

## RESEARCH

# Luxury, Mystification, and Oppressive Power in d'Holbach's Philosophical Writings

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Luxury is one of the main polemic targets of Baron d'Holbach. It brings one to run after imaginary needs they cannot fulfill, dooming them to live an unhappy, grim life. This critical view of luxury is no news and was shared by many others *philosophes*. In this paper, however, I argue that in d'Holbach's account, luxury is more than an economically and morally disruptive force. It is also a tool to reinforce oppressive power. First, I reconstruct d'Holbach's well-known account of luxury contained in his *Politique Naturelle* (1773). Secondly, I show that a closer reading of his later work *Morale Universelle* (1776) discloses a new element: according to d'Holbach's social philosophy, luxury is a mystification strategy used by tyrants to be seen as gods and consequently dominate their subjects. Finally, pivoting on the continuity between human nature and modern society in the *Système de la Nature* (1770), I show that luxury is inscribed into a natural process. It is nothing mysterious nor supernatural. This naturalization of luxury allows people to unmask the god-like tyrant as a common human being, showing that understanding how nature works can set man free not only from religion, but also from oppressive political power.

**Keywords:** Enlightenment; d'Holbach; luxury; nature; oppressive power

## Introduction

The so-called *querelle du luxe* had enflamed the most enlightened *philosophes* for over fifty years when Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach (1723–1789)<sup>1</sup> came to clarify his position in his *Politique Naturelle, ou Discours sur les vrais principes du gouvernement* (1773, hereafter PN). In the French eighteenth century, the dispute on luxury was a well-known and thought-provoking debate,<sup>2</sup> to the point that it was written that 'among all the inquiries which occupy the minds in this enlightened century, probably no one is more important for the public good and the interest of humankind than the inquiry on LUXURY' (De Pinto 1762: 7).<sup>3</sup> Since the beginning of the eighteenth century the question concerning the role of luxury and riches in the development of human progress had begun drawing the attention of intellectuals and authors, opening up a real dispute that touched not only economics but also ethics, politics, and social issues. On the one hand, thinkers such as J. F. Mélon and Voltaire (in France), Mandeville, Hutcheson, and Hume (across the Channel) upheld the idea that luxury is mostly beneficial for the economic and political development of a Country. On the other hand, more or less strongly, F.-A. Boureau-Deslandes, E. de la Font de Saint-Yenne, Rousseau, Diderot, Mirabeau, Condillac, Helvétius, and many others condemned luxury as a source of moral and political corruption, followed by further economical pitfalls.

<sup>1</sup> Despite the well-known role of Baron d'Holbach in the eighteenth-century European thought and clandestine knowledge diffusion, the available philosophical monographs on his works are not many. For an introduction and general expositions of his ideas see Topazio (1956), Naville (1967), and Di Iasio (1993). For an overview of his role in the French Enlightenment see Kors (1976), Sandrier (2004), Kozul (2016), and LeBuffe (2020).

<sup>2</sup> On the French development of the *querelle* see at least Jennings (2007), Kwass (2015), and Diemer (2013). For the English-speaking debate see Berry (1994) and Berg (2005).

<sup>3</sup> All translations from non-English texts contained in this paper are mine. I always provide the reader with the original text in footnotes: 'De toutes les recherches qui exercent les esprits de ce siècle éclairé, peut-être aucune n'est si importante, pour le bien public & pour l'intérêt de l'humanité, que celle qui concerne le LUXE' (De Pinto 1762: 7).

In opposition to the many proponents of the dynamic and positive role of luxury, d'Holbach—in the wake of Rousseau's work, and in close contact with the development of Helvétius's (see Lough 1938; Ladd 1962)—decided to adopt a critical perspective on 'this object discussed by the vast majority of Moralists and Politicians' (PN, 2: 242).<sup>4</sup> There is little room for doubt: luxury, according to Baron d'Holbach, is poisonous to society.<sup>5</sup> The most extensive discussion of this topic is to be found in eleven paragraphs (from IX to XIX, pp. 242–64) of Discourse 9 of PN devoted to the *Dissolution des États*. Luxury appears here and is pointed out as one of the main causes of the ruin of a country. But, how can luxury be such a disruptive scourge?

In Section I of this paper I answer this question focusing on d'Holbach's well-known account of luxury contained in PN (1773). I show that luxury, by d'Holbach's lights, emerges for the human tendency to create illusion and false needs which, in spite of an instant gratification, bring on the long run to the destruction of social stability. In Section II, I explore the overlooked interactions between d'Holbach's account of luxury and his social philosophy. It will emerge that luxury is a mystification strategy used by tyrants and oppressors to be seen as gods or superior beings and consequently dominate their subjects in various ways. Finally, in Section III, I claim that d'Holbach provides us with a remedy to this oppressive mechanism. Pivoting on the continuity between human nature and modern society in the *Système de la Nature* (1770, hereafter SN), we can read d'Holbach as arguing that the study of natural philosophy becomes an effective instrument to contrast oppressive power insofar as it helps us to deconstruct the illusions lying at the very base of illegitimate power. The *philosophe*, therefore, has not only the important mission of setting humankind free from the slavery of religion but also of demolishing political oppression.

## I. D'Holbach's Account of Luxury

In PN d'Holbach devotes more than twenty pages to intense criticism of luxury, defined as 'the situation of a Society in which riches have become the ruling passion' (PN, 2: 242–243).<sup>6</sup> In a society infected by luxury, everyone runs after money, which becomes the strongest source of motivation for one's actions. Baron d'Holbach refers to this process of alienation as a movement from reality to opinion, which brings men to desire luxurious objects, 'the signs that, according to everyone, represent power, pleasure, and happiness' (PN, 2: 243).<sup>7</sup> In such a nation, men and women will abandon their real needs (*besoins réels*) and be moved by illusory (*fictifs*) and supernatural (*supernaturels*) ones. Luxury is a sort of epidemic phenomenon that brings one's imagination to a state of illness consisting in the creation of unnatural, illusory needs. Moreover, in a state infected by such virus the 'the most well-grounded goods are sacrificed to appearances' (PN, 2: 243).<sup>8</sup> Honor is replaced with gold, happiness with insatiable desires.

In order to fulfill these unnatural needs, men not only relinquish the satisfaction of natural desires, but also become insensitive and cruel: 'in this way luxury, after depriving men of every trace of humility, makes them insensitive, cruel, and even separates them from the sacred connections upon which their domestic happiness depends' (PN, 2: 246).<sup>9</sup> True and natural goods are deserted in favor of detrimental illusions. The general goal of social utility is clouded by deceitful desires: 'Glitz, finery, and the love of spending become necessary things in countries ruled by men who themselves take glitz and prodigality for greatness, and have no idea of usefulness' (EP: 85 fn).<sup>10</sup>

Running after all these illusory and false needs (*besoins imaginaires et fictifs*) has disastrous consequences on society. Men are led to follow their own pleasure and will try not to share their goods with other people. Because of their egoism, they will therefore not have children, consequently diminishing the population. This lack of people, together with the damages which luxury creates to agriculture and commerce, bring about serious troubles (PN, 2: 246–48). Add to this the fact that, according to Baron d'Holbach, luxury makes soldiers effeminate, turns glory into vanity, love into *galanterie* (PN, 2: 248–50), and you will have a picture of how dangerous it is to social stability.

<sup>4</sup> '[C]et objet de la déclamation de la plupart des Moralistes & des Politiques.' (PN, 2: 242)

<sup>5</sup> As remarked by some of the most notable interpreters, d'Holbach's philosophy has the merit of a 'systematic presentation of a convergent set of reasons to conclude in favour of materialism' but can hardly boast any original element (see Kors 1992: 295; cf. also Israel 2011: 810). However, as my following discussion aims at showing, d'Holbach's conception of luxury has an innovative force insofar as it provides an example of the *philosophe's* political mission.

<sup>6</sup> '[L]a situation d'une Société dont la richesse est devenue la passion principale.' (PN, 2: 242–243)

<sup>7</sup> '[L]es signes qui, de l'aveu de tous, représentent le pouvoir, les plaisirs, la félicité.' (PN, 2: 243)

<sup>8</sup> 'Les biens les plus solides sont sacrifiés à l'apparence.' (PN, 2: 243)

<sup>9</sup> 'Ainsi le luxe, après avoir fait perdre toute honte aux hommes, les rends insensibles, cruels, & brise pour eux jusqu'aux liens sacrés desquels dépend leur félicité domestique.' (PN, 2: 246)

<sup>10</sup> 'Le faste, la parure, l'amour de la dépense deviennent des choses nécessaires dans les pays gouvernés par des hommes qui prennent eux-mêmes le faste & la prodigalité pour de la grandeur, & qui n'ont point d'idées de l'utilité.' (EP: 85 fn)

In a society infected by *luxe*, everyone stops conceiving of their satisfaction as the fulfillment of natural pleasures and collective utility. Happiness is rather thought of in terms of comparison with the wealth and alleged success of others:

Devoured by an unquenchable thirst for riches, [man] never believes he can acquire enough to satisfy the inconstancy of his passions, his luxury, his fantasies; he envies all those whom the opinion of the vulgar fool makes him regard as happier and more loved than he is [...]. (EP: 14–15)<sup>11</sup>

This logic of comparison is especially dangerous because it touches all citizens and does not leave room for any exception: 'in a country infected by luxury, everyone is ill to a greater or lesser extent, from the Monarch down to the poorest of the Subjects' (PN, 2: 251).<sup>12</sup> This also brings virtue to complete destruction. In a nation infected by an epidemic love of riches (*la richesse est la passion principale*) every vice is forgiven in favor of wealth and immediate pleasure, and even crime comes to be regarded as positive when it brings more riches.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, d'Holbach argued that those who live luxuriously would not change their ways within a single lifetime. The only chance a nation has to break the cycle of excess is raising a new, luxury-free generation, whose education has to be kept far away from the illusions of excessive comforts and unnatural desires.

Luxury, this epidemic delirium (*délire épidémique*), in summary, is the product of a society in which 'real needs are sacrificed; specious needs created. Public virtue is discouraged: the citizen is taught that nothing is substantial but money, nothing desirable but [immediate] pleasure' (Ladd 1962: 236). In such a society, short-term gratifications and sensuous pleasures are preferred to the search for social utility which alone provides access to good human life. The problem with luxury, therefore, is not that it involves pleasure, but rather that it destroys it in the long run.<sup>14</sup> As d'Holbach affirms in his *Essai sur les Préjugés* (1770, hereafter EP): 'Luxury, dissipation, idleness, love of frivolity, will ignite in all hearts passions impossible to satisfy without harming public happiness' (EP: 334, my emphasis).<sup>15</sup> What upon a first glance seems an object of pleasure or even progress, ends up destroying society as a whole, endangering social stability and public happiness. This is the traditionally well-known account of luxury *chez le Baron*.<sup>16</sup>

## II. Luxury, Mystification, and Oppressive Power

Despite the many analyses of d'Holbach's account of luxury as a disruptive force in PN, interpreters have mostly overlooked the fact that this 'illness of a nation' also plays an important role in establishing power, and in particular, oppressive power in despotic regimes.<sup>17</sup> Luxury is dangerous to politics and civil society because it creates unnatural needs, with their many negative effects on economy and morality. Despots' luxurious comfort is *an end* they reach at the expense of their people, who are 'forced to give their sweat, blood, and treasures to ungrateful individuals who come to believe that heaven intended their fellowmen to work for them' (PN, 1: 42).<sup>18</sup> At the same time, it is also *an instrument* used by the oppressors to impose their power on their subjects, perpetuating their prejudices. Luxury is not only an *effect* of tyrants' domination but also one of its *causes*.

A clue to these dynamics can be found in the last three paragraphs of d'Holbach's PN. Here, Baron d'Holbach explicitly connects luxury to despotism. By his lights, 'if one traces things back to their source, they will see that Despotism is the true generating principle and promoter of luxury' (PN, 2: 260).<sup>19</sup> Luxury is an illness that spreads throughout societies only in certain circumstances. On the contrary, when it comes to despotism d'Holbach affirms clearly that this *délire* is intrinsically connected to oppressive power:

<sup>11</sup> 'Dévoré d'une soif inextinguible pour les richesses, il ne croit jamais pouvoir en acquérir assez pour satisfaire l'inconstance de ses passions, de son luxe, de ses fantaisies; il porte envie à tous ceux que l'opinion du vulgaire imbécile lui fait regarder comme plus heureux & plus favorisés que lui [...].' (EP: 14–15)

<sup>12</sup> '[D]ans un pays infecté par le luxe depuis le Monarque jusqu'au plus vil de ses Sujets, tout est plus ou moins malade.' (PN, 2: 251)

<sup>13</sup> Another disruptive effect of luxury according to d'Holbach is the erosion of one's proper self-esteem and reliable evaluation of their own value (see Blank 2016; 2017).

<sup>14</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous referee of this journal for helping me to see this point clearly.

<sup>15</sup> '[L]e luxe, la dissipation, l'oisiveté, l'amour de la frivolité, allumeront dans tous les cœurs des passions impossible à contenter sans nuire à la félicité publique.' (EP: 334)

<sup>16</sup> The authors who have devoted some efforts to analyze d'Holbach's view on luxury usually consider just these eleven paragraphs from PN (see Ladd 1962; Naville 1967, esp. Ch. 4; Borghero 1974: 151–170; Di Iasio 1993: 136–40).

<sup>17</sup> One remarkable exception is Binoche (2018) « *Écrasez l'infâme !* » : *Philosopher à l'âge des Lumières*, (see esp. chap. 2).

<sup>18</sup> '[F]orcés de prodiguer leur sueur, leur sang & leurs trésors à des ingrats qui se persuadent que le ciel a voulu que leurs semblables travaillassent pour eux [...].' (PN, 1: 42)

<sup>19</sup> '[S]i l'on remonte à la source des choses, on sentira que le Despotisme est le vrai générateur & fauteur du luxe.' (PN, 2: 260)

The Despot is always vain. He knows grandeur only in puerile pomp, in dazzling splendor, in spectacular representation. He infects his court with the same vices by which he is fooled. The desire to shine, to show oneself with flair, was and will always be the disease of those who had the right to be near the Divinities of the earth. (PN, 2: 261)<sup>20</sup>

This thesis gains importance and becomes clearer in a later work of Baron d'Holbach, *La Morale Universelle, ou Les devoirs de l'homme fondés sur sa Nature* (1776, hereafter MU). Focusing on this work, one can see that luxury fosters oppressive power on four different levels: (a) it mystifies the sovereign and dupes the people;<sup>21</sup> (b) it subjects nobility to the tyrant; (c) it enfeebles the army, which becomes incapable of fighting the despot; and (d) even corrupts and transforms democracies in oppressive political systems. I take these aspects in turn here below.

### **(a) Luxury as a mystification strategy**

As I have shown so far, luxury clouds people's minds. Men and women are by nature eager for the wonderful (*avidés du merveilleux*) and, in a curious paradox, luxury plays an important role in duping human beings, who are *naturally* attracted by rare and seemingly *supernatural* things, including luxurious objects. According to d'Holbach, oppressive power emerges when someone begins considering other men as gods. This often happens because of imprudence and fascination in front of an excessive aesthetical appeal of the despot's lifestyle. In the first pages of SN, Baron d'Holbach states the following:

he [man] submitted himself unreservedly to men like him, whom his prejudices made him see as beings of a higher order, as gods on earth; they took advantage of his error to enslave him, corrupt him, make him vicious and miserable. Thus it was for ignoring its own nature that mankind fell into servitude, and was misgoverned. (SN, 1: 6–7)<sup>22</sup>

The main problem is to know how some human beings ever get to be considered that way. Baron d'Holbach insists that ignorance, ingenuity, and imprudence have a role in the creation of oppressive systems in connection with luxury: reckless fathers (*pères imprudens*) have stipulated that their posterity will forever be 'obliged to live in poverty, misfortune, and tears to provide for the luxury, the prodigality, the murderous extravagances of an unbridled Court' (EP: 118–19).<sup>23</sup>

What fosters oppressive powers above all, however, is the existence of prejudices (*préjugés*) which are at the very basis of every misleading illusion. There is no doubt about the fact that among those prejudices to which d'Holbach refers here one can also find religious beliefs:<sup>24</sup> '[the rulers], ignoring the true source of their power, claimed to hold it from heaven, to be accountable only to it for their actions, to owe nothing to society, in a word to be gods on earth and to govern it arbitrarily like the gods of the empyrean' (SN, 1: 145).<sup>25</sup> But how is this possible? How does a free man come to accept another's oppressive power over himself, to regard another as a god? To answer this question—as always in d'Holbach's philosophy—one has to inquire into nature, and in particular his description of human nature. As reminded above, d'Holbach says that 'for having desired the wonderful and supernatural [...] the human race has remained in a long childhood' (SN, 1: 9).<sup>26</sup> What is the natural cause of such desire of wonderful and supernatural objects?

<sup>20</sup> 'Le Despote est toujours vain; il ne connoît de grandeur que dans une pompe puérile, un faste éblouissant, une représentation imposante; il infecte sa cour des mêmes vices dont il est la dupe. La passion de briller, de se montrer avec éclat fut & sera toujours la maladie de ceux qui eurent le droit d'approcher les Divinités de la terre.' (PN, 2: 261)

<sup>21</sup> In the following discussion I equate the terms sovereign, despot, and tyrant. Even if d'Holbach distinguishes them clearly in PN (2: 4; 'Le Despotisme [...] se fonde sur la prétention absurde, que la volonté quelconque du Souverain doit faire la loi dans la Société. La Tyrannie n'est que cette volonté, quand elle est injuste'), when it comes to his discussion of luxury there is no difference in his treatment of these forms of oppressive power.

<sup>22</sup> '[I] [l'homme] se soumit sans réserve à des hommes comme lui, que ses préjugés lui firent regarder comme des êtres d'un ordre supérieur, comme des Dieux sur la terre; ceux-ci profitèrent de son erreur pour l'asservir, le corrompre, le rendre vicieux & misérable. Ainsi c'est pour avoir ignoré sa propre nature que le genre humain tomba dans la servitude, & fut mal gouverné.' (SN, 1: 6–7)

<sup>23</sup> '[O]bligée pour toujours de vivre dans l'indigence, dans l'infortune & dans les larmes, afin de fournir au luxe, aux prodigalités, aux extravagances meurtrières d'une Cour effrénée.' (EP: 118–19)

<sup>24</sup> D'Holbach draws a clear parallel between political power and religion. This has already been underlined in the secondary literature, for example by Sandrier (2004: 146–50 and *passim*). What is still lacking is the awareness of the role of luxury in bridging these two aspects of Baron d'Holbach's critical account.

<sup>25</sup> 'Ceux-ci [les souverains], méconnaissant la vraie source de leur pouvoir, prétendirent le tenir du ciel, n'être comptables qu'à lui de leurs actions, ne devoir rien à la société, en un mot être des Dieux sur la terre & la gouverner arbitrairement comme les Dieux de l'Empyrée.' (SN, 1: 145)

<sup>26</sup> '[P]our avoir désiré du merveilleux & du surnaturel [...] le genre humain est demeuré dans une longue enfance.' (SN, 1: 9)

In order to explain the genesis of religion and superstitions, d'Holbach refers to the role of habit, which he defines on the basis of Thomas Hobbes and David Hume's treatments of the same topic (cf. Naville 1967: esp. chap. 2): '*Habit* is in man a way of being, thinking and acting that our organs, both external and internal, contract by the frequency of the same movements' (SN, 1: 137).<sup>27</sup> Human beings are creatures of habit and when something does not fit with their habitual perception, they believe to be in the presence of a miracle. This could happen also when a 'savage' or poor person comes across a rich individual's luxurious pomp and splendor. The imagination of the poor is immediately excited and the magnificent appearance of the rich raises illusions in the mind of the indigent person, who is 'surprised to find in his leaders resources that he believes *divine*' (PN, 1: 57)<sup>28</sup> and consequently comes to regard them as gods.

Despots justify their power and impose themselves as gods among human beings because they are able to shape other people's imagination, coming to be regarded as divine beings.<sup>29</sup> How can they do that? In many scattered but related passages, Baron d'Holbach seems to hint to a role for luxury in this process. In MU d'Holbach writes the following:

Everyone agrees that luxury, this fatal emulation of vanity, is mainly due to the splendor of sovereigns and great men, which everyone tries more or less to imitate or copy: this dangerous evil seems to be inherent in the monarchy, and especially in despotism, where the prince, transformed into a kind of divinity, wants to impose himself on his slaves with dazzling splendor. (MU, 2: 54)<sup>30</sup>

The despot is embellished and overdressed because he knows that through stunning ostentation of riches, a dazzling splendor (*faste éblouissant*) among indigent people, he will be seen as a kind of divinity (*une espèce de divinité*). Luxury is not only an illness infecting a nation. It is also a mystification strategy through which a man imposes his absolute and illegitimate power over other people. Luxury is an instrument of oppression.

In the light of this reflection to be found in MU, one could be reminded of a paragraph of the previous PN, presented much earlier than d'Holbach's systematic analysis of luxury in the same work. In paragraph 35 of Discourse 3, entitled *De l'Etiquette*, d'Holbach analyzed 'the origin of the *Ceremonial of the Etiquette* and these sumptuous titles by which the Monarchs imposed themselves on the Nations always in love with the wonderful' (PN, 1: 141).<sup>31</sup> In this paragraph, Baron d'Holbach never mentions the word 'luxe', but in the light of what I have discussed above it is clear that this is what he has in mind when he writes:

To respect authority, Peoples need it to be represented to them in a palpable way. The purple, the ceremonies, the beams, in the Republics; an even greater pomp in the Monarchy, dazzled the eyes and imposed it on the vulgar. In order to make their power more revered, the Despots commonly showed themselves to their Subjects only surrounded by a glow that would astonish them. (PN, 1: 140–41)<sup>32</sup>

The resonance with MU (2: 54) goes on. Baron d'Holbach also refers to the mechanism of habit that I have explained above: 'The less familiar the eyes are with objects, the more these objects excite one's imagination. No Monarch is a God to the one who sees him every day' (PN, 1: 141).<sup>33</sup> More than three hundred pages before the development of his well-known analysis of luxury, d'Holbach was already warning his reader against pageantry, pomp, and finery as parts of a mystification strategy. 'Ceremonial and etiquette are barri-

<sup>27</sup> '*L'habitude* est dans l'homme une façon d'être, de penser & d'agir que nos organes tant extérieurs qu'intérieurs contractent par la fréquence des mêmes mouvements.' (SN, 1: 137)

<sup>28</sup> '[E]tonné de trouver dans ses chefs des ressources qu'il croit *divines*.' (PN, 1: 57)

<sup>29</sup> It is worth noting that according to d'Holbach sovereigns are themselves duped by this deceiving process. This is mostly due to their education: '[a] depraved education leaves him [the prince] commonly unaware that he is a man.' (*Une éducation dépravée lui [au prince] laisse communément ignorer qu'il est homme*, PN, 1: 131)

<sup>30</sup> 'Tout le monde convient que le luxe, cette émulation fatale de vanité, est principalement dû au faste des souverains & des grands, que chacun s'efforce plus ou moins d'imiter ou de copier: ce mal, si dangereux, paroît être inhérent à la monarchie, & surtout au despotisme, où le prince, transformé en une espèce de divinité, veut en imposer à ses esclaves par un faste éblouissant.' (MU, 2: 54)

<sup>31</sup> '[L]'origine du *Cérémonial de l'Etiquette* & ces titres fastueux par lesquels les Monarques en imposèrent aux Nations toujours éprises du merveilleux.' (PN, 1: 141)

<sup>32</sup> 'Pour respecter l'autorité, les Peuples ont besoin qu'elle leur soit représentée d'une façon sensible. La pourpre, les cérémonies, les faisceaux, dans les Républiques; une pompe plus grande encore dans la Monarchie, éblouirent les yeux & en imposèrent au vulgaire. A fin de rendre leur pouvoir plus révérent, les Despotes ne se montrèrent communément à leurs Sujets qu'environnés d'un éclat propre à les étonner.' (PN, 1: 140–41)

<sup>33</sup> 'Moins les yeux sont familiarisés avec les objets, plus ces objets font travailler l'imagination. Nul Monarque n'est un Dieu pour celui qui le voit tous les jours.' (PN, 1: 141)



ers that flattery has placed around Kings, in order to remove People from their Leaders, and to prevent one from seeing that they are men' (PN, 1: 141–42)<sup>34</sup> writes Baron d'Holbach, pinning down glitz and pageantry as tools to raise the Monarchs above the human condition (*au-dessus de la condition humaine*, PN, 1: 142).

### **(b) Luxury to subject aristocracy**

A closer reading of MU shows that *le luxe* is used strategically by a tyrant to dominate not only common people but also both aristocracy and soldiers. Later on, in the same work, Baron d'Holbach writes:

Always duped by the opinion transmitted by the savage ancestors and maintained by misleading political moves, this nobility puts all its efforts and ends up in ruin to obtain nothing but smoke: finally, seduced by vanity, a ruinous form of luxury multiplies its needs and forces it to give up freedom and to crawl cowardly at the feet of the masters who can satisfy them. Under arbitrary government, luxury is a powerful means of humiliating the nobles and forcing them to accept the yoke. (MU, 2: 126)<sup>35</sup>

In this excerpt, d'Holbach pins down luxury as a way in which the tyrant tames noblemen, aristocrats, and all that 'golden crowd that surrounds Kings' (*foule dorée qui entoure les Rois*, PN, 1: 204). The love for unnecessary goods and the vain desires which it entails bring nobility to submission to a despot. He will appear to be the only one able to provide them with the satisfaction they seek, but will just give them sops to keep them under his power.

This form of manipulation of the aristocracy through luxury is different from the mechanism that enslaves common people. In the latter case, oppressive power is exercised via stunning aesthetical appearances and palpable representations of the sovereign's superiority. In the former case, it is rather via envy, emulation, and desire for prestige that the oppressor subjects aristocracy. This happens because of a tendency to emulation well-rooted in human nature:

Everyone wanted to please powerful men, everyone tried to imitate them either from near or far. Hence the love of pomp, the frenzy of luxury, the thirst for gold and all the crimes that are required to obtain it. (EP: 128)<sup>36</sup>

This point is reinforced in d'Holbach's *Système Social* (1773, hereafter SS), especially in chapter 6 of volume 3. Here, the author explicitly discusses luxury as a form of emulation (*Le luxe est une emulation de dépenses & de richesses*, SS, 3: 63), consequently showing that 'every man has the desire to imitate, rival, and excel those who are seen as possessing greatness, power, well-being' (SS, 3: 64).<sup>37</sup> This desire stems from human imagination, and since this faculty 'works more when there is a lack of useful occupations' (SS, 3: 66),<sup>38</sup> it follows that aristocracy is a social class that can be easily subjected in this way.<sup>39</sup>

### **(c) Luxury to subject the army**

The pivotal role of the diffusion of a passion for riches in the consolidation of oppressive power extends also to the army. In MU (2: 152) d'Holbach exemplifies the disastrous consequences of luxury, referring to the Romans:

The Ancient Romans, poor and inebriated by the love of their homeland, subjugated the world; enriched by the remains of the nations, their greed put them in battle with each other, softened by

<sup>34</sup> 'Le cérémonial & l'étiquette sont des barrières que la flatterie a placées au-tour des Rois, afin d'écartier les Peuples de leurs Chefs, & pour empêcher qu'on ne voie qu'ils sont des hommes.' (PN, 1: 141–42)

<sup>35</sup> 'Toujours dupe de l'opinion transmise par les sauvages ancêtres, & maintenue par une politique trompeuse, cette noblesse se dévoue & se ruine pour une vaine fumée: enfin, séduite par la vanité, un luxe ruineux multipliant ses besoins, la force de renoncer à sa liberté, & de ramper lâchement aux pieds des maîtres qui peuvent les satisfaire. Sous un gouvernement arbitraire, le luxe est un moyen puissant pour humilier les nobles & les forcer à recevoir le joug.' (MU, 2: 126)

<sup>36</sup> 'Chacun voulut plaire à des hommes puissans, chacun s'efforça de les imiter soit de près soit de loin. De là l'amour du faste, les frénésies du luxe, la soif de l'or & tout les crimes qu'on emploie pour l'obtenir.' (EP: 128)

<sup>37</sup> 'Tous les hommes ont le désir d'imiter, d'égalier & de surpasser ceux à qui ils supposent de la grandeur, du pouvoir, du bien-être.' (SS, 3: 64)

<sup>38</sup> 'L'imagination travaille d'autant plus, que l'on manqué d'occupations utiles.' (SS, 3: 66)

<sup>39</sup> Human nature, d'Holbach thinks, is characterized by a tendency to comparison and a desire of prestige and glory. These features of d'Holbach anthropological model stem from Hobbes's texts which the Baron read and translated in the 1760s (see Staquet 2011).

luxury, these formidable warriors were nothing but a vile flock of slaves, trembling under the most cowardly, the most despicable tyrants. (MU, 2: 152)<sup>40</sup>

D'Holbach is aware that 'the signs that represent wealth also provide power' (PN, 2: 148).<sup>41</sup> In a society infected by this *délire épidémique*, luxurious objects are signs of riches and power generated by the imagination and emulation of individuals within that society. This, however, does not change nature: the ones who benefit of luxury may be esteemed, admired, and envied, but they will nonetheless be enfeebled and lose their physical force as a natural and necessary consequence of their luxurious life.

Luxury saps military virtue. Infecting soldiers with the passion for riches the tyrant knows that he leaves no room for any military opposition to his power. Of course, this also means that nations ruled by a despotic regime lack important defensive resources. As Baron d'Holbach writes in the paragraph entitled *De la Milice*: 'The Nations need national militias, and not royal militias or janissaries, always ready to serve the passions of a Sultan or the follies of a Vizier' (PN, 1: 190).<sup>42</sup> It is not by chance that d'Holbach's main analysis of luxury comes up in the discourse on the *Dissolution of the States* (*Dissolution des États*, PN, 2: 223–280): luxury brings a Nation's military power to languish and therefore exposes the country to the worst external threats. Vigorous soldier becomes 'frivolous men, irritated by sluggishness and luxury, devoid of energy and courage, lost into dissipation and childish pleasures' (EP: 228).<sup>43</sup> This all has disastrous consequences of the life of a Nation.

#### **(d) Luxury and oppressive democracies**

The fourth aspect of d'Holbach's discussion of luxury within the framework of oppressive political power concerns democracies. His radical critique of *luxe* is by no means limited to despotic oppression in tyrannies or kingdoms but extends so far as to reach also those states which are governed by a majority of people. D'Holbach is aware that even democracies can act as despotic oppressors towards minorities within a given country or towards other nations and populations. In PN, chapter 6 of Discourse 9, devoted to the *Principes de Destruction dans la Démocratie*, d'Holbach writes:

A People, like a private individual, becomes insolent and wicked when, without enlightenment nor virtue, it enjoys Power; it becomes intoxicated with vanity at the sight of its forces which it never exercises with prudence or justice: it then disregards its true friends, in order to join perfidious people who flatter its passions. (PN, 2: 239)<sup>44</sup>

Things get even worse when commercial societies, blinded by an immoderate desire of gold and luxury, oppress other nations in order to gain useless objects: 'Almost all the vain objects which India supplies to Europe have some importance only for the fickle whim of women and the vanity of a few men, foolishly disgusted with the manufactures of their country' (MU, 2: 318–19).<sup>45</sup> We can, therefore, clearly see that luxury and the desire of gold are not detrimental only within societies governed by a despot or a king, but also in democracies. When a majority of people who has some power want to acquire luxurious goods, they may end up in such a 'horrendous business of trafficking in human blood' (*commerce affreux qui consiste à trafiquer du sang humain*, MU, 2: 319) to obtain nothing but useless riches (*futile richesses*).<sup>46</sup>

To sum up: in d'Holbach's social philosophy, luxury is a mystification strategy used by despots to make it look like they are gods and consequently dominate their subjects. Through luxury, the oppressors also come to impose their power to the nobility and delete every chance of violent rebellion by dispossessing soldiers and the army of their physical force. Even when the power is held by a majority and not by a

<sup>40</sup> 'Les Romains, pauvres & enivrés de l'amour de leur patrie, ont subjugué le monde; enrichis des dépouilles des nations, leur avarice les mit aux prises les uns avec les autres, amollis par le luxe, ces guerriers si redoutables ne furent qu'un vil troupeau d'esclaves, tremblants sous les plus lâches, les plus méprisables des tyrans.' (MU, 2: 152)

<sup>41</sup> '[L]es signes qui représentent les richesses procurent aussi du pouvoir.' (PN, 2: 148)

<sup>42</sup> 'Il faut aux Nations des milices nationales, & non des milices royales ou des janissaires, toujours prêts à servir les passions d'un Sultan ou les folies d'un Visir.' (PN, 1: 190)

<sup>43</sup> '[D]es hommes frivoles, énervés par la mol[li]esse & par le luxe, dépourvus d'énergie & de courage, livrés à la dissipation & à des plaisirs puérils.' (EP: 228)

<sup>44</sup> 'Un Peuple, comme un particulier, devient insolent & méchant quand, sans lumières & sans vertus, il jouit de la Puissance; il s'enivre de vanité à la vue de ses forces qu'il ne sait jamais exercer avec prudence ou justice: il méconnoît alors ses vrais amis, pour se livrer à des perfides qui flattent ses passions.' (PN, 2: 239)

<sup>45</sup> 'Presque tous les vains objets que l'Inde fournit à l'Europe, n'ont de mérite que pour le caprice inconstant des femmes & la vanité de quelques hommes, sottement dégoûtés des manufactures de leur pays.' (MU, 2: 318–19)

<sup>46</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous referee for pushing me to add this fourth point to my discussion.

single tyrannical individual, luxury still has detrimental effects and brings a given society to act against humanity. As we have seen, Baron d'Holbach had affirmed that this wide-spread *passion pour la richesse* is an intrinsic part of absolutism: 'luxury, this fatal emulation of vanity, is mainly due to the splendor of sovereigns and great men [...] such a dangerous evil seems to be inherent in the monarchy, and especially in despotism' (MU, 2: 54).<sup>47</sup> It should now be clear why it is so: luxury is dangerous to civil society but advantageous to the oppressor's blind search for immediate pleasure, to the establishment of his absolute and indiscriminate power.

### III. A Remedy to Oppression: d'Holbach's Naturalization of Luxury

The seed of luxury has devastating effects. So far, my discussion has been aimed at showing that among its many disruptive outcomes there is also the fact that it reinforces oppressive power. If one pays attention not only to MU, but also to the previous PN, it will appear that despots' luxury-based power is short-lived. The nations they rule will soon perish under the blows of luxury itself. As I have shown both in Sections I and II of this paper, luxury quickly brings a state to its destruction. This is also due to the lack of effectiveness of a despot's subjects, who are either enchanted or subjugated by his *faste éblouissant*. But is there any remedy to save the nation? Is there anything one can do to stop the spread of luxury, the reinforcement of oppressive power, and the consequent degeneration of their country? D'Holbach refers to the role of education, but, as far as I know, he never articulates this point explicitly. However, one could go back to his 1770 books SN and EP in order to find an answer to this question.

In his most famous work, the *Système de la Nature*, Baron d'Holbach argued that human artifice has to be inscribed into a natural process: 'Man is a purely physical being [...] Everything that the human mind has successively invented to change or perfect its way of being [...] has never been but a necessary consequence of man's own essence and that of the beings who act on him' (SN, 1: 2–3).<sup>48</sup> To put it in a nutshell: 'art is but nature acting with the help of instruments she herself made' (SN, 1: 3).<sup>49</sup> In the same vein, Baron d'Holbach wrote that a hypothetical external observer could not find any discontinuity in the natural development bringing savage men to the highest refinements of arts. Between these two opposite states of human history there is nothing but a relentless evolution of desires and needs. D'Holbach's elegant and clear writing is worth quoting at length:

For a being [...] who from the top of the atmosphere would contemplate the human species with all its progress and changes, men would seem no less subject to the laws of nature when they wander naked in the forests [...] than when living in civilized societies, that is, enriched by a greater number of experiences that end up immersing them in luxury, they invent a thousand new needs day by day and discover a thousand ways to satisfy them. It is in this same way that the butterfly, whose beauty we admire, begins by being an inanimate egg, from which the heat brings out a worm, which becomes a chrysalis, and then changes into a winged insect, which we see adorned with the brightest colors. (SN, 1: 3–4)<sup>50</sup>

Despite the religious devotion of people towards the pomp and splendor of the tyrants, luxury is part of a natural process. It is the final issue of a long series of small changes which, like a butterfly (*ainsi que le papillon*), bring men and women from their natural wild condition of "savages" to the highest refinements of eighteenth-century French *salons*. Likely, the development of human luxury is inscribed into a natural process.

The naturalization of human culture is one of the most distinctive traits of d'Holbach's philosophy and is reiterated in his later PN. There, *le Baron* writes:

<sup>47</sup> '[L]e luxe, cette émulation fatale de vanité, est principalement du au faste des souverains et des grands [...] ce mal, si dangereux, paroît être inhérent à la monarchie, et surtout au despotisme.' (MU, 2: 54)

<sup>48</sup> 'L'homme est un être purement physique [...] Tout ce que l'esprit humain a successivement inventé pour changer ou perfectionner sa façon d'être [...] ne fut jamais qu'une conséquence nécessaire de l'essence propre de l'homme & de celle des êtres qui agissent sur lui.' (SN, 1: 2–3)

<sup>49</sup> 'L'ART n'est que la nature agissante à l'aide des instruments qu'elle a faits.' (SN, 1: 3)

<sup>50</sup> 'Pour un être [...] qui du haut de l'atmosphère contemplerait l'espèce humaine avec tous ses progrès et changements, les hommes ne paraîtraient pas moins soumis aux lois de la nature lorsqu'ils errent tout nus dans les forêts [...] que lorsque vivant dans des sociétés civilisées, c'est-à-dire enrichies d'un plus grand nombre d'expériences finissant par se plonger dans le luxe ils inventent de jour en jour mille besoins nouveaux et découvrent mille moyens de les satisfaire. [...] C'est ainsi que le papillon, dont nous admirons la beauté, commence par être un œuf inanimé, duquel la chaleur fait sortir un ver, qui devient chrysalide, & puis se change en un insecte ailé, que nous voyons s'orner des plus vives couleurs.' (SN, 1: 3–4)



[t]he man ruled by a King is as much in the state of Nature as the wild man who wanders in the forests. Something he does, whatever institution he adopts, whatever means he imagines to improve his fate, he can never leave his nature; he is always under his law; he is always equally forced to follow them; he is constantly striving towards the goal she proposes to him. (PN, 1: 27)<sup>51</sup>

The same case is also made in SS when d'Holbach writes that '[t]he luxury of a Nation is a natural effect of the progression of human desires and needs' (SS, 3: 63).<sup>52</sup>

In light of this defense of continuity between nature and human culture, luxury must, therefore, be understood investigating nature itself. Even the dazzling splendor of modernity is the issue of natural modifications, even the arts are just the product of 'nature acting with the help of instruments she herself made' (SN, 1: 3).

Understanding that luxury is nothing mysterious nor supernatural, but just one out of many products of nature, will help people to demystify the tyrant and give them a chance to avoid the destruction of their country. Quoting Montaigne's *Essays* (bk. 3, chap. 4) in MU d'Holbach affirms one more time that 'it is a kind of pusillanimity to monarchs, and a testimony of not feeling enough what they are, to work to assert themselves through excessive spending' (MU, 2: 45).<sup>53</sup> People should stop regarding luxurious spending with admiration and luxury should instead trigger an alarm in people's heads.

As d'Holbach said, 'every error of humankind is an error in physics' (SN, 1: 5)<sup>54</sup> and the understanding of nature can set men free not only from the slavery of religion but also from tyranny. Unmasking luxury as a mystification strategy, the study of nature is a way to break free from oppressive political power. Recognizing the natural origin of luxury and therefore unmasking the tyrant's real nature, it will be clear that 'a respectable potentate is not one who is distinguished by a proud label, by enormous expenses, by unbridled luxury, by sumptuous buildings' (MU, 2: 43).<sup>55</sup> D'Holbach has been clear since the very beginning:

Men will always be wrong when they abandon experience for systems born of imagination. Man is the work of nature, he exists in nature, he is subject to its laws, he cannot free himself from them, he cannot even think outside them; it is in vain that his spirit wants to set out beyond the limits of the visible world, he is always forced to go back to it. (SN, 1: 1)<sup>56</sup>

This excerpt shows clearly that *everything* can (and has to) be traced back to nature and understood in terms of natural facts. Luxury is no exception. Human beings are often led to leave the guidance of reason and experience to pick up unnatural illusions, to see richness not only as the signs of power, but also as something supernatural: 'The study of nature will sooner or later expel falsehood, miracles, and illusions that are used everywhere to deceive the human race' (EP: 245 fn).<sup>57</sup>

Baron d'Holbach's philosophy is a good antidote to illusions, including those aroused by the luxurious lifestyle of a despot which brings to his divinization. Therefore, according to d'Holbach, the study of nature has benefic political outcomes. In the light of this discussion, d'Holbach's exhortation '[l]et's distrust wild imagination, let's take experience as our guide' (SN, 1: 16)<sup>58</sup> assumes not only epistemological but also political relevance. Within a radical naturalism, philosophers will not only be a watchtower against illusion and religion but also against political oppression.

<sup>51</sup> 'L'homme gouverné par un Roi est autant dans l'état de Nature, que le sauvage qui erre dans les forêts. Quelque chose qu'il fasse, quelque institution qu'il adopte, quelque moyen qu'il imagine pour améliorer son sort, il ne peut jamais sortir de sa nature; il est toujours sous ses lois; il est toujours également forcé de les suivre; il tend incessamment vers le but qu'elle lui propose.' (PN, 1: 27)

<sup>52</sup> 'Le luxe d'une Nation est un effet naturel de la progression des désirs & des besoins de l'homme.' (SS, 3: 63)

<sup>53</sup> '[C]'est une espèce de pusillanimité aux monarques, & un témoignage de ne point assez sentir ce qu'ils sont, de travailler à se faire valoir par des dépenses excessives.' (MU, 2: 45)

<sup>54</sup> 'TOUTES les erreurs des hommes sont des erreurs de physique.' (SN, 1: 5)

<sup>55</sup> '[U]n potentat respectable n'est pas celui qui se distingue par une étiquette orgueilleuse, par des dépenses énormes, par un luxe effréné, par des édifices somptueux.' (MU, 2: 43)

<sup>56</sup> 'Les hommes se tromperont toujours quand ils abandonneront l'expérience pour des systèmes enfantés par l'imagination. L'homme est l'ouvrage de la nature, il existe dans la nature, il est soumis à ses lois, il ne peut s'en affranchir, il ne peut même par la pensée en sortir; c'est en vain que son esprit veut s'élancer au delà des bornes du monde visible, il est toujours forcé d'y rentrer.' (SN, 1: 1)

<sup>57</sup> 'L'étude de la nature expulsera tôt ou tard les chimères, les miracles, les prestiges dont on se sert en tous lieux pour tromper le genre humain.' (EP: 245 fn)

<sup>58</sup> 'Défions-nous d'une imagination déréglée, prenons l'expérience pour guide.' (SN, 1: 16)

## Conclusion

In this paper I have analyzed d'Holbach's conception of luxury, integrating the traditionally well-known passages from the *Politique Naturelle* with less studied excerpts from previous and later works. After reconstructing the traditional account of luxury *chez le Baron*, I have shown that pageantries, fineries, and glitz can be even more dangerous than they seemed to be.

Reading the *Morale Universelle*, I have shown that luxury is not only an obstacle to the well-being of economic stability and moral rectitude, but also a mechanism that reinforces oppressive power and confers on a tyrant the tools to impose himself on every layer of civil and political society. Pivoting on the *Système de la Nature*, I have finally shown that a possible remedy to luxury and its oppressive consequences can be found in the investigation of nature. Through a process of naturalization of luxury, Baron d'Holbach provides his reader with an effective antidote against despotism. Investigating nature itself and disclosing the true essence of luxury one comes to unmask aesthetical excesses and luxurious splendor as a mystification strategy used by tyrants to dominate their subjects.

In light of my discussion, d'Holbach's articulation of the relationship between political and natural philosophy should be taken more seriously. Luxury emerged as a possible form of political domination over people. At the same time, the study of nature turned out to be an effective instrument to contrast tyrannical power, showing that Baron d'Holbach invested natural philosophers not only with the important mission of setting humankind free from the slavery of religion but also from tyranny and political oppression.

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