



HAL
open science

The history of a colonial mystification: Is the concept of commerce in the Encyclopédie ideological ?

Naïs Sabatier

► To cite this version:

Naïs Sabatier. The history of a colonial mystification: Is the concept of commerce in the Encyclopédie ideological?. 25th International Conference on the History of Concepts. Political Ideologies: Tracing the History of Concepts and Languages in a Global Context, History of Concepts Group; Institute of Social and Political Studies; Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Dec 2024, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. hal-04943890

HAL Id: hal-04943890

<https://hal.science/hal-04943890v1>

Submitted on 12 Feb 2025

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial - NoDerivatives 4.0 International License

The history of a colonial mystification: Is the concept of commerce in the *Encyclopédie* ideological?

Naïs SABATIER

Laboratoire de Philosophie et Rationalités (PHIER)

Université Clermont Auvergne - FRANCE

UCA
UNIVERSITÉ
Clermont
Auvergne

UPhieR
Laboratoire
Philosophies & Rationalités

The History of Political
and Social Concepts Group

25th INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON THE HISTORY OF CONCEPTS

“Political Ideologies: Tracing the History of Concepts and Languages in a Global Context”

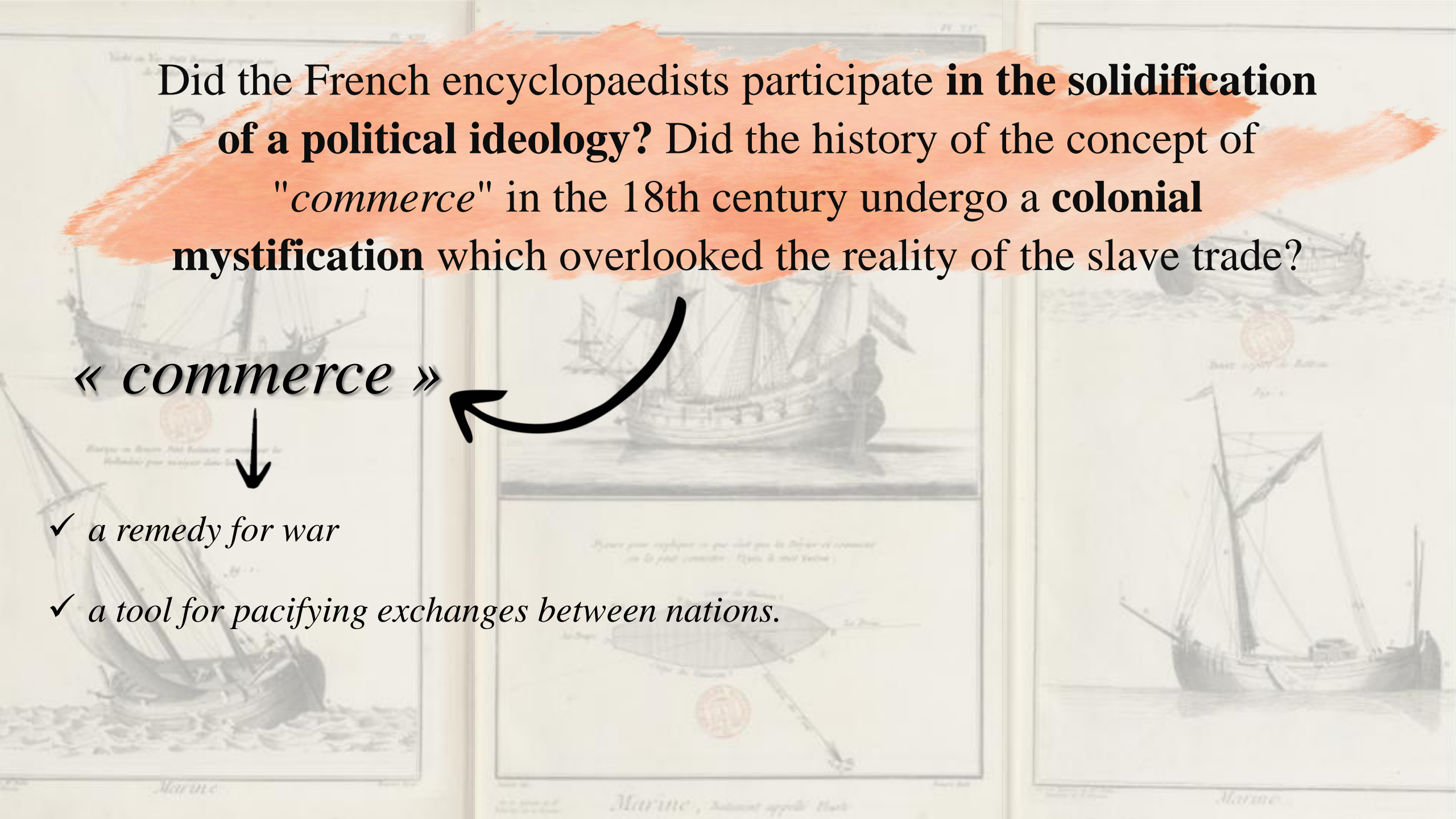
Rio de Janeiro, 05, 06, 07 December 2024

Did the French encyclopaedists participate **in the solidification of a political ideology**? Did the history of the concept of "*commerce*" in the 18th century undergo a **colonial mystification** which overlooked the reality of the slave trade?

« *commerce* »



- ✓ *a remedy for war*
- ✓ *a tool for pacifying exchanges between nations.*



Did the French encyclopaedists participate **in the solidification of a political ideology**? Did the history of the concept of "*commerce*" in the 18th century undergo a **colonial mystification** which overlooked the reality of the slave trade?



Vincent de Gournay (1712-1759)

« *science du commerce* »

« *Laissez-faire, Laissez-passer* »

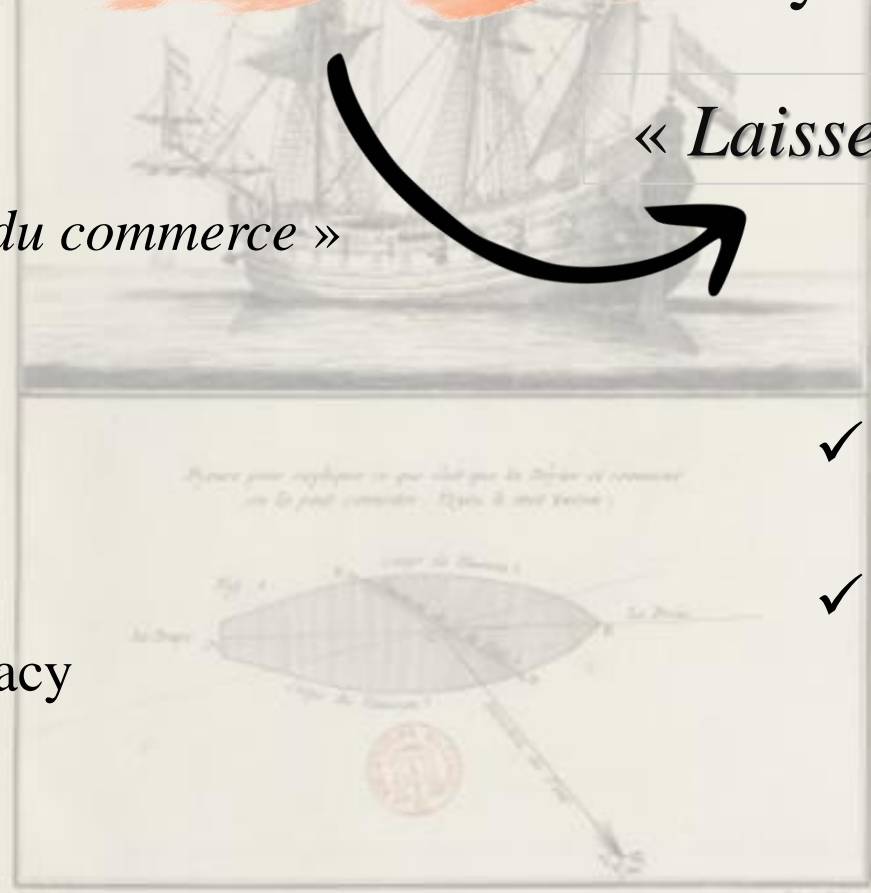


- ✓ *demand for free trade*
- ✓ *opposition to government regulations*
(« *bureaucratie* »)



François Quesnay (1694-1774)

Physiocracy



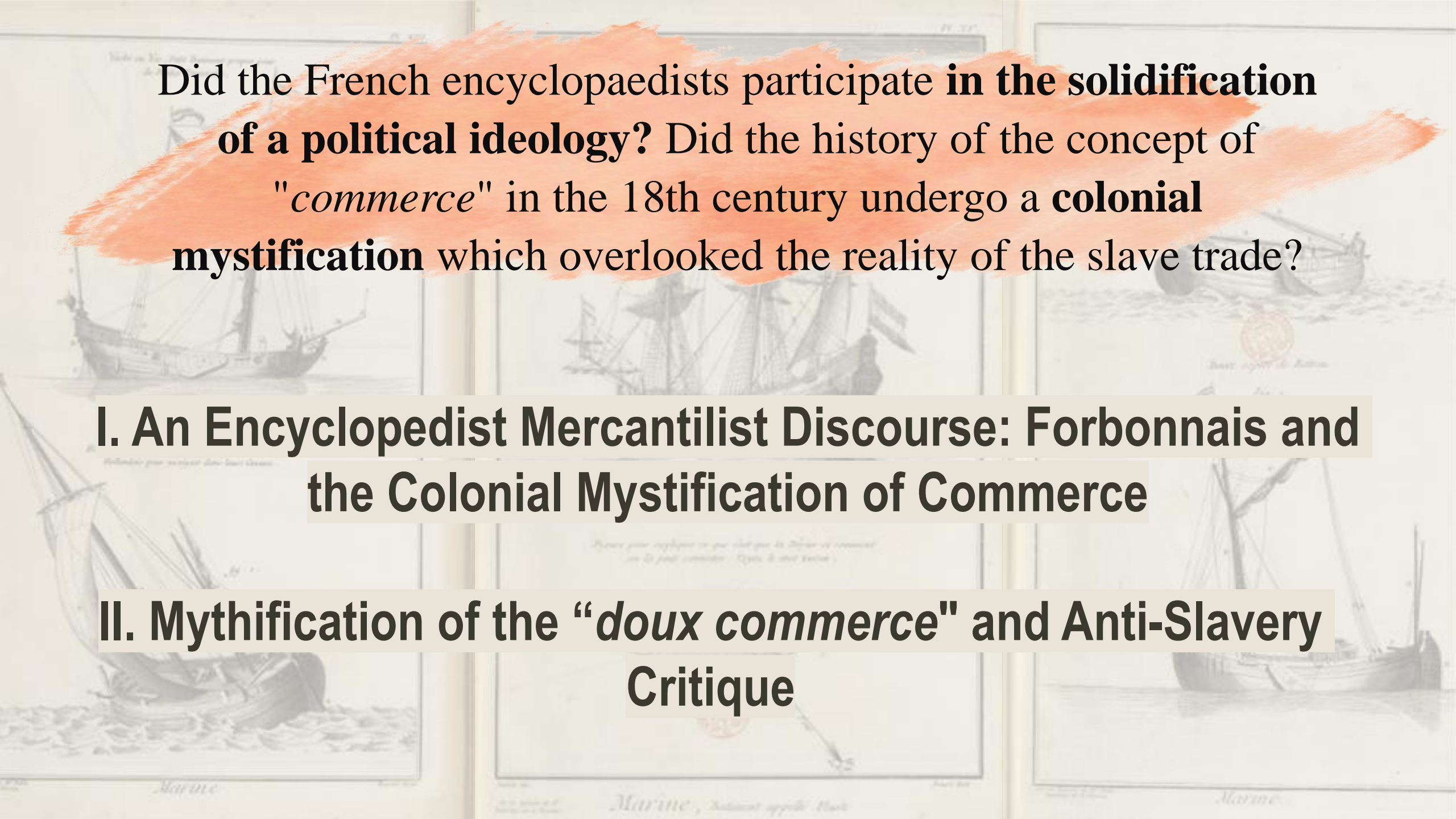
Did the French encyclopaedists participate **in the solidification of a political ideology**? Did the history of the concept of "*commerce*" in the 18th century undergo a **colonial mystification** which overlooked the reality of the slave trade?

But...

a liberalism never fully realized.

a contradiction between free trade and slavery

a contradiction between free trade and colonial trade



Did the French encyclopaedists participate **in the solidification of a political ideology**? Did the history of the concept of "*commerce*" in the 18th century undergo a **colonial mystification** which overlooked the reality of the slave trade?

I. An Encyclopedist Mercantilist Discourse: Forbonnais and the Colonial Mystification of Commerce

II. Mythification of the "*doux commerce*" and Anti-Slavery Critique

I. An Encyclopedist Mercantilist Discourse: Forbonnais and the Colonial Mystification of Commerce



Montesquieu (1689-1755)

« *L'effet naturel du commerce est de porter à la paix* »
(*Esprit des lois*, XX)

“The natural effect of commerce is to promote peace”

- 16 entries contain excerpts from *The Spirit of Laws*.



Corpus of 191 entries (politics) of Diderot's *Encyclopédie*

Crédits (code)

Reeve Jonathan, *Text-Matcher*, 2020, Github.

URL : <https://github.com/JonathanReeve/text-matcher>

I. An Encyclopedist Mercantilist Discourse: Forbonnais and the Colonial Mystification of Commerce



Forbonnais (1722-1800)

COMMERCE, vol. III (1753)

COLONIE (*Hist. anc. mod. & Commer.*), vol. III (1753)

History of commerce and colonization

« SPIRIT OF CONQUEST »

« SPIRIT OF COMMERCE »

*First era of
commerce and the
establishment of
societies.*

*Third era of
commerce and great
conquests
(Empire of Alexander).*

*Modern era of commerce
and economic relations
between nations.*

I. An Encyclopedist Mercantilist Discourse: Forbonnais and the Colonial Mystification of Commerce



Forbonnais (1722-1800)

History of commerce and colonization

« SPIRIT OF CONQUEST » —→ « SPIRIT OF COMMERCE »

- Rejection of a « Colbertist » policy (regulations, bullionism, “war of money”, etc.)
- Participation of commerce in a new ideology: a modern alternative to war.
- Definition of “*commerce*” : « *afin de porter les peuples à conserver la paix entre eux et à s’aimer* »

“In order to encourage peoples to maintain peace among themselves and to love one another”

I. An Encyclopedist Mercantilist Discourse: Forbonnais and the Colonial Mystification of Commerce



Forbonnais (1722-1800)

What is the new role of the colony in this conception of free trade?

« *en général la liberté doit être restreinte en faveur de la métropole* » (in COLONIE)

“In general, liberty must be restricted in favor of the metropolis”

- Defense of the **Colonial Pact**: *prohibition for the colonies to sell to nations other than the metropolis.*
- Paradoxical continuation of the ideology of « power » that ultimately **justifies colonialism**

II. Mythification of the “*doux commerce*” and Anti-Slavery Critique



Jaucourt (1704-1780)

70 000 entries for the *Encyclopédie*...
...but with many plagiarized texts!

Livre XV de l'*Esprit des lois*

§8 Il faut donc borner la servitude naturelle à de **certain pays** particuliers de la terre. Dans tous les autres, il me semble que, quelques pénibles que soient les travaux que la société exige, on peut tout faire avec des hommes libres. [...]

ESCLAVAGE, Jaucourt

§43 De plus, **dans tout gouvernement & dans tout pays**, quelque pénibles que soient les travaux que la société y exige, on peut tout faire avec des hommes libres [...]

“It is therefore necessary to limit natural servitude to **certain particular countries** of the earth”

“Moreover, in **any government and in any country** (...), everything can be done with free men”

II. Mythification of the “*doux commerce*” and Anti-Slavery Critique



Jaucourt (1704-1780)

Livre XV de l'*Esprit des lois*

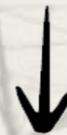
§6-7 Il est temps de chercher la vraie origine du droit de l'esclavage. Il doit être fondé sur la nature des choses : voyons s'il y a des cas où il en dérive comme tous les hommes naissent égaux, il faut dire que l'esclavage est contre la nature, quoique dans certains pays, il soit fondé sur une raison naturelle (...).



ESCLAVAGE, Jaucourt

§56 Cependant n'y a-t-il point de cas ni de lieux où l'esclavage dérive de la nature des choses ? Je réponds 1°. à cette question qu'il n'y en a point ; je réponds ensuite, avec M. de Montesquieu, que s'il y a des pays où l'esclavage paroisse fondé sur une raison naturelle (...)

“Slavery must be based on the nature of things (...). Slavery is against nature, although in certain countries it is based on natural reason.”



“Are there cases where slavery derives from the nature of things? My first response to this question is that there are none. If there are countries where slavery seems to be based on natural reason”

II. Mythification of the “*doux commerce*” and Anti-Slavery Critique



Jaucourt (1704-1780)

What becomes of the concept of "commerce" in Jaucourt's corpus, and does it serve as a tool for critiquing slavery?

Jaucourt, *TRAITE DES NEGRES (Commerce d'Afrique.)*, vol. XVI (1765)

« Que l'on mette les nègres en liberté, et dans peu de générations ce pays vaste et fertile comptera des habitants sans nombre. Les arts, les talents y fleuriront ; et au lieu qu'il n'est presque peuplé que de sauvages et de bêtes féroces, il ne le sera bientôt que par des hommes industriels. »

“Let the *nègres* be set free, and in just a few generations, this vast and fertile country will have countless inhabitants. Arts and talents will flourish there; and instead of being populated mostly by savages and wild beasts, it will soon be inhabited solely by industrious men.”

- opposition between voracious and unequal colonial trade and free, egalitarian and pacifying commerce.
- perpetuation of a form of "**colonial mystification**": the former slave becomes a civilized subject through their economic relationship with the West.

CONCLUSION

➤ three possible trajectories of « *Commerce* » in the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and D'Alembert

1 Mercantilist reception of the « *doux commerce* » of Montesquieu



"*Commerce*" : in the service of monarchic power strategies

2 Radicalization of the egalitarian demands of commerce.



"*Commerce*" : within the framework of *commercial humanism* that universalizes a Western development model

3 Resistance of the republican tradition and rejection of the commercial model



Republican concerns about the universalization of the commercial model (increased inequalities and loss of civic virtue)

25th INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON THE HISTORY OF CONCEPTS

“Political Ideologies: Tracing the History of Concepts and Languages in a Global Context”

Rio de Janeiro, 05, 06, 07 December 2024