

Raynal, un regard vers l'Amérique

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Cross the Seine on the Pont des Arts and climb the east staircase of the Institut de France and you reach the oldest public library in France, the Bibliothèque Mazarine, which has been open for use in this particular location since 1689. At the far end of the '*grande galerie*', beneath Corinthian columns and marble busts, is an exhibition devoted to the Abbé Raynal (1713-1796), French historian, journalist and *philosophe* who was famous in his lifetime as the author of the *Histoire des Deux Indes*. This *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les Deux Indes* (to give the book its full title) offered a multi-volume history of European trade with the East and West Indies. The text was initially published anonymously in 1770. A second extended edition appeared in 1774, and a third in 1780, by which time substantial parts had been revised and updated and the name of Abbé Raynal was given as the author.

The *Histoire des Deux Indes* has been described as one of the most successful and influential of the *encyclopédiste* texts. In turn abridged, translated and plagiarized it has been estimated that by the Revolution there were at least fifty official and pirated editions in circulation. The book was a vast comparative history of European commerce: its geographical scope extended eastwards as far as Japan, China, India, Sumatra and Borneo and westwards to Mexico, Chile and Peru, Paraguay, Brazil and the Caribbean islands. The last volume dealt specifically with French and British colonies in North America. The text itself mixed geographical description, historical narrative, and maps, tables and data relating to international trade. There was also plenty of philosophical reflection: observations on the advantages and disadvantages of colonial dependencies and plenty of opinion on the long sad histories of European savagery, in particular the miseries that had been inflicted on indigenous peoples by colonists, missionaries and armies. The text denounced the trafficking of men; it was critical of the indifference of the Church and it predicted the rebellion of all oppressed and tormented people.

The Abbé Raynal described himself as a ‘defender of humanity, virtue and liberty’ and with each successive edition the *Deux Indes* had become more radical, that is, more anti-clerical, more anti-monarchical and more anti-colonial. As sales rose throughout Europe, so did the polemics surrounding it. The text was black-listed in 1774, banned by the Catholic Church in 1775 and condemned by the Parlement de Paris in 1781. The same year, extracts dealing specifically with the British colonies in North America were circulating in French and English editions under the title *The Revolution in America*. By the late eighteenth century then, the *Histoire des Deux Indes* had shaped perceptions of America in fundamental and enduring ways, and with phrases like ‘the authority of Great Britain over America must sooner or later be extinct ... [for] ... you fear our progress, bind our hands, and repress and strangle our growing strength’ (vol. 6, 1782, p. 52) or ‘all power by its very nature tends to despotism’ (vol. 6, 1782, p. 41), the *Deux Indes* was increasingly understood as a political manifesto for revolutionary change.

This exhibition has been co-curated by Gilles Bancarel, President of the Raynal Association and Patrick Latour, head curator of the Mazarine Library. It is one of several events that have been scheduled to celebrate the 300th anniversary – this year – of Raynal’s birth. The two opening sections of the exhibition are called ‘America: Images and Perceptions of a Discovery’ and ‘From Travel Document to Global History’, and they put Raynal’s text into dialogue with a range of existing works – books, manuscripts and archives – the majority of which have been taken from the Mazarine’s impressive holdings. The exhibits include some of the first published accounts of the Americas, such as the *Cosmographiae Introductio* (1507), which introduced the word ‘America’, the pocket-size *Brief Récit* (1545) with its glossary of Amerindian language, or Francisco Lopez de Gomara’s widely diffused compilation *Historia general de las Indias* (1552), exhibited here in French, Italian and Spanish editions. These, along with the first atlases (for example, Nicolas Sanson’s *L’Amérique en plusieurs cartes*, 1657) or the early treatises of botanical medicine (Nicolas Monardes’ *Dos Libros*, 1565) give a good indication of how curiosity for the New World shifted focus, moving from observation and documentation to questions of trade and national identity. Thus, maps give way to the ‘how-to manuals’ of commerce (the *Journal oeconomique*, 1751-72, Chambon’s *Traité général du commerce de l’Amérique*, 1783), or to travel compendiums (Prévost’s multi-volume *Histoire générale des Voyages*, 1749-89), dissertations on the slave trade, or philosophical essays enquiring into the nature of the ‘American’ (de Pauw’s *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains*, 1770). The exhibits in these sections are highly varied and were published in a range of European languages (French, Italian, Spanish, Dutch, English). Presented like this they help prepare us for the ways in which the *Deux Indes* would differ.

The central section of the exhibition is formed of four glass cases containing the first editions of the *Deux Indes* (part three of the exhibition) and a variety of materials that recover its broad impact and wide reception. The book immediately stimulated a lively critical response in Europe although the published attacks (such as Thomas Paine's *A Letter Addressed to the Abbé Raynal*, 1782, or Juan Nuix y Perpina's *Reflexiones imparciales*, 1782) only appeared in the 1780s, when Raynal had assumed sole authorship of the text. Parts four and five highlight how the contents of the *Deux Indes* accelerated the American War of Independence and calls for the abolition of slavery. Part six, 'Raynal and the Academy', turns to his influence in academic discourse with a display of dissertations produced in response to a question that Raynal had set for the Académie of Lyon in 1780: Had the discovery of America been 'useful' or 'harmful' to the rest of mankind? Candidates had three years to submit their essay and the author of the best response would be awarded fifty *louis d'or*. The final section of the exhibition, 'Raynal and Posterity', addresses his contradictory reputation during the Revolution. In fact, while Raynal was considered one of the 'fathers' of the Revolution, when his response to it eventually came, in the form of a letter that was read to the National Assembly in May 1791, it was to condemn the violence of the mob. He called for a ban on political clubs and for more power to be given to the king. Given the evident contradictions with the most famous passages of the *Deux Indes*, his response seemed mad: Raynal seemed now to be no more than a '*malheureux vieillard*', a charlatan who had started to plead the cause of tyrants. Nevertheless, in 1795, 'Citoyen Raynal' was asked to join the newly formed Institut de France. Both the Minister's letter of invitation and the *philosophe's* negative reply are among the many archive documents that are being displayed at the Mazarine Library. Raynal died the following year. A last edition of the *Histoire des Deux Indes* was published in 1820. Thereafter, it became one of the forgotten texts of the eighteenth century.

Renewed interest in Raynal and the *Deux Indes* has recently been gathering momentum: The first volume of the first ever scholarly edition of the *Histoire des Deux Indes* was published in 2010 by the Voltaire Foundation in Oxford, and four more are in preparation. Further afield, scholarship has focused attention on its anti-imperialistic positions and the sort of idealized image of America that it propagated. There is also the vexed question of authorship, for the *Histoire des Deux Indes* was actually a collaborative work and from 1774, at least, there were important contributions from Denis Diderot (who is believed to have authored a third of the text) as well as from Baron d'Holbach, Jean de Pechméja and the Comte de Buffon. The exhibition, however, leaves the disputatious issues of authorship to one side. It returns us to the book as it was published and known at the time, as Raynal's text.

According to Latour, what is on display is not the most precious, nor even the most impressive of the library's holdings, but what fits discreetly with the constraints of place – which means into the glass cabinets of the library and within a reading room which remains in use. With eighty pieces, the exhibition is bigger than it initially seems. The exhibits all repay careful attention and their display emphasizes, where possible, the use of illustration. The catalogue to the exhibition, which has been published in collaboration with the Éditions des Cendres contains generous introductory essays on all seven sections of the exhibition, fully annotated catalogue entries and many high-quality photographs of the various texts. In giving back to the exhibited works voices by which they can speak, it becomes an essential guide to the exhibition as well as a valuable contribution to Raynal studies.

Overall, what this exhibition does so well is to emphasize the mobility of an eighteenth-century text: it allows us to understand the sharing, copying, adapting and printing, across different European centres, of the publications that would make the writing of encyclopedic compendia possible. Furthermore, by reconstituting some of the different ways in which Raynal was read and understood, the Mazarine exhibition effectively demonstrates how the book catalyzed an enduring debate about the nature of American identity, and by extension the meaning of democracy, freedom and rights.

'Raynal, un regard vers l'Amérique' is at the Bibliothèque Mazarine, Paris, from 13 June to 15 September 2013.