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«The Great Protector of Wits». D'Holbach 1789-2019 9-11th May 2019, Göttingen, Lichtenberg-Kolleg Conference Report

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Abstract. This is a report of the first ever International Conference fully devoted to Baron d'Holbach (1723-1789). Entitled «“The Great Protector of Wits”. D'Holbach 1789-2019», this event was organized by Laura Nicoli and Franziska Meier and held from 9-11th May 2019 at the Lichtenberg-Kolleg, The Göttingen Institute for Advanced Study. The conference was organized into eight subsequent sessions and two roundtables and aimed to explore every aspect of Baron d'Holbach's polymorphic intellectual activity. This report will highlight the structure of the conference, pointing out the main traits of every contribution.

Keywords. Baron d'Holbach, Enlightenment, clandestine literature, Eighteenth century, atheism.

In the flourishing landscape of Enlightenment studies, Paul Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach (1723-1789) does not hold a privileged position. Despite being one of the most relevant figures of eighteenth-century France, the literature devoted to him is by no means comparable to the hundreds of books written on Diderot and Rousseau, Voltaire and Montesquieu. Holbach's work has been read in two opposing but equally denigrating ways. On the one hand, his thought has been seen as an unoriginal repetition of previous thinkers' ideas. On the other, his agenda has appeared too radical to be considered seriously. To this, one should add some complications due to the heterogeneous nature of the works issued by his thought-laboratory, the so-called *coterie*. What we today regard as Holbach's philosophy was often the work of a plurality of authors, collaborators, and translators. Put this together with the fact that his texts have hardly been re-printed and that a critical edition of his works does not yet exist and you will have the full picture: these difficulties explain why only very few scholars engage in an exploration of this multifaceted and mysterious figure. Holbach, however, is an extremely modern thinker. Let us remind ourselves, for instance, the importance of his role as an organizer of culture in his century and a promoter of the most fundamental values of the Enlightenment, which alone would justify the urgent need of a reassessment of his work. Persuaded by the necessity

to update our understanding of Baron d'Holbach and to fight against the stereotypical figure of an imitative materialist, Laura Nicolì and Franziska Meier decided to take up the challenge of exploring his activity, bringing together some of the most outstanding Enlightenment scholars in a 3-day event. The result of their efforts is the first ever International Conference fully devoted to him: «The Great Protector of Wits”. D'Holbach 1789-2019», held from 9-11th May 2019 at the *Historische Sternwarte*, the main building of the Lichtenberg-Kolleg, The Göttingen Institute for Advanced Study. In line with the international vocation of the event, both English and French have been chosen as official languages of the conference.

Author, translator, editor, *maître d'hôtel* of philosophy: we can hardly put a label on Baron d'Holbach, who preferred to say of himself that he lived «d'une existence collective». On this note, Franziska Meier (Georg-August-Universität Göttingen) opened up the conference, followed by Laura Nicolì's (Lichtenberg-Kolleg) introduction to Baron d'Holbach's mysterious life and activity. By gathering some of the many epithets used to describe this exceptional thinker by his contemporaries, Nicolì focused on the polymorphic identity of the «great protector of wits». With a case study from Holbach's translation of John Toland's *Letters to Serena*, Nicolì kicked off the workshop: this analysis of one single textual omission was enough to highlight both the richness and the difficulties one encounters when studying Holbach's texts. Even the smallest, seemingly unimportant textual manipulation can reveal itself to be an essential part of Holbach's atheistic strategy. The eight sessions of the workshop, sketched below, did aim at exploring all different aspects of this multifaceted figure.

BARON D'HOLBACH: PHILOSOPHER

The first session of the conference paired two contributions focusing on Holbach's philosophical thought. Brunello Lotti (Università di Udine) devoted his paper to the concept of natural order in the *Système de la Nature* (1770). By analyzing Baron d'Holbach's naturalistic monism, Lotti examined and catalogued all the different conceptions of «ordre naturel» to be found in his most famous work. Arguing in favor of the predominance of an absolute and objective order immanent to nature in the *Système*, Lotti showed that Holbach proposed a radical critique of the useless postulation of a divine entity external to Nature itself. And yet, Holbach's cosmology, Lotti argued, contains an epistemic limitation, as well. Therefore, since the very beginning of the confer-

ence, a paradoxical trait of Holbach's thought has been underlined. On the one hand, he had an unconditional faith in materialistic atheism; on the other hand, however, he also recognized the limits of human intellectual faculties, and the impossibility of grasping the real essence of the universe. The first session continued with a paper by Enrico Galvagni (Lichtenberg-Kolleg), who explored Holbach's political philosophy focusing on his concept of luxury, mystification, and oppressive power. Considering some of the most important philosophical writings of Baron d'Holbach such as the *Politique Naturelle* (1773) and the *Morale Universelle* (1776), Galvagni focused on Holbach's awareness not only of the enflamed *querelle du luxe*, but also of the mystification force of aesthetics and prestige. In the light of Holbach's materialistic monism, Galvagni analyzed the process of naturalization of luxury: demystified and understood through the lens of natural philosophy, luxury – as well as religion – ceases to be a mysterious source of political power. In other words, Galvagni claimed, Baron d'Holbach invested natural philosophers not only with the important mission of setting humankind free from the slavery of religion, but also from tyranny and political oppression.

BARON D'HOLBACH: STRATEGIST OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

The second session of the conference has been devoted to an analysis of the authorial and editorial strategies Baron d'Holbach used in his battle in favor of the Enlightenment. How did he manipulate texts? Which strategies did he use to conceal his real identity? Mladen Kozul (University of Montana) gave an answer to these questions by analyzing authorial and textual manipulations. He highlighted the essential role played by pseudonyms, allonyms, and cryptonyms in Holbach's production. A specific pattern in Holbach's manipulation consisted in the substitution of original paratexts with new ones, containing misleading information (false author, year and location of print, etc.). In this way, Holbach was able to infuse new life to old texts and, at the same time, to work on his political agenda. As Kozul remarked, Holbach had a clear strategy in his mind: he wanted to create a fictive crowd of philosophers (the alleged authors of his works) ready to fight for an enlightened world. A study of the heterodox strategy and usage of texts by Baron d'Holbach must also include his peculiar relationship with Voltaire. This has been the theme of Ruggero Sciuto's (Herford College/Voltaire Foundation, University of Oxford) intervention. Sciuto

revealed that Holbach often paraphrased Voltaire's text, and occasionally even imitated his ironic tone to meet the stylistic expectations of the latter's public, while also concealing the true identity of the Baron. Sciuto dealt with this topic by examining the complex relationship between these two key figures of the Eighteenth century and demonstrated that some works we today attribute with certainty to Holbach, were attributed to Voltaire between the 1760s and 1770s. For instance, Sciuto showed that the general public saw *Le Bon Sense* (1772) and *La Theologie Portative* (1768) as works of Voltaire's pen, consequently supporting the idea that Holbach was deliberately trying to conceal his identity, even at someone else's expenses.

BARON D'HOLBACH: ENCYCLOPEDISTE

The third session focused on Holbach's contribution to the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and d'Alembert. Alan Sandrier (Université de Caen Normandie) claimed that Holbach's contribution has received so far little attention, also because of the difficulties one has to go through when trying to evaluate the exact extent of his participation to this enterprise. A second reason, Sandrier hypothesized, is the overwhelming quantity of scientific articles and entries (chemistry, mineralogy, natural science, etc.) Holbach wrote for the *Encyclopédie*. To overcome these problems, Sandrier focused on a new way of interrogating this vast array of texts. Thanks to the resources offered by the collective project of an *Edition Numérique Collaborative et CRitique de l'Encyclopédie* (ENCCRE), Sandrier put into practice a digital approach aimed at analyzing and comparing a wide number of articles. He showed that a detailed analysis of the whole ten encyclopedic volumes hosting Holbach's contributions reveals that less than a half of his contributions were signed with his own name. The Baron's name is explicit in 427 articles; while 450 contributions do not include his signature but are certainly attributable to his authorship. The enormous canon of entries penned by Holbach, Sandrier claimed, means that a digital approach could open up new lines of enquiry and research opportunities which have so far been precluded. As a response to the lack of scholarship pointed out by Sandrier, Mélanie Ephrème (Université Paris Diderot) analyzed some of the most relevant entries Holbach wrote for the *Encyclopédie* concerning chemistry and mineralogy. By establishing Baron d'Holbach's scientific bibliography, tracking his sources, and making sense of its translations of German scientific texts, Ephrème raised the question of the anonym-

ity of his scientific translations and tried to evaluate the original additions due to Holbach's own knowledge and scientific activity. Such in-depth study allowed her to consider the whole scientific corpus of Baron d'Holbach, from mineralogy to geology and metallurgy, showing how, far from be a simple translator of others' ideas, *le Baron* was also a skilled chemist.

BARON D'HOLBACH: SKEPTIC THINKER

The keynote intervention by Alan Charles Kors (University of Pennsylvania) has been aimed at revealing the "dark side" of Holbach's political and social program. His materialistic atheism, Kors claimed, has always been read as a form of dogmatic philosophy. However, Holbach was not so self-confident and optimistic as the literature has wanted him to be. Kors argued for the need to rethink Holbach's anthropology and his alleged confidence in human beings. In spite of the fact that materialism was generally seen as dogmatic in the Eighteenth century, Holbach tragically admitted that man's eye feels more comfortable in the darkness of superstition than when enlightened by reason: pessimistic though it is, religion and submission to oppressive power are just part of human nature and cannot therefore be fully eradicated. Man is provided only with a small lantern, and his efforts towards knowledge and freedom mostly lead to defeat. Kors's intervention was followed by Tony La Vopa's (North Carolina State University/Lichtenberg-Kolleg) comments, which raised a discussion concerning the extent of Holbach's desire and hope to positively influence the society he lived in.

BARON D'HOLBACH AND RELIGION

The second day of the workshop began with a fourth session wholly devoted to Holbach's treatment of religious topics. Gianni Paganini (Università del Piemonte Orientale) scrutinized the seemingly contradictory positions of Holbach on Jewish religion. On the one hand, Paganini argued, he seems to promote Jewish culture publishing the manuscripts of the Jew Orobio de Castro. On the other, he is the author of some clearly anti-Judaic works, such as *L'Esprit du Judaïsme ou Examen raisonné de la loi de Moïse*, in which Holbach's efforts are devoted to demolishing Israel's religion. Paganini attributed this ambivalence to the use of Jewish sources for anti-Christian purposes, consequently distinguishing between anti-Judaism (the critique of Jewish religion); anti-Semitism (an attack on the Jewish people as

a whole); and Jeudophobia (a phobic attitude towards Jews). In a paper which valuably adds nuance to Holbach's criticism of the monotheistic religion, Paganini showed how, within a strategy that aimed at atheism and was therefore also anti-Judaic, Baron d'Holbach could at times seem to defend and promote Jewish culture against other religious sects, as the case of Orobio de Castro's manuscript shows. The second intervention of this session was held by Jacopo Agnesina (Università di Roma 'La Sapienza') and considered the role of prophecies *chez le Baron*. Agnesina's paper detailed the editing process the Baron went through prior to the translation of Anthony Collins' *Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion* (1725) and his *Scheme of Literal Prophecy Considered* (1727). This analysis shed light on Holbach's merging of these two original texts in what became known in France as the *Examen des Prophéties* (1768), having a considerable influence also on the writing process of *L'Esprit du Judaïsme* (1770). By so doing, Agnesina also had a chance to raise interesting questions concerning the accuracy of Baron d'Holbach's translations, going back to one of the main starting points of the conference: Holbach's manipulation of texts and ideas. Differently from other interventions, however, Agnesina put forward the hypothesis that Holbach's modifications was no betrayal, but rather a coherent and radical development of Collins' ideas.

BARON D'HOLBACH'S PHILOSOPHICAL RELATIONSHIPS

The fifth and sixth sessions of the workshop were devoted to Holbach and his relationships with other philosophers and *hommes de lettres*, both in France and across the Channel. First to take the floor was Maria Susana Seguin (Université Montpellier III / IHRIM - ENS de Lyon / IUF) who explored Holbach's role in the dissemination of clandestine literature. Seguin devoted particular attention to arguing for the existence of a personal proximity between Baron d'Holbach and Louis Marie Florent du Châtelet, diplomat of the *Ancien Régime* and son of the better known Émilie du Châtelet. Exploring the traces of this unusual friendship, Seguin's paper detailed how a diplomat like Florent du Châtelet could have contributed to the very dangerous activity of fostering the circulation of Holbach's clandestine texts. Taking advantage of the many travels required by his job, Florent du Châtelet could have contributed to the diffusion of manuscripts beyond France's borders. At the same time, with a close analysis of private documents and letters (including correspondence with Voltaire),

Seguin argued that du Châtelet had a well-established philosophical reputation. Later on, Paolo Quintili's (Università di Roma 'Tor Vergata') delved into the intellectual friendship between the Baron d'Holbach and Denis Diderot, showing that their relationship very early overcame the borders of a simple philosophical collaboration. Analyzing this friendship, Quintili worked to detail Holbach's positions about human nature and made it clear that, in spite of the radical perspective on religion and society, Holbach's position was much more pessimistic than Diderot's one, therefore proposing to review the extent of the philosophical collaboration between the two most radical and original thinkers of the French Enlightenment. The following session, in the same vein, was opened by Gerhardt Stenger (Université de Nantes), whose intervention considered Voltaire's battle against the *coterie holbachique*. Stenger remarked that Voltaire never knew the authorship of Holbach's works. The former, without being aware of the identity of the author of texts such as the *Christianisme dévoilé* (1756), fought against them. Voltaire was convinced both that atheism was false and that it was dangerous. According to him, denying the existence of a remunerative and avenging God, far from being an advancement, would have been detrimental to social progress. However, Stenger argued that after 1770, Voltaire – without losing his attachment to deism – began to share some of Holbach's ideas. In spite of the enflamed and constant polemic that opposed him to the *coterie*, Voltaire came to integrate a materialistic conception of the world within his vision of the universe. In conclusion, Emilio Mazza's (IULM, Milano) presentation (of a paper co-written with Gianluca Mori, Università del Piemonte Orientale) contributed to the debate on Holbach's philosophical network, focusing on his relationship with David Hume. After retracing a well-known anecdote allegedly happened at Holbach's table, in which Hume would have said that «he did not believe in atheists», Mazza expressed some doubts concerning the way this episode has been used in secondary literature. Biographers and scholars took that to be a confirmation that Hume was not an atheist and refused to call himself such. Mazza showed why we should be cautious and avoid committing the error of thinking that an anecdote can suffice as foundation for an argument. On the contrary, such story could tell us something about Hume's ironic style and, he claimed, even shed some new light on his *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* (1779).

The second day of the workshop ended with a roundtable in which Nicholas Cronk and Ruggero Sciuto presented the project of a critical digital edition of Holbach's whole corpus. The scientific community is

in need of a critical edition of Holbach's works. Instead of setting up a traditional paper edition, the Voltaire Foundation launched a project for a new born-digital edition. Such an edition would offer especially useful tools to search the complex and heterogeneous corpus of Holbach's works. Through a digital edition, Cronk and Sciuto claimed, many of the difficulties which have so far brought every attempt to an *impasse* would be solved: Holbach's production – as remarked above – is not easy to frame into any type of categorization and refuses labels. Anonymous works, pseudonyms, heterodox usage of sources and massive text manipulations make it difficult to approach Holbach's work with traditional means. A born-digital edition, however, would allow scholars to access this corpus in a more responsive and flexible way¹.

BARON D'HOLBACH: RADICAL THINKER

The seventh session of the workshop was held by Jonathan Israel (Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton), whose paper enquired into the nature of Holbach's political thought. Israel situated Holbach in between two different interpretative tendencies. On the one hand, some commentators have claimed that his political thought was a mild monarchism, and therefore unexceptional and unimportant to understand the emergence of the French revolution. On the other hand, a rival approach put the emphasis on the fact that Holbach's philosophy was an essential ingredient of that French crypto-republicanism which shaped the political ideas in the 1770s and 1780s. Israel's reading of Holbach's works has stressed the importance of the innovative potential of his political thought showing the key role they must have played in the eighteenth-century hidden debate on republicanism. By drawing on Holbach's elaboration of «universal rights», Israel brought some evidence to recognize *le Baron* as one of the most important thinkers of the so-called 'Radical Enlightenment'.

BARON D'HOLBACH'S READERSHIP

In the eighth and last session of the workshop, Nicholas Cronk (Voltaire Foundation, University of Oxford) stressed an essential point to change for the better our understanding of Baron d'Holbach's philosophical corpus. He did so by asking one simple ques-

tion: Who was d'Holbach writing for? After remarking the importance of the massive revolution that was changing the production of books in Eighteenth-century Europe, Cronk went on to ask whether we have any reason to consider Holbach's corpus as targeting a specific audience. Cronk's analysis showed that we would rather think that every single work of the Baron was conceived, written, and published for a different and specific readership. This would make sense not only of the very different styles, but also of the various degrees of philosophical and technical complexity in Holbach's works. The last paper was given by Iryna Mykhailova (Lichtenberg-Kolleg), who brought the attention to Holbach's legacy in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. Mykhailova remarked that in 1780, d'Holbach became honorary member of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Saint-Petersburg and ever since his works became popular in the whole of Russia. Mykhailova showed also the dark side of Holbach's Eastern reception: not all of his works were regarded as a positive achievement of a learned man. The *Système de la Nature* (1770) and its history are a particularly interesting case. This book was banned several times during the Nineteenth century, when Holbach's atheism was taken as poisonous to society. By revealing that in the Soviet Union the attitude towards Holbach became positive, Mykhailova gave once again evidence of how this polymorphic philosopher still has a role in shaping our contemporary intellectual world.

The awareness on the importance of Holbach as a thinker, whose influence goes well beyond the boundaries of his century, was one of the main points of the final roundtable discussion. Chaired by Alan Ch. Kors, the closing debate brought together many of the ideas that emerged during the intense 3-day workshop. Among others, one question was particularly cogent: on the way paved by Kors's public lecture, Holbach's alleged faith in the possibility to actively shape the world we live in became the most discussed object of the debate. On the one hand, the idea of a 'Dark Enlightenment' brought up by Kors was used as a ground for the claim that Holbach was never fully optimistic concerning man and his ability to overcome superstition and oppression. On the other, Jonathan Israel and many others remarked that only a thinker who believed in the actual possibility to achieve a better world would devote their entire life to a battle for Enlightenment. Holbach did such a thing. On this note the workshop came to an end, with a renewed awareness on how much work still has to be done and how intriguing and multifaceted Baron d'Holbach, «the great protector of wits» really is.

¹ More information about the project can be found on the blog of the Voltaire Foundation, University of Oxford, <<http://www.voltaire.ox.ac.uk/news/blog/digital-d%E2%80%99holbach>> (09/2019).