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Inventing Europe in Modern History of Philosophy

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From the 18th century onward European civilization has been characterized by a philosophical mind that would have reached maturity or, in alternative narratives, appeared in the 17th century.¹ In the 18th and 19th centuries, philosophical historiography contributed in a specific and significant way to the constitution of this *topos* and, in so doing, to the creation of European modern self-consciousness.² By contrasting European culture with other cultural ensembles, modern historians of philosophy created a European philosophical culture that was essentially Christian³ and paradoxically rooted

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¹ On the notion of civilization: AAVV, *Civilisations, Retour sur les mots et les idées*, *Revue de Synthèse*, 129, 2008/1; Ph. Bénéton, *Histoire des mots, culture et civilisation*, Paris 1975; B. Binoche (ed.), *Les équivoques de la civilisation*, Paris 2005; B. Dufal, « Faire et défaire l'histoire des civilisations », in Ph. Büttgen, A. de Libera, M. Rashed, I. Rosier-Catach (ed.), *Les Grecs, les Arabes et nous. Enquête sur l'islamophobie savante*, Paris 2009, 317-358; R. Monnier, « Usages d'un couple d'antonymes au 18^e siècle. La civilisation et son revers, la barbarie », *Dix-huitième Siècle*, 40, 2008, 523-542; O. Remaud, « Culture versus civilisation. La genèse d'une opposition », *Revue de synthèse*, 129, 2008, 105-123; A. Sartori, « The Resonance of 'Culture': Framing a Problem in Global Concept-History », *Society for Comparative Study of Society and History*, 47, 2005, 676-699. On progress and modernity: G. Piaia, I. Manova (ed.), *Modernità e progresso. Due idee guida nella storia del pensiero*, Padova 2014.

² R. Balzaretto (« The Creation of Europe », *History Workshop Journal*, 33, 1992, 181-196) argued that there was no idea of Europe in the Middle Ages, suggesting that this idea is a modern invention.

³ M.A. Perkins, *Christendom and European Identity. The Legacy of a Grand Narrative since 1789*, Berlin-New York 2004.

— in Greek (pagan) and/or modern (secularized) philosophy.⁴ With notable exceptions such as Brucker's history of philosophy or Voltaire's cultural history,⁵ these processes of constituting European identity on the ground of philosophical rationality indeed excluded other cultures, which were on the one hand identified as Semitic, Chinese, Japanese or American Indian, on the other hand, historically situated in ages allegedly devoid of autonomous philosophical rationality, that is, in the antediluvian period, in the Middle Ages or in the Renaissance. Since the end of the 18th century, the European philosophical culture would moreover have taken particular forms in the recently created nations.

The conference *Inventing Europe in Modern History of Philosophy* aims **(A)** to reconstruct some exemplary modern undertakings, which, on the one hand, have contributed to the definition of philosophy as a method and cultural endeavor; on the other hand **(B)**, have created an allegedly European philosophical mind by excluding other cultural and historical worlds. Moreover, **(C)** it intends to investigate the effects that these European historiographical enterprises have had on histories of philosophy undertaken in other cultural areas, which have precisely been identified as "other" or non-philosophical in Western history of philosophy (such as China, Japan and the Islamic World).

(A) Definition of philosophy as a method and cultural endeavor. While reconstructing the developments, fortunes, misfortunes, accelerations, progresses and regressions⁶ of philosophical rationality since its very first anticipations in the antediluvian ages (e.g. J.J. Brucker) or in Greek antiquity

⁴ See, for instance, the clear statements of Émile Bréhier and Olof Gigon, two foremost 20th century historians of philosophy. É. Bréhier, « Comment je comprends l'histoire de la philosophie », in É. Bréhier, *Études de philosophie antique*, Paris [1947] 1955, 8-9: « [...] la philosophie a pris son élan en Grèce et, de cet élan, elle a gardé l'amour et la passion de la liberté; je ne disconviens pas que la philosophie soit une plante rare dans l'ensemble de l'humanité, et même une plante fragile; et il n'y a pas eu, que je sache, de philosophie ainsi précisément nommée et caractérisée ailleurs que dans notre civilisation occidentale, sinon par une imitation qui s'est étendue jusqu'à l'Islam et jusqu'à l'Inde. C'est cette plante rare et belle que je défends autant qu'il est possible à un historien, en me rendant compte qu'elle est exposée au péril qui menace, de l'intérieur et de l'extérieur, notre Occident. » O. Gigon, *Les grands problèmes de la philosophie antique*, Paris 1961, 9: « Dernière remarque. Il n'est pas de nos jours inutile de souligner avec énergie que la philosophie, aussi bien la chose que le mot, est née chez les Grecs et qu'il n'existe de philosophie, au sens vrai du mot, qu'exclusivement dans la tradition qui nous vient des Grecs. Sans doute ne peut-on empêcher personne d'appeler philosophies la sagesse chinoise et les spéculations de l'Inde [...]. Nous ne voudrions empêcher personne de manifester, par conviction ou par politique, la plus haute estime pour les classiques hindous et chinois. Mais ces derniers n'ont rien de commun avec ce que l'histoire, depuis Platon et Aristote, nous oblige à nommer 'philosophie'. »

⁵ See the nuanced study by A. Lilti in A. Lilti, C. Spector (ed.), *Penser l'Europe au XVIII^e siècle*, Oxford 2014.

⁶ On these notions, see the classical study by R. Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*, Frankfurt am Main [1979] 2005.

— (e.g. D. Tiedemann),⁷ modern historians of philosophy defined the object of their narratives by at least five features. (1) First, they considered the philosophical culture that had reached maturity in modern Europe as a process of *generalization*. The philosophical mind claims a certain degree of abstraction. Since the beginning of its history, it has elaborated general concepts such as the ideas of being and truth. By contrast, non-philosophical cultures would be unable to think abstractly; their cultural productions would rather be poetical or religious.⁸ (2) Second, according to modern historians of philosophy and philosophers, European philosophical culture has a monopoly on *method*, which is regarded as an epistemic virtue.⁹ From the scholastic ages onwards philosophers and theologians established controlled procedures for treating general problems. In the modern era, with Descartes and then Kant, the dialectical scholastic method turned to or was replaced by criticism. (3) Third, this method has also been described as *analytic* – particularly in French and English historiographies, less in German history of philosophy.¹⁰ Philosophical analysis creates discontinuity and thus provides epistemic tools for cumulative and controlled sciences. In this respect, modern historians of philosophy paid special attention to the problem of the *language* one should speak or write in philosophy, whether it be a formal, artificial language or a natural language such as German or French.¹¹ In the 19th century, they notably underlined that Semitic languages are unsuitable for philosophy. (4) Fourth, in the modern philosophical historiography the achievement of philosophy goes hand in hand with a *secularized* and intersubjective rationality, whose political counterpart is the European rule of law. By contrast, non-European philosophical enterprises, for example the so-called “Arabic peripatetic philosophy”, are often portrayed as fatalistic, enthusiastic or fanatical and compared with tyrannical political regimes. (5) Finally, European philosophical culture has been conceived as *reflexive*. By reconstructing the history of philosophical rationality over the centuries, the European mind would have become conscious of itself. At least since the romantic era, *historical self-consciousness* has been regarded by historians of philosophy and culture as an essential modern and European philosophical feature.¹²

⁷ D. Tiedemann, *Geist der spekulativen Philosophie*, Marburg 1791, XIX: « Nun wird allgemein zu zugestanden, daß alle Lehren der Chaldäer, Persier, Indier, und selbst der Aegypter [...] entweder bloße Dichtungen halb roher Zeiten enthalten, oder auf religiöse Vorstellungen hinausgehen [...]. Von der Philosophie dieser Völker haben wir demnach kein Recht zu reden, noch in einer Geschichte der Philosophie solche Lehren aufzustellen. »

⁸ P.K.J. Park, *Africa, Asia and the History of Philosophy. Racism in the Formation of the Philosophical Canon, 1780-1830*, New York [2013] 2014.

⁹ On epistemic virtues, see L. Daston, P. Galison, Peter, *Objectivity*, New York 2010.

¹⁰ With some notable exceptions, such as “Austrian” history of philosophy. See K. Mulligan, « Sur l’histoire de l’approche analytique de l’histoire de la philosophie: de Bolzano et Brentano à Bennett et Barnes », in J.-M. Vienne (ed.), *Philosophie analytique et histoire de la philosophie*, Paris 1997, 61-103.

¹¹ On nationalist trends, see M.A. Perkins, *Nation and Word, 1170-1850. Religious and metaphysical language in European national consciousness*, Aldershot 1999.

¹² See J. Goody, *The Theft of History*, Cambridge 2006; M. Olender, *Race sans histoire*, Paris [2005] 2009.

— **(B) Creation of a European philosophical culture by exclusion of others.**

As already suggested, the constitution of a specific European cultural identity proceeded, in the history of philosophy, by excluding other cultural traditions and therefore by identifying them.¹³ History and anthropology indeed served as projection surfaces for modern historians of philosophy.¹⁴ “Semites”, Chinese, Japanese and American Indians sometimes played the role of the noble savage for stigmatizing, in contrast, the corrupted sophistication of philosophy in the European Middle Ages, or they embodied barbarous, fanatical or mystical cultures, which are heterogeneous to philosophy (in the sense described above). Religion¹⁵ and language were at the center of these reconstructions; they were seen as markers of cultural identities. From a *diachronic* point of view, three periods were particularly considered as pre- or non-philosophical: the antediluvian ages,¹⁶ in which the reason was still in an embryonic stage; the Middle Ages, in which philosophy was mixed up with theology and therefore enslaved and corrupted;¹⁷ and the Renaissance, which has been considered as a (non-philosophical) artistic period.¹⁸ Ancient Greece and modern Europe were thus portrayed as the privileged ages of philosophical culture. Around 1800 the Middle Ages were however rehabilitated: in the emerging nations, historians of philosophy colonized the national Middle Ages in order to make them the cradle of the national culture.

(C) Retroactive and proactive effects on non-European histories of philosophy or philosophies. Since the last decades of the 20th century, history of philosophy has been globalized, giving rise to a “global history of

¹³ See F.M. Wimmer, *Interkulturelle Philosophie. Theorie und Geschichte*. Wien 1990, 25-52.

¹⁴ M. Laerke, « The Anthropological Analogy and the Constitution of Historical Perspectivism », in M. Laerke, J.E.H. Smith, E. Schliesser, *Philosophy and its History. Aims and Methods in the Study of Early Modern Philosophy*, Oxford 2013, 7-29.

¹⁵ See for instance: I. Almond, *History of Islam in German Thought*, London 2010.

¹⁶ For a counterproposition: M. Mulsow, « Vor Adam. Ideengeschichte jenseits der Eurozentrik », in *Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte*, 9, 2015, 47-66.

¹⁷ C. König-Pralong, *Médiévisme philosophique et raison moderne. De Pierre Bayle à Ernest Renan*, Paris 2016. On positive colonization of the Middle Ages: T. Reuter, « Medieval Ideas of Europe and their Modern Historians », *History Workshop Journal*, 33, 1992, 176-180; A.-M. Thiesse, *La création des identités nationales. Europe XVIIIe-XIXe siècle*, Paris [1999] 2001²; P.J. Geary, *Myths of nations. The medieval origins of Europe*, Princeton 2003.

¹⁸ C. Muratori, G. Paganini (ed.), *Early Modern Philosophers and the Renaissance Legacy*, Dordrecht 2016.

— ideas (or philosophy)”.¹⁹ Historians of philosophy and culture have notably studied the effects of Western cultural undertakings on other cultural areas. In the conference, we intend to present some case studies documenting how European definition of philosophy (as described above) has been received in the worlds which embodied otherness in modern histories of philosophy, how the grand European narrative has been taken over or contested in them.

The conference *Inventing Europe in Modern History on Philosophy* aims to study the strategies of demarcation implemented in the 18th and 19th centuries by historians of philosophy in order to create the allegedly *philosophical* culture of modern Europe, as well as national philosophies. From within the philosophical historiography, it investigates the cultural narratives that intended to establish the supremacy of Western culture above all others, as well as their effects on cultures that have been excluded from European rationality.

¹⁹ On the history of philosophy and culture see, for instance, the studies of M. Mulsow (cf. note 16 above). Regarding the retroactive effects of Western philosophy on Chinese philosophy: J. Kurtz, *The Discovery of Chinese Logic*, Leiden 2011. On Western philosophy in the modern Islamic World: A. von Kügelgen, *Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie. Philosophie in der islamischen Welt*. Vol. 4: *Geschichte der Philosophie in der islamischen Welt des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*, Basel, forthcoming. On Japanese philosophy in global perspective: R. Elberfeld and alii, *Komparative Philosophie. Begegnungen zwischen östlichen und westlichen Denkwegen*, München 1998.