

L'ENCYCLOPÉDIE AS A PLACE OF MEMORY

A ENCYCLOPÉDIE COMO LUGAR DE MEMÓRIA

José Fernando Martins¹

ABSTRACT: Recognizing the importance of the *Encyclopédie*, this essay shows its role in the French Culture and the way that it defined itself as a place of memory.

The *Encyclopédie* provokes a change in the political and social paradigm, altering the world view for the modern man, also having an evident influence on the ideals of the French Revolution.

In a conflict with religious ideals and even with the absolutism established at the time, components that revealed themselves as impediments to freedom, the *Encyclopédie* appeared, and the guiding elements concerned freedom in the most diverse areas, from the individual, to thought, and to written expression.

KEYWORDS: *Encyclopédie, Memory, French, Diderot, Knowledge, History, Culture*

RESUMO: Reconhecendo a importância da *Encyclopédie*, este ensaio demonstra o seu papel na cultura francesa e o modo como esta se define enquanto lugar de memória.

¹ José Fernando Martins is an administrative assistant at BNP Paribas. He has a degree in Cultural Studies from the University of Minho, was president of the Student Association of the Cultural Studies Course at the University of Minho, where he created the magazine "Lince Cultural" together with other colleagues. He is currently attending the Masters in Intercultural Studies for Business at the Instituto Superior de Contabilidade e Administração in Porto. His areas of interest for study include gender studies, cultural studies and in a particular way queer theory.

A *Encyclopédie* provoca uma mudança no paradigma político-social, alterando a perspectiva do mundo para o Homem moderno, tendo também uma influência evidente nos ideais da Revolução Francesa.

Num conflito com ideais religiosos e ainda com o absolutismo estabelecido naquela época, os componentes que se revelaram como impedimentos à liberdade, a *Encyclopédie* surgiu, e os elementos orientadores, no que diz respeito à liberdade nas suas mais diversas áreas, desde a individual, à de pensamento, e ainda à expressão escrita.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Encyclopédie, Memória, Francesa, Diderot, Conhecimento, História, Cultura*

Introduction

The main objective of this academic work is to show how the *Encyclopédie* established itself as a place of memory and the practical cases of its use, without forgetting the theoretical aspects of it.

Due to the page limit of this paper, the analysis will be concentrated in five moments. The first part will evoke how the idea of the encyclopedia has been disseminated since the middle ages, highlighting the names of Aristotle, Vincent of Beauvais, responsible for preparing a practical guide, oriental philosophers, and even Francis Bacon, who led to a change in the learning paradigm.

In the second part, one will mention those responsible for the creation of the main theme of this essay - the French Encyclopedia - in this case, Jean-Baptiste d'Alembert, Denis Diderot, Jean-Michel Papillon, and Pierre Mouchon and how the *Encyclopédie* broke barriers in the most varied domains, the rational, political and philosophical, criticizing society and the institutions of the time, in an attempt to disseminate knowledge, having also driven a cultural and knowledge revolution.

Then, in the third part, an effort will be made to try to clarify the concept of places of memory according to the perspective of the author Pierre Nora and his essay - *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire*. In this part, we will distinguish the concepts of memory and history and how they are interconnected.

Subsequently, on the fourth part, according to the definition of the place of memory from Pierre Nora's essay, essential definitions will be outlined to be able to link the Encyclopedia to terms such as history, memory, and place of memory, the latter in its three fundamental aspects, the material, the symbolic and the functional.

Lastly, one will try to interconnect all the aspects mentioned across the essay to explain how the *Encyclopédie* can be represented and understood as a place of memory in line with Pierre Nora's definitions.

In the beginning

The idea of the encyclopedia as a compilation of the totality of knowledge appears long before the 17th century, and its purpose would be to be a kind of authentic bookstore that would dispense recourse to other books (Collier *et al.*, 1957).

On the other hand, Aristotle's works constituted a truly encyclopedic knowledge for the time; in the Middle Ages, Bishop Isidore of Seville, between 600 and 630 wrote 20 books not on ecclesiastical matters, but also on other varied topics of culture and knowledge, which constituted a "tremendous" authority for the time and were reprinted with commentaries in the 16th century (*ibidem*).

During the thirteenth century, Vincent of Beauvais, at the behest of Louis IX, the French king was responsible for the creation of *Speculum maius*, a practical guide to official public education with chapters covering a wide range of subjects, from logic and rhetoric to poetry, law and politics, commerce and navigation, medicine, mathematics, theology, astronomy, and even including mythology (*ibidem*).

After Beauvais, more than five centuries passed before someone took up the idea of combining all human knowledge. Brunetto Latini was also responsible for writing an encyclopedia in ancient French - *Le Livres dou tresor* - which was based on Vincent of Beauvais' creation. It was divided into three parts, the first dealing with history and the natural sciences, the second with vices and virtues, and the last, combining information gathered by Aristotle, on rhetoric and politics (*ibidem*).

Later, oriental philosophers, influenced by Greek writings, produced works whose scope was encyclopedic. For example, *The Catalogue of the Sciences*, whose topics discussed included language and logic, mathematics, physics, politics, metaphysics, theology, and jurisprudence. During the twelfth century, Averroes put together a kind of

medical encyclopedia, and his commentaries on Aristotle's writings constitute a philosophical encyclopedia. As for the seventeenth century, Francis Bacon was responsible for developing the form of the encyclopedia, and his writings draw the beginnings of the scientific approach to learning (*ibidem*).

In the Modern Age, the concept of the encyclopedia changed decisively with the French *Encyclopédie* with its 28 volumes, which for the first time aims to create a world view based on rational, scientific, and strongly critical points of view, giving importance to technological and scientific subjects rather than religious or theological ones, as had been constant until this time (*ibidem*).

The new-Encyclopedia is French

Jean-Baptiste d'Alembert was a French expert in the math, mechanics, physics, philosophy, and music areas, having worked with Denis Diderot in the *Encyclopédie* edition. Denis Diderot was a well-known figure in the enlightenment age, having also been a philosopher, and writer and is most known as one of the editors of the *Encyclopédie* alongside d'Alembert. Jean-Michel Papillon was a French engraver, responsible for the ornamental letters, vignettes, and illustrations in the volumes. Pierre Mouchon was a pastor in charge of the index of the *Encyclopédie*.

French intellectuals, in this specific case, Diderot and D'Alembert grouped all knowledge in an encyclopedia capable of providing the enlightenment ideals to all citizens, between 1755 and 1772 - (Diderot *et al*, 1751-1765).

In the 18th century, due to the volume of ideas and thoughts that tried to resignify a vision of the world from an enlightened perspective, the *Encyclopédie* proved to be a key point in the production of a new, more cultivated citizen, since it brought together concepts on the most varied topics, such as mathematics, theology, grammar, physics, technology, cooking, and even medicine (Diderot *et al*, 1751-1765).

The structure of the Encyclopedia is assimilated into more than two dozen volumes containing more than seventy thousand articles.

It is a veritable war machine, philosophical and rational. It aims to paint a picture of the efforts of the human spirit in all fields and over the centuries, describing the progress of sciences and arts and exercising social, political, and religious activities.

Surreptitiously, and through references to other articles/entries, veiled allusions, and feigned naivety, it virulently criticizes institutions and society, the clergy, and

economic life. Diderot was a strong advocate that the mere fact that a thing has never been impartially questioned does not serve to prove it true and unquestionable. Hence, a skeptical perspective is fundamental - "*Le scepticisme est le premier pas vers la vérité*" (Diderot, 1746).

During the eighteenth century, it emerged in France as an excellent instrument for scientific vulgarization and the dissemination of new knowledge: it was a pulpit where leading specialists came to discuss their innovative theories. Thanks to Diderot's patient research, the twelve illustrated volumes of plates constitute a complete repertory of techniques, arts, and crafts, enabling the universal dissemination of practical knowledge.

In the 18th century, the "self-made man" was in vogue, socially rooted in a kind of pack culture that magically transmuted the ignorant into the educated, through the pragmatism of an infernal machine of popularized production and reproduction of science, philosophy, religion, and fashionable literature. However, the peak of the eighteenth-century diffusion of knowledge was represented by the publication of the *Encyclopédie* and the herculean effort of its highly cultured collaborators who appreciated the project of not translating into French the *Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences* by Ephraïm Chambers but to produce an original work that would be both an exhaustive repertory of aspects of human knowledge and a filter for the elimination of outdated doctrines and a subsequent introducer of theories conducive to the progress of humanity (Diderot *et al*, 1751-1765).

L'*Encyclopédie* as the knowledge revolution

A gigantic monument to the awareness of knowledge, its immediate usefulness could not escape the voltairean spirit who, right from the start, thought of a vast range of specific applications for it.

Apparently, and in a surface structure, the *Encyclopédie* maintains the tradition: from the social point of view, it settled to advocate a more equitable distribution of taxes, a fairer malleability of certain stipulations in legislation, and a more radical intervening power, tending to the disappearance of pauperism; from a political point of view, it limited itself to expressing the desire that the king should continue to govern per the interests of his subjects, that is to say, the people; from a religious point of view, the

articles to be published, liable to the approval of censors, affirmed an orthodox devotion and respected the prevailing dogmas. However, the spirit of this bellicose encyclopedic machine was completely different in its deepest structure: it did not make a frontal attack, but an oblique one; it simulated naivety, but confabulated battles in the shadows; it perfidiously concealed criticism under the deceptive veil of panegyric; it had recourse, above all, to the ingenious process of malicious renunciation.

“Throughout the thousands of pages in the 28 volumes into which the encyclopedia finally grew, there were strong notes of skepticism, firm emphasis on scientific and technological subjects rather than on religion and theology, and half-veiled criticism of conditions existing in France and elsewhere in Europe” (Collier *et al.*, 1957).

Thus, an article, which was noted for its exemplary orthodoxy, referred to a second, which, under a benign appearance, dropped insidious allusions, which, in turn, referred to a third which, in a less anodyne way, did not evade the truth of the aggression. In this way, the basic article, considered to be encomium, was completely refuted to the detriment of incessant referrals, boldly plotted, and strategically placed.

The creation of a historical continuum among men, the establishment of conditions for a temporality where nothing is useless, and the introduction of new writing that would alter the man-world relationship were, in fact, some of the many contributions of this encyclopedic revolution. Its first important input was, undoubtedly, the affirmation that knowledge is not contemplation, but action or, better, human work submitted to the laws of biological-social organisms and to the economic organization of society. Because knowledge is action, it is urgent to rethink the keyword reason - this is his second contribution. In fact, during the previous century, reason was considered in terms of the thirst for innate ideas that defined the common space between the human spirit and divine reason (Diderot *et al.*, 1751-1765).

This prescription of rules underlying the solid construction of knowledge presupposes and conveys the need for man to venture into domains hitherto forbidden, becoming the center of a universe that excels in the absence of God and the denial of transcendence. The image of a providentially orchestrated universe is succeeded by that of another possible one, cemented by interactive forces that establish a humanism that flows into the writing of the world by man and the writing of man for man (Diderot *et al.*, 1751-1765).

Memory vs History

Pierre Nora is a French historian that was selected to the French academy in 2001 and is notorious in the French identity and memory fields, having written in 1989, an essay entitled *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire*.

Memory, in perpetual evolution, is available to the dialectic of remembrance and forgetfulness, unaware concerning its consecutive distortions. Memory is transfiguring, the distance embellishes the events, vulnerable to any uses and manipulations, susceptible of knowing either periods of latency, more or less long, or periods of sudden actualization. This phenomenon is an experience, lived in the eternal present. Since it is affective and magical, in most cases it only falls into comforting details, feeding on vague, floating, and symbolic memories. Thus, it installs the memory in a sacred dimension, becoming multiple and divided, and can be individualized as well as plural and collective. It is rooted in the concrete, in the space, in the gesture, in the image, and in the object, tending towards an absolute (Nora, 1989: 7-11).

History aims at the reconstruction, often problematic and incomplete, of what no longer exists, or exists partially and differently from what it was, appearing as a representation of the past, appealing to an intellectual and lay operation, called analysis/critical discourse, and holding a universalizing vocation. History is a reconstitution of what no longer exists or of what partially exists. Belonging to all and to no one and knowing only the relative, it is linked to the prosaic, it dwells on temporal continuities, on the evolutions and relationships between facts (*ibidem*).

We are in an acceleration of history, in the memory of what is disappearing, in an irreversible past, in mutilation with no return, in the rupture of the balance.

The distance between memory and history becomes more acute as people recognize the right, the power, and the duty to change. A distance that nowadays reaches a certain convulsive concretization (*ibidem*).

Places of memory

Delving deeper into Pierre Nora's line of thought, what particularly characterizes a place of memory, which stops time, blocks oblivion, and materializes the immortal, is

nothing more than the interaction of memory and history, that is, the up and down that presides over its capacity of metamorphosis (between oblivion and actualization).

In his eponymous work, referred to in the previous paragraphs, Pierre Nora (1989), affirms that “*Lieux de mémoire* are simple and ambiguous, natural and artificial” (*idem*, 18) at the same time. They can be defined through three aspects, although in different degrees: material, symbolic and functional aspects (*ibidem*).

In the first instance, a material place, such as an archive storage room, will only become a place of memory if the imagination invests it with a symbolic aura (*ibidem*).

Subsequently, a functional place, such as a manual or an association of former combatants, will only enter the category of a place of memory if it is the object of a ritual (*ibidem*).

Finally, a minute's silence, which is symbolic (as a tribute), is also a quality of a material division of a temporal functional unit, by configuring the concentration of the memory (*ibidem*).

Another example of this coexistence is the abstract concept of generation.

This concept is material, because of its demographic content; functional because it ensures the crystallization and subsequent transmission of memory and it is also symbolic, characterizing through an event or experience lived only by a minority a majority which did not participate in that same event or experience (*ibidem*).

Conclusion

The main objective of this academic work is to demonstrate how the *Encyclopédie* presents itself as a place of memory, exploring the practical cases and their theoretical aspects.

As seen above, the idea of the encyclopedia emerged long before the seventeenth century, and both its dissemination and its form have changed as a result of the contribution of the various authors who, over the centuries, were in some way responsible for this idea.

It emphasizes not only the role that the *Encyclopédie* had in the dissemination of knowledge but also in driving a cultural uprising. More than just a compilation of knowledge, the role and legacy of the *Encyclopédie* can be seen above all in its criticism of society, religion, and a wide variety of other aspects.

Therefore, some events become places of memory by 'escaping' History, surviving it, surpassing it and they seem to be their own referents: they are, simultaneously, places of excess, of plenitude, closed in themselves, and open places, by the extension of their symbolic significations.

In short, the *Encyclopédie* assumes itself as a place of memory, insofar as it consists of several volumes, there is also the possibility to observe the visible drawings, and finally, the satire on slavery and religion quite present.

As we said, these elements can corroborate the three characteristic aspects of a place of memory: the material aspect, the functional aspect, and the symbolic aspect.

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