* character assumed by republicanism in France, by comparison with



its variants elsewhere in the Atlantic world.<sup>[51]</sup> Their specific focus is what they term "social republicanism," founded on a radical egalitarianism that was without precedent in the early republican tradition -- indeed, was born of its sudden and explosive fusion with hitherto adjacent but distinct currents of utopian thought. So far, this cohort has devoted its attention primarily to the most spectacular fruits of "social republicanism," revolutionary Jacobinism and the Babeuism that mutated out of it, together with their 19th-century fallout. Investigation of its earlier appearances has been largely confined to Rousseau and to pioneers in blending republican and utopian themes -- Morelly and Mably. As for the *origines lointaines* of French "social republicanism," one obvious place to start would be with what Michael Sonenscher dubbed, in *Sans-Culottes*, the "Rousseau-Fénelon pairing" (by contrast with the "Rousseau-Montesquieu pairing") -- the profoundly influential current of thought launched by Fénelon's effort to bring "ancient prudence" to bear on the reform of modern monarchy. This was the tradition to which Istvan Hont referred in the passage from his *Politics in Commercial Society* cited by Hank. It was a long journey, of course, from the "Rousseau-Fénelon pairing" to Robespierre and Babeuf. But it would be interesting to know what, if anything, the long incubation of "social republicanism" in this sense owed to the *Encyclopédie* in particular. That is perhaps another job for Team ARTFL -- to set out in search, not of Israel's Radical Enlightenment, but of this other, less "Spinozist" and more home-grown form of radicalism.

But neither of these suggestions is intended to let Hank off the hook in regard to the "Jaucourt-Montesquieu pairing." If he continues to think that the question of the radicalism, or otherwise, of the *Encyclopédie* is at one with that of *De l'esprit de lois*, then I propose that we corner him in discussion and force him to cough up the answer. One can understand his reluctance, especially given that the stakes here extend to Rousseau as well. Paul Rahe, second to none in uncovering the interplay between esoteric and exoteric writing in the Western political thought, has recently argued that "Jean-Jacques Rousseau constructed his system within the framework of Montesquieu's science of politics.... [T]he critique of bourgeois society

that he shouted from the rooftops was a restatement of themes presented in a highly muted fashion in *The Spirit of the Laws*."<sup>[52]</sup> Is something like that true for the *Encyclopédie* as well?

#### Endnotes

[41.] Henry C. Clark, ed., *Encyclopedic Liberty: Political Articles in the Dictionary of Diderot and d'Alembert*, Henry C. Clark and Christine Dunn Henderson, trans. (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund: 2016).

[42.] For a sample of Israel's claims about "causation," see the concluding cadences of *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights, 1750-1790* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 950-51.

[43.] *Democratic Enlightenment* was the third volume in the series. Israel has gone on to publish *Revolutionary Ideas: An Intellectual History of the French Revolution from The Rights of Man to Robespierre* (Oxford & Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014) -- which drummed the Jacobins out of the Radical Enlightenment -- and, most recently, *The Expanding Blaze: How the American Revolution Ignited the World, 1750-1848* (Oxford and Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

[44.] Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (New York: Viking, 2018). For Gates's effusion, see <<https://www.gatesnotes.com/Books/Enlightenment-Now>>; for Brooks, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/22/opinion/stev-en-pinker-radical-honesty.html>>.

[45.] Arthur M. Melzer, *Philosophy between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

[46.] *Ibid.*, p. 246.

[47.] *Ibid.*, p. 249.

[48.] Cited in Melzer, p. 250).

[49.] Cited in Melzer, pp. 250-51.

[50.] *Ibid.*, p. 247.

[51] For samples of their work, see Stéphanie Roza and Pierre Crétois, eds., *Le républicanisme sociale: une exception française?* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2014), and Stéphanie Roza, *Comment l'utopie est devenue un programme politique: Du roman à la Révolution* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2015).

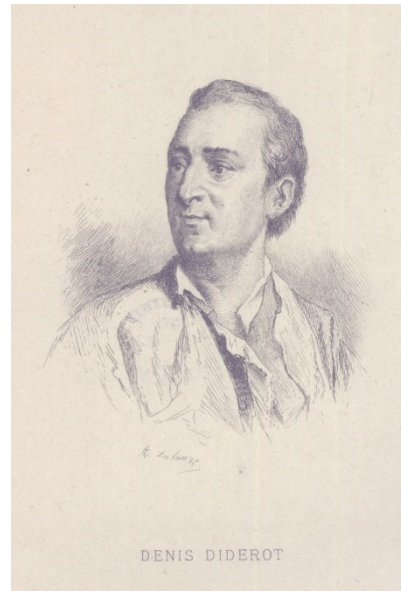
[52] Paul A. Rahe, *Soft Despotism, Democracy's Drift* (New Haven, CT & London: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 138.

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## A BROADLY SUBVERSIVE PROGRAM

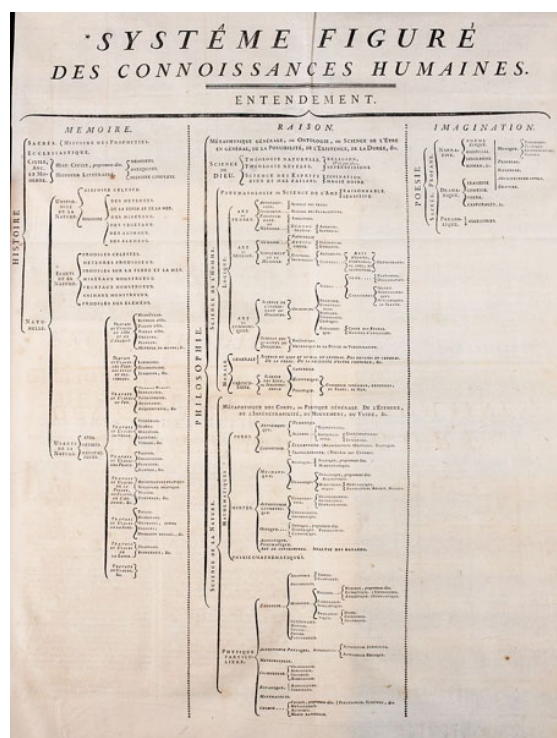
by Andrew Jainchill

In his learned and sharp essay, Henry Clark proposes that the *Encyclopédie* "was 'not so much an ideology as a quarry' from which different readers were destined to draw different kinds of inspiration," and rightly stresses the "eclectic variety of perspectives" in the text. Such an approach serves to caution against discounting the many "conservative" and "reformist" aspects of Diderot's so-called "war machine." Clark is undoubtedly correct to a point, but his argument also risks occluding the genuinely and powerfully subversive currents within the text's nearly 73,000 articles. This is in part because the question posed – "How radical was the political thought of the *Encyclopédie*?" – can only incompletely assess its "radicalism." Extracting explicitly political thought from the work as a whole serves to sidestep many of the text's most political interventions, as many of the text's most "radical" elements do not materialize in response to questions of classical political thought, as important as they are. A brief consideration of three related subjects – religion, epistemology, and privilege – makes clear just how "radical" the *Encyclopédie* could in fact be.



*Denis Diderot*

The most obvious example is the *Encyclopédie's* treatment of religion. Its famous "Map of the System of Human Knowledge" placed the "Science of God" on an equal footing with the "Science of Man" and the "Science of Nature," all as part of "Philosophy" and attributed to the faculty of "Reason." The Map then took the further step of subdividing the "Science of God" into "Natural Theology," "Revealed Theology," and the "Science of Good and Evil Spirits," with the former two regrouped as "Religion, from which, through abuse, Superstition" and the latter divided into "Divination, Black Magic." The visual effect of the Map and the use of terms such as "Superstition" and "Black Magic" are striking. Moreover, the text was full of hidden jabs, such as the infamous cross-reference to "Eucharist, Communion, Altar" found at the end of the entry "Cannibals." [53] The point was, unmistakably, to undermine the authority of the Catholic Church and revealed religion, a point with no small political stakes in the context of France's still sacral monarchy.



**"Map of the System of Human Knowledge"**

The *Encyclopédie* did not simply mock the Church and revealed religion. Even more powerfully, it articulated a new epistemology that aggressively displaced religious knowledge in favor of knowledge derived from human experience and reason, imagination, and memory, the three faculties that structured the tree of knowledge. As Robert Darnton put it in *The Business of Enlightenment*, the *Encyclopédie* "made it clear that knowledge came from the senses and not Rome or Revelation.... They had rearranged the cognitive universe and reoriented man within it, while elbowing God outside."<sup>[54]</sup> Vincenze Ferrone categorizes this as no less than "a genuine epistemological revolution."<sup>[55]</sup> Diderot, in the entry "Encyclopedia," put the matter bluntly: "Man is the unique point from which one must set out, and to which everything must be brought back."<sup>[56]</sup>

With man established as the epistemological starting point, it was not only the epistemological authority of the Church that was "elbowed" aside. The *Encyclopédie* aimed to subject *all* received knowledge to critical analysis. A few pages after declaring the epistemological centrality of "man" in the article "Encyclopedia," Diderot called for "intellectual courage" and wrote that "all things must be

examined, all must be winnowed and sifted without exception and without sparing anyone's sensibilities."<sup>[57]</sup> This sentiment was in many ways the animating impulse of the entire intellectual enterprise. And critical reason, once liberated from tradition, would question the foundational institutions and principles of the Old Regime throughout the *Encyclopédie*'s 17 volumes of text. In the article "Trading Company," for example, the reader is told that "[the purpose of the \*Encyclopédie\* is to instruct](#)" and, then, that the "prejudice" against commercial competition "[has not entirely dissipated ...](#) because it is easier to imitate than to reason."<sup>[58]</sup>

Perhaps no traditional institution was subject to more withering attack than that of "privilege." Indeed, William Sewell describes the *Encyclopédie* as "the Philosophes' most important weapon in their attack on privileges."<sup>[59]</sup> Multiple articles addressed the topic, both under the heading "privilege" and as it pertained to other matters. The first entry under the head word "Privilege," categorized as "grammar" but clearly taking aim at a much broader range of issues, explained that privilege was an "advantage accorded to one man over another. The only legitimate *privileges* are those that nature accords. All others can be regarded as injustices carried out against all men in favor of a single individual."<sup>[60]</sup> The article, uncertainly attributed to Diderot, plainly called into question this pillar of Old Regime France. Crucially, it did so by invoking the authority of nature and implicitly downgrading that of tradition and established hierarchies. And Turgot, in his famous article on "[Foundations](#)," certainly did not pull any punches in arguing that the traditional privileges of corporate bodies should not be considered authoritative or binding. The "reflections" advanced in his article, he wrote in its final paragraph,

["ought to leave no doubt](#) on the incontestable right possessed by the government ... to dispose of old foundations, to extend their funds to new objects, or, better still, to suppress them altogether. Public utility is the supreme law, and it ought not to be nullified by any superstitious respect for what we call the intention of the founder — as if ignorant and short-sighted

individuals had the right to chain to their capricious wills the generations that had still to be born."

Strikingly, Turgot did not stop there and continued his assault on the privileges of corporate bodies by invoking the rights of citizens against corporate bodies.

"[Citizens have rights](#), and rights sacred for the very body of society. They exist independent of that society. They are its necessary elements. They enter into it with all their rights, solely that they may place themselves under the protection of those same laws to which they sacrifice their liberty. But private bodies do not exist of themselves, nor for themselves; they have been formed by society, and they ought not to exist a moment after they have ceased to be useful."[\[61\]](#)

In a society saturated with privilege, one can hardly imagine a more "radical" political stance.

This brief discussion points to what could be considered a broadly subversive program that actively undermined key elements of Old Regime political culture. Such was the judgment of the royal historiographer Moreau, who in 1757 condemned the *Encyclopédie* as undermining "morality, religion and government."[\[62\]](#) Clark is undoubtedly correct that the *Encyclopédie* was a kind of "quarry." But a reader who carefully excavated the text would find less durable material for reinforcing the bases of Old Regime political culture than for laying the foundations of a rather different social and political order.

#### Endnotes

[\[53.\]](#) "Anthropophages [Cannibals]," *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.*, eds. Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert (University of Chicago: ARTFL Encyclopédie Project, Autumn 2017 Edition), Robert Morrissey and Glenn Roe (eds), <<http://encyclopedie.uchicago.edu/>>, 1:498.

[\[54.\]](#) Robert Darnton, *The Business of Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the Encyclopédie, 1775-1800* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1979), 7-8.

[\[55.\]](#) Vincenze Ferrone, *The Enlightenment: History of an Idea*, trans. Elisabetta Tarantino (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2015), 109.

[\[56.\]](#) "Encyclopédie [Encyclopedia]," *Encyclopédie*, 5:641. Quoted in Ferrone, *The Enlightenment*, 110, with a slightly different translation.

[\[57.\]](#) "Encyclopédie [Encyclopedia]," *Encyclopédie*, 5:644A. Quoted in Keith Michael Baker, "Enlightenment Idioms, Old Regime Discourses, and Revolutionary Improvisations," in *From Deficit to Deluge: The Origins of the French Revolution*, ed. Thomas E. Kaiser and Dale K. Van Kley (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 174.

[\[58.\]](#) Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, *Encyclopedic Liberty: Political Articles in the Dictionary of Diderot and d'Alembert*, ed. Henry C. Clark, trans. Henry C. Clark and Christine Dunn Henderson (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2016), 58.

[\[59.\]](#) William Sewell, *Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 23.

[\[60.\]](#) "Privilège [Privilege]," *Encyclopédie*, 13:389.

[\[61.\]](#) See "Foundation" in *Encyclopedic Liberty*, 208, where it is the penultimate paragraph. In the original, it is the final paragraph. *Encyclopédie*, 7:75.

[\[62.\]](#) This is the paraphrase of the "General Chronology of the Encyclopédie" of the ARTFL project. <<http://encyclopedie.uchicago.edu/node/82>>.



forbids, but is permitted or even encouraged by the Straussian approach.

#### Endnotes

[98.] M. F. Burnyeat, "Sphinx Without a Secret," *New York Review of Books*, May 30, 1985 -- which provoked a wonderfully funny ruckus in the Letters pages, as one big name after another -- Cropsey, Jaffa, Bloom, etc. -- protested over the caricatures of both Burnyeat and David Levine (who was held to have given Strauss "two right hands").

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[Henry C. Clark](#) has been a visiting professor in the Political Economy Project at Dartmouth College since 2014. Before then, he taught at Canisius College (where he became professor of history), Norwich University, Lawrence University, Tulane University, and Clemson University. He is the author of *La Rochefoucauld and the Language of Unmasking in Seventeenth-Century France* (1994) and *Compass of Society: Commerce and Absolutism in Old-Regime France* (2007). He has edited *Commerce, Culture and Liberty: Readings on Capitalism Before Adam Smith* (2003), and has translated *Montesquieu's Mes pensées* (My Thoughts [2012]), named a *Choice* magazine Outstanding Academic Title. His edition, co-translated with Christine D. Henderson, of *Encyclopedic Liberty: Political Articles in the Dictionary of Diderot and d'Alembert* appeared in 2016. His articles and reviews have appeared in journals of history, political science, philosophy and economics. His current book project, on which this post is loosely based, bears the provisional title *Honor Management: The Unsocial Passions and the Untold Story of Modernity*.

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