

The evidences against 'L'Évidence' **Keynes, Galiani and Diderot on the fallacy of naturalistic economics**

It is a commonplace to say that the eighteenth-century marks the birth of modern empiricism, under the tutelar figure of John Locke. This commonplace, however, has cloaked for years a most difficult question: what *is* empiricism? The standard answer is that empiricists assert that all knowledge comes from experience and must be tested against experience. Unfortunately, this answer is not satisfactory for many reasons. Firstly, it is absurd: the thesis that all knowledge comes from experience cannot itself be tested by experience. Thus empiricism is, by its own standards, untenable. Secondly, far from adopting of kind of down-to-earth, believe-in-when-I-see-it attitude, eighteenth-century empiricists have a tendency to indulge in the wildest speculations concerning the influence of physics on human affairs. So-called empiricists were, in other words, dogmatic *materialists* who confused *speculating on* experience with *speaking from* experience. Thus eighteenth-century empiricism, which legitimized itself as the sound and scientific answer to the wild speculations of theologians and metaphysicians, whom it accused of being driven by dogma, not reason, was itself an ideology in the making, only replacing the magical words "God" or "Reason" by the word "Nature".

The reason why empiricism was allowed to flourish unquestioned was political: it served as a useful basis for the emergence of economic liberalism. It is not surprising, therefore, that the crisis of liberalism – on the social, political and economical levels – finally led to it being heavily criticized. One such criticism was voiced by John Maynard Keynes in 1926 in "The End of *laissez-faire*". Keynes reminds us that the expression "Laissez-faire" was first used by the Marquis d'Argenson about 1751, in the midst of the French debate on the liberalisation of the grain trade (the effects of this liberalisation – famine for the poor and huge profits for tradesmen – can be seen as an early illustration of the evils economic liberalism). Keynes' essay is not a scientific work: it is a pedagogical work mobilizing historical examples and euristic metaphors (including giraffes) in order to expose, beneath the veneer of scientificity, the ideological roots of liberalism. Keynes' attempt is not unprecedented; indeed, as early as 1770, Galiani had attempted the same task of demystifying liberalism in a masterpiece of economic vulgarization: *Dialogues sur le commerce des blés*.

Galiani's book became a best-seller, not least thanks to the support it received from Denis Diderot, who proof-read and promoted it. Most interestingly, Diderot had first been highly skeptical of Galiani's anti-liberal stance. He had been swayed by the physiocrat Mercier de la Rivière, who proclaimed the existence of a natural economic order, analogical to the natural laws regulating the physical order. The confusion between empiricism and materialism was blatant in the physiocrats' insistence that their model was founded on "l'évidence" – never had a physicalist dogma been further removed from corroborated by experience. Galiani used reason, pedagogy and even wit to finally overturn Diderot's dogmatic conviction; but most of all, he used evidence – geographical, biological, political, psychological. In a striking paradox, the debate on free trade thus marked a turning point in Diderot's career: Galiani had produced evidences against "l'évidence" and thus led him from pseudo-empiricism to real empiricism, from physicalist dogma to the study of human affairs. The consequences were far-reaching, not only for Diderot's economical stance but for all aspects of his philosophy, and also for the ways in which he wrote it.

The debate between Diderot and Galiani shows the strategic position of commerce in philosophical thought, both in the eighteenth-century and today. In times when the key words of political thought are nature, utility and well-being, it is essential that the meaning of these words is not lost in speculation. Whereae economy is easily subverted by ideology, these ideologies are put to the test by the realities of commerce. It thus provides a focal point for philosophers who are keen to relate their systems to experience.