

CREDULITY
IN THE AGE OF REASON

LA CRÉDULITÉ
À L'ÂGE DE LA RAISON

Rhetoric, Epistemologies, Education
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NAVIGATING CREDULITY AND DOUBT IN THE AGE OF REASON

At a time of fake news, conspiracy theories, and the increasingly pervasive stranglehold of social networks in the dissemination of knowledge and disinformation, the place of reason in the establishment of truths and the distinction between belief and facts as well as the role of the media in the transmission of knowledge are discussed daily.¹ In this heated context, credulity – who is guilty of it, who promotes it, what constitutes it, and why it matters – is a timely topic. This collection of essays examines the issue of credulity in an earlier period when it was equally central to social debates: the 18th-century “Age of Reason”. As Allison P. Coudert notes, at that time, the very meaning of knowledge was redefined, while at the same time participation in the production of knowledge was expanded in a concerted attack against all forms of deception and credulity.² This was the fundamental basis of the Enlightenment. What made the Enlightenment a common project rather than simply an intellectual movement, as Antoine Lilti explains, “c’est la dimension militante et pédagogique, la conviction que la lutte contre les préjugés et les superstitions doit être menée publiquement, que le savoir et l’esprit critique doivent être diffusés le plus largement possible”.³ For the philosophers of the Enlightenment, critical reasoning would contribute to both individual and collective emancipation.⁴ To achieve these lofty goals, however, they would have to deal with the problem of credulity.

¹ Carolyn Biltoft, “The Anatomy of Credulity and Incredulity: a Hermeneutics of Misinformation”, *The Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*, vol. 1, 2, 2020.

² Allison P. Coudert, “Laughing at Credulity and Superstition in the Long Eighteenth Century”, in *Laughter in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: Epistemology of a Fundamental Human Behavior, its Meaning, and Consequences*, Albrecht Classen (ed.), Berlin; New York, De Gruyter, 2010, p. 803.

³ Antoine Lilti, *L’héritage des Lumières. Ambivalences de la modernité*, Paris, EHESS; Gallimard; Seuil, 2019, p. 270.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 270-271.

In the *Encyclopédie*, Diderot defined credulity as follows:

CRÉDULITÉ, s. f. est une foiblesse d'esprit par laquelle on est porté à donner son assentiment, soit à des propositions, soit à des faits, avant que d'en avoir pesé les preuves [...].⁵

This propensity to accept everything they were told indiscriminately made people vulnerable to all kinds of deception, but it was only half the problem; just as serious was its antithesis, radical scepticism. In fact, Diderot concluded, “Il y a le même danger à tout rejeter et à tout admettre indistinctement; c'est le cas de la *crédulité*, le vice le plus favorable au mensonge”.⁶ Diderot and his fellow encyclopaedists sought a middle way between the Scylla of blind faith and the Charybdis of radical scepticism by eradicating irrational beliefs while developing reason and building empirical knowledge. In doing so, they defied the authority of the Church, which they considered largely responsible for credulity since Christian worship encouraged blind faith. In the article “Liberté de penser”, Diderot developed his argument on how religious mysteries should be considered. Of true freedom of thought, he declared:

[elle] tient l'esprit en garde contre les préjugés et la précipitation. Guidée par cette sage Minerve, elle ne donne aux dogmes qu'on lui propose, qu'un degré d'adhésion proportionné à leur degré de certitude. Elle croit fermement ceux qui sont évidens; elle range ceux qui ne le sont pas parmi les probabilités; il en est sur lesquels elle tient sa croyance en équilibre; mais si le merveilleux s'y joint, elle en devient moins crédule; elle commence à douter, et se méfie des charmes de l'illusion. En un mot elle ne se rend au merveilleux qu'après s'être bien prémunie contre le penchant trop rapide qui nous y entraîne. Elle ramasse sur-tout toutes ses forces contre les préjugés que l'éducation de notre enfance nous fait prendre sur la religion, parce que ce sont ceux dont nous nous défaisons le plus difficilement.⁷

Education, which should sharpen the mind, had the opposite effect, and those beliefs inculcated in childhood proved to be the most firmly held. Antoine Furetière stated that children, women and common folk were

⁵ Denis Diderot, “Crédulité”, in *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, ed. Denis Diderot et Jean Le Rond D'Alembert, Paris, Le Breton, Durand, Briasson, Michel-Antoine David, 1751-1772, t. 4, p. 451.

⁶ Diderot, “Crédulité”, p. 452.

⁷ Denis Diderot, “Liberté de penser”, in *Encyclopédie*, vol IX, p. 472.

amongst the most gullible, i.e. those who “croient facilement”.⁸ Over the course of the 18th century, interest in education only grew, as evidenced by the considerable rise in the number of publications devoted to the subject, especially in the wake of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s publication of *Émile ou de l’Éducation* (1762). Writers less well-known than Rousseau, such as Jean-Pierre de Crousaz, Marie Leprince de Beaumont, Stéphanie-Félicité de Genlis and Arnaud Berquin, all proposed pedagogical methods for teaching children to think for themselves rather than exploiting their credulity. As Crousaz, explained in his *Traité de l’éducation des enfans* (1722):

Si l’on veut que la Raison des Enfans prenne de la force, il ne faut pas leur faire un mérite de leur facilité à croire sans preuve tout ce qu’on leur dit, au contraire il faut les interroger, pour voir s’ils ont bien nettement compris une pensée; il faut leur proposer, suivant qu’on sentira leurs forces, quelque objection qui leur donne lieu de repasser sur l’évidence d’une preuve et d’y chercher de quoi la résoudre: il ne faut jamais les rebuter quand ils demandent des éclaircissemens et qu’ils proposent des questions.⁹

Giving women and common folk the opportunity to take advantage of these new pedagogies was also a subject for debate. Even Diderot wished to reserve secondary education for the children of nobles and “comfortable citizens of the third estate”.¹⁰ However, in the early 1780s, Nicolas de Condorcet responded to those who might think that education was wasted on the common people by putting the blame squarely on the institutions that kept them ignorant: “[L]a stupidité du peuple est l’ouvrage des institutions sociales et des superstitions. Les hommes ne naissent ni stupides, ni fous: ils le deviennent”.¹¹ Condorcet’s championing of public education during the French Revolution must be understood as a desire to awaken the judgment of individuals so that they would be able to

⁸ *Dictionnaire universel, contenant généralement tous les mots françois tant vieux que modernes, et les termes de toutes les sciences et des arts [...] par feu Messire Antoine Furetière*, La Haye, A. et R. Leers, 1690. This triptych was invoked again in the *Dictionnaire de Trévoux*. See *Dictionnaire universel françois et latin: Tome 2*, Trévoux, F. Delaulne, 1721, p. 373.

⁹ Jean-Pierre de Crousaz, *Traité de l’éducation des enfans*, La Haye, Vaillant et Prevost, 1722, vol. 1, p. 308.

¹⁰ Diderot, “Essai sur les études en Russie”, quoted in Harvey Chisick, *The Limits of Reform in the Enlightenment. Attitudes toward the Education on the Lower Classes in Eighteenth-Century France*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1981, p. 147.

¹¹ Nicolas de Condorcet, “Dissertation sur cette question: S’il est utile aux hommes d’être trompés”, *Œuvres complètes*, t. V, François Arago (ed.), Paris, Firmin, 1847, p. 361-362, quoted by Antoine Lilti, *op. cit.*, p. 275.