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**THE CONCEPT OF "NATURE" IN THE FRENCH
MATERIALIST PHILOSOPHY OF THE 18TH
CENTURY**

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The present work has a pronounced historical and interpretative character. Through it we aim to systematically study the concept of "nature" as it was thought by the main representatives of the 18th century French Materialism. However, this work is not limited to the thematic study of the works of Holbach, Diderot, Helvetius, La Mettrie, and the reconstruction of the meaning of the central concept of materialistic thought, which has been successfully spread in France for the last hundred years of the absolutist-feudal regime of the house Bourbon. She is pursuing more than that. Starting from a less-used bibliography in the Francophone environment, which includes works by authors such as Alan Charles Kors, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Deirdre McCloskey, Alasdair MacIntyre, Friedrich Hayek, or Murray Rothbard, this research aims to combat some prejudices and clichés that were installed early in the Romanian academic world, some of which are still functional today in our cultural mainstream, prejudices that systematically prevent the correct understanding of historical data and events that underlie European modernization processes carried out in Western societies since the late 17th century. Among these, perhaps the most widespread and most influential of them is to consider the Enlightenment as an episode of French culture and to treat it as a materialistic-radical trend. By combating these prejudices, we intend to demonstrate that the meaning of the term "nature", as thought by materialistic philosophers of the 18th century, can be understood only in their revolutionary political project of destruction of the old absolutist feudal regime, and that, for this reason, in the absence of a scientific character, this concept plays an ethical and moral role in materialistic thinking. Our research extends on three chapters and in order to achieve this goal, we appeal both to classical methods of historical research (text study, exegesis and linguistic analysis, etc.), as well as to methods of systematic research (data collection, simulation and hypothesis testing): 1. Enlightenment and Materialism, 2. The intellectual origins of French Materialism, 3. The concept of "nature" in French Materialism.

Being convinced that the study of ideological trends plays an important role in knowing the spiritual, economic, legal or political life of a society, I considered from the very beginning that this study cannot be undertaken without a prior conceptual clarification of the current Enlightenment. This prior undertaking, to which I devoted the first chapter, an enterprise which for some of us could appear on its own, didn't prove to be a light, risk-free or surprise work for the author of this work. The difficulty came first of all from the fact that the Enlightenment is not treated at all as a particular historical period, as a phase of a wider historical evolution, or as a cultural epoch or movement, but as a specific conception of the world, a collective way of thinking and acting which, without first being linked to a particular society, has a pan-European character.

Our study has struck a number of historical prejudices about the Enlightenment, which once left unchecked, risked to seriously damage the findings of this research. First of all, it is the bias about the duration of this major ideological trend of Western culture, one that far from falling within the limits of the 18th century manifests in accordance with our bibliography and analyses, starting with The English Revolution of 1688 to continue to this day. We are referring to a prejudice that follows a political process of historical falsification of the Enlightenment, following which this ideological stream was treated as a radical and secular current in France, and which, starting in 1715, will spread throughout Europe to end with the French Revolution of 1789. Despite this prejudice, fuelled by a rich bibliography tributary to the cultural ideals of the French national state, in this paper we treated the Enlightenment not as an episode of French culture but as a stream of ideas that can only be understood as departing from within the culture of Great Britain, the true homeland of the European Enlightenment. Beginning with the last decade of the 17th century, as a result of processes of emancipation under the influence of the values of feudal absolutism and institutional modernization culminating in the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the Great Industrial Revolution, the most important economic force of the European continent, Britain will also become the host of the most advanced Western culture of the time. Under these conditions, it will play the role of the environment of the emergence of all those ideas, principles and institutions that underlie the modernization of Europe and which we designate in their ensemble and unity as the term of Enlightenment.

It is a series of cultural components that, since the last decade of the 17th century, have created, despite their spread throughout Europe through the communication channels of British

society, a true development gap between the UK and all other European societies, particularly the French one. Starting from the discovery of this gap between British and French societies, we have proposed in parts 3-5 of the first chapter to review and analyse the ideological factors that we believe can explain. We have identified and analysed in this regard a series of ideas, rules and institutions such as "*human individuality*", "*individual autonomy*", "*private property*", "*fair market and governance*", "*private conventions and community traditions*" which through their systematic cultivation in British society, respectively by preventing or delaying their recognition in the absolutist-feudal French, explains the historical advance of the former and the intensification of the crisis in the latter. It is a sum of institutions that, while having a clear moral-political character, operate in accordance with the law of correspondence between the practical and the theoretical domain, closely related to the gnoseological regime specific to the society in which they are installed. On the basis of this law of correspondence between the political regime of a society and its gnoseological one, we shall insist in the sixth part of the first chapter of the paper on the role that epistemologies played in the imagination and organization of political regimes, emphasizing by this opportunity the structural and functional correspondence between the Cartesian and Baconian epistemologies of the *manifest truth* and the absolutist feudal moral and political regimes of the 17th century. We refer to two classical epistemologies that, starting with the 80' of the 17th century, will come into crisis and will be deployed from the Anglo-Saxon cultural area, being replaced by a new, critical, sceptical, pessimistic epistemology, to be concerned with the discovery of "the absolute sources of truth, is interested in cultivating" means of detecting and removing the error". It is an epistemology of the Enlightenment, a movement of Scottish origin, individualist, liberal, reformist, deistic, inspired by the tradition of British empiricism and scepticism, represented in France by Voltaire, Montesquieu, Turgot and in Great Britain, the United States America or Germany by Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Thomas Reid, Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, Gilbert Stuard, David Hume, Thomas Jefferson, E. Burke, Lord Kames, Alexander Hamilton, John Adams, James Madison or I. Kant.

However, the two epistemologies of *manifest truth*, so foreign to the Enlightenment gnoseological model, will not always be displaced and overcome. They will continue to function in those societies where the absolutist feudal political regime was still rooted in the collective mentality. They will cause serious historical damage here. In France, for example, they will play the role of the fundamental means of accepting and assimilating the ideas, principles and

institutions of the British Enlightenment, becoming accountable by their absolutist, authoritarian, exclusive and inflexible character of profound distortion of their meaning. In this context, in the cultural areas dominated by the old episteme, they will lead to the emergence of a second-hand Enlightenment, represented in France by Holbach, Diderot, Helvetius, La Mettrie, J.J. Rousseau, Mably, Condorcet, Mirabeau, Meslier, and in the other part of Europe by Thomas Paine, Richard Price, John Jebb, William Frend, William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, Joseph Priesley, J.Bentham, Lessing, Herder, Weishaupt, Jan Schimmelpenninck, Peter Paulus, Cerisier, Benjamin Rush etc., movement that through its most representatives has a monist, substantial, materialist, radical and atheist character, rooted among others in the metaphysics of Cartesian, Spinozist and Leibnizian Rationalism. It is a stream of thought that assigns reason to the role of an absolute intellectual instrument by means of which people can directly know the reality or modify society in accordance with the interests of sovereigns or their peoples. This second-hand Enlightenment is a stream of thought from which Romanticism will come later, that reactionary movement even directed against the ideas, principles and institutions of the authentic European Enlightenment.

Produced by an alienated and radicalized intellectual environment, this pseudo-Enlightenment is the result of the attempt by the French intelligentsia to take over and force the moral-political superstructure of the British Enlightenment in the absence of the necessary and appropriate epistemological support. By betraying the thinking of the Age of Lights, the pseudo-Enlightenment took the form of a vulgar materialism. In the tenth part of the chapter, dedicated exclusively to the materialist trend, we first tried to identify the general factors that favoured the emergence of this pseudo-Enlightenment current in France, discovering, on the one hand, that the French society of the 18th century is a conservative agrarian society with an archaic economy and affected by famine and poverty and on the other hand that the French state is a monarchic absolutist feudal state which, as we have seen, is based on the epistemological regime of the *manifest truth* that cannot be defended without an appeal to religious dogma. Being an absolutist state in which the King is treated as a God's anointing, he is founded on religion – as a specific ideological source of despotism and monarchic absolutism – and on Church, as the central institution of the feudal order and hierarchy. As the absolutist state is a confessional state in which the King and the Church cannot be separated, we will understand why it cannot demolish without its opponents having destroyed its religious foundation. The analysis that we will

undertake in the tenth part of Chapter I will help us to understand why the opposition of the French intelligentsia to the absolutist feudal regime has actually taken the character of opposition against religion and the Christian church. Religion is therefore a major stake in both the camp of supporters of the absolute monarchy and that of the Enlightenment or radical opposition that we can say that the attack or the defence of it actually relates all the actions, successes or defeats of the two camps. Everything is happening on the backdrop of a visible process of secularization, which will primarily affect the aristocratic class, the literate, and the less popular, illiterate masses, which in this case also represent a significant conservative force. Thus, among the nobility, that is kept away from office and prisoner at the king's court, begins to feel, from the last quarter of the 17th century, an air if not indifferent to religion, then certainly hostile to it.

If the early emergence of this process of secularization in Europe could be attributed to the excitement and religious conflicts or to the establishment of the capitalist institutions that have been taking place in European societies since the 15th century, the intensification of secularization in France in the 17th century is undoubtedly the product of the activity of the native writers of the time, which originated in their majority from the ranks of the nobility. The ideological blows that this eccentric nobility applies to the religious foundations of the absolute monarchy ultimately affect the feudalism itself, built on these bases. Observing this, has allowed us to affirm that atheism and materialism have originated from the aristocratic media. If they appear and manifest shy in the beginning, in time they become more pronounced and aggressive. Thus, if before the 50's of the 18th century, official criticism of Christianity takes the indirect form of encoded language, hints, cautious suggestions, alongside it, a virulent critique unfolds through a number of clandestine manuscripts.

However, going beyond the Enlightenment boundaries of the de-scriptural debates maintained by the opposition of the French intellectuals under the direct influence of the Anglo-Saxon culture, the French radical intelligence fuelled by this native clandestine literature will eventually break with any religion, including natural religion, openly stated his materialism and his atheism. As a result of this intellectual skew, the explosive texts of materialism of the 18th century will appear along with its most important representatives: Holbach, Diderot, Helvetius or La Mettrie. Through their work, materialism will acquire a genuine doctrinal character in France. Represented in the UK by a small number of intellectuals, it will enjoy in France a significant support especially among the nobility. Whether it appeared in the deterministic and mechanistic

version of Helvetius, or in Diderot's dynamic and evolutionary, materialism ruptured to the surface with the old dualistic metaphysical doctrine of the substance and was developed from three constitutive theses: 1. thinking is only a form of organized matter, 2. freedom, good and evil absolutely are simple intellectual illusions, 3. God and the immortal soul are pure religious superstitions.

Having a clear polemic character, materialism wanted to be emancipated by the scholastic thinking systems, the obscure spiritualist metaphysics, the old theories and the ontologies of Western thought. However, despite its scientific intentions, materialism remained tributary, as we will show in Chapter II, to Descartes's, Spinoza's and Leibniz' classic metaphysics. Thus, substantiality, mechanism, and ontological determinism developed systematically in the latter will deeply mark the materialist doctrine. It is not by accident that the gradual scientification of authentic Enlightenment thinking, based on the Newtonian physics model of mathematical analysis and phenomenological data offered by physics, mechanics, logic or astronomy, occurs with the taking over of Cartesian, Spinozist or Leibnizian ontologies, materialism remains captured, despite the statements of its supporters, in the metaphysical core they maintain. While authentic Enlightenment, starting from the assumption that reason has its limits and that they are acknowledged, is a subjectivist, gnoseologist inclined to scepticism and refuses in principle any theory of being, materialism, pushing the total intelligibility of nature, turns into a objectivist-substantive ontology (rooted *nolens volens* in Aristotelian metaphysics). With a vulgar, popular, pseudo-scientific character, materialism betrays the ideals of Enlightenment and damages the foundation of its intellectual domains, such as La Mettrie, D'Holbach, Helvetius or Diderot, through their metaphysical approach to the reduction of science, morals, art, language, etc. to the absolute substance of matter – which we will analyse during the third chapter of the paper – prevents and decreases their enterprises. Although it appears to be a radical critique, materialism functions as an authoritarian metaphysics specific to the epistemological regime correlated with absolutist political thought.

Without being scientific, this metaphysics, designed to attack the religious foundations of the monarchic absolutist regime, is engaging and cannot be understood beyond the political struggle in which it was used by its supporters. For French radicalists, the path of atheism materialism is the ultimate form of denial of the absolutist feudal political regime and the means of ensuring the complete rupture with it. In the face of this denial, "matter," a true conceptual

march, becomes a strategic political expedient of metaphysical destruction of the religious foundations of absolutism. Used as an absolute negation of God – the central pillar of the epistemological structure of the absolutist regime – this concept of "*matter*" will actually function for radicalists as a true "*God turned backward*."

Based on this concept of matter, the conception of the nature of the French materialists of the 18th century is shaped. As we shall see, it is an extremist, dogmatic cosmological conception, alien to the epistemic cadres of the Lights, which remains branched and tributary, to the 17th century deductive and ontological metaphysics. Among them is the Cartesian double substance. The Cartesian conception of a self-contained material, equally inanimate and devoid of mind, is, in our opinion, the founding moment of modern European materialism. It is an ideological moment that provides the conditions for the support of the metaphysical thesis that matter, by virtue of its substantial separation, is far from being an amorphous, passive, undetermined element, which acquires meaning only through its informing, carried out by the finalist activity of a higher mind, has all the qualities necessary to manifest itself separately and independently.

However, from this Cartesian stage of recognizing of the autonomous manifestation of matter in relation to thought, to the materialist monist of the radicalist conception of thought as a phenomenon of matter, there was only one step. It is an ideological step that the materialist philosophers of the 18th century will undertake. Apart from the doubts specific to the rationalist-critical thinking of Enlightenment, or the necessity of pre-gnostic legitimation of any particular scientific approach, the materialists give us, on the Cartesian lineage, a new metaphysical theory of nature. This theory is the result of an intellectual approach that aims to reveal the absolute substance that nature carries within itself. It is an absolute, unique, original substance, protein, of a "determined essence" – as Holbach calls it – which, through manifestations and changing arrangements, creates all the possible things, actions and ideas, which in relation to it must be considered simple secondary phenomena. It is also a substance that, without being blind, is penetrated and organized by a sum of universal mechanical laws according to which it carries out its movements and arrangements.

This unique substance, absolute, private of contradictions and cleavages is *matter* itself. For the radical intellectuals of the 18th century, this is the absolute foundation of all things. Designed as a fundamental principle of nature, matter can only be directly known. Its "direct",

"intuitive" and "obvious" character has the gift of imposing human minds. In so far as it does, it deduces deductions of science from nature. Indeed, since sense and sensory experience only put us in touch with particular things, that is, exclusively with secondary phenomena, we need the prior recognition of matter as a theme and as a primary substance.

With the intuitive and immediate recognition of this universal substance, but also with the deductive research through it of our sensory-bodily experience, matter, as a common substrate of the composition of things and people, becomes the basis for identifying the science of nature with the science of man and the science of man with the science of nature.

Under these circumstances, the science of nature functions as a negative intellectual approach by which matter is conceived in opposition to the series of socio-political and cultural obstacles that have hindered the human spirit so far to manifest itself freely and genuinely. It involves the elimination of all these historical obstacles to the intuitive and sensible freedom of the spirit. That is why for the French materialists the manifest of nature and the recognition of the way in which it is itself, as a closed, substantial, self-grounded, subconscious and explicable per se, implies the demolition of the obstructions, conditions and socio-political constraints that obey the spirit and maintain people in ignorance, misery and poverty. In pursuing to reveal nature in all its physical nakedness, materialistic theory, far from being scientific, is designed to attack the religious foundations of the absolutist-feudal political regime of the time. For this reason it can only be analysed and understood in relation to the social-political liberation struggle in which the radical French intelligence of the time was involved.

Without being able to be understood through a simple conceptual analysis, the term "nature" or "matter" should be studied starting from what the materialists intend to undertake through them. The two concepts, therefore, do not refer to certain objective properties of things, or to features that an observer may perceive from the outside of them, but to the less visible, but not less efficient, conception that the radical materialists have about the things in question. That is why, in our work, we will speak of them as "*teleological concepts*".

Indeed, the term nature plays for the French materialists of the 18th century the role of a concept that can only be understood by starting from their anti-monarchical and anti-clerical social program, a program that aimed at destroying the old absolutist feudal regime and replacing it with an egalitarian, popular and democratic one. For this reason, the concept of "*nature*" far

from having a scientific character, plays for materialists, as we will demonstrate during this work, an eminently ethical and moral role.

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