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Enlightenment and extra-European cultures

Introduction

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The relationship between Enlightenment and non-European cultures is currently the object of historiographical debate. Many scholars see the *philosophique* movement as expressing a Eurocentric ideology based on Europeans/Westerners' alleged superiority over other cultures¹. This critical perspective is especially evident in post-colonial studies², where the concept of 'Orientalism' has been expanded progressively in space and time far beyond the geographical and chronological boundaries Edward Said originally identified in his 1978 book³. Said's hypothesis of a European identity built on the exclusion of the Other beginning in the eighteenth century, or perhaps even earlier, contrasts starkly with the views expressed by opponents of Enlightenment in the eighteenth century. As a matter of fact, these anti-Enlightenment critics saw the *philosophique* body of thought as embodying an interest in and propensity for other civilizations, an attitude that was problematic in their opinion because it risked jeopardizing the central role of Christianity as the only true religion. Contemporary scholars inclined to view Enlightenment thought as harboring an attitude of openness towards other cultures thus stress these very aspects of attention towards and sensitivity in approaching other worlds that make the eighteenth century the century of dialogue with the Other *par excellence*⁴.

¹ Regarding the concept of eurocentrism, cf. among others, A. Stanziani, *Eurocentrism and the Politics of Global History*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham (CH) 2018; M.J. Wintle, *Eurocentrism: History, Identity, Man's Burden*, Routledge, London-New York 2021. A summary of the Enlightenment stance is available in A. Stanziani, *Les entrelacements du monde: histoire globale, pensée globale, XVI^e-XXI^e siècles*, CNRS Éditions, Paris 2018, pp. 59 and ff.

² For orientation see J. Pouchepadass, *Subaltern et Postcolonial Studies*, in *Historiographies: concepts et débats*, sous la direction de C. Delacroix, F. Dosse, P. Garcia, N. Offenstadt, Gallimard, Paris 2010, 2 voll.: I, pp. 636-646.

³ E.W. Said, *Orientalism*, Pantheon Books, New York 1978. The volume was re-edited with an Afterword by the author (Penguin, New York 1995). As is well known, Said invited readers to critically think about the image of the East as developed in Europe/the West (the two terms coincided because they were used in a cultural rather than geographical sense): that image, based on the contrast between a civilized West and a barbaric East, was in his opinion nothing more than the expression of Western domination. For a review of Said's work and critique of Eurocentrism, cf. P. Delpiano, *Dall'eurocentrismo alla provincializzazione dell'Europa. Gli studi postcoloniali e la storia*, «Meridiana», 100, 2021, pp. 77-95; R. Minuti, *Oriental patriotism? Eighteenth-century French representations of Nadir Shah*, in *Persia and the Enlightenment*, ed. by C. Masroori, W. Mannies and J.C. Laursen, Voltaire Foundation, Oxford 2021, pp. 101-124.

⁴ The various studies contributing to this line of argumentation include R. Minuti, *Oriente barbarico e storiografia settecentesca. Rappresentazioni della storia dei tartari nella cultura francese del XVIII secolo*, Marsilio, Venezia 1994; Id., *Orientalismo e idee di tolleranza nella cultura francese del primo '700*, L.S. Olschki, Florence 2006; K. O'Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment. Cosmopol-*

It is this debate that the current issue of «Diciottesimo Secolo» engages, presenting a research laboratory on the subject through the analysis of various cases examined by scholars from across the international scientific community. Their essays represent different disciplinary fields, from history in a stricter sense to the history of literatures and different study approaches, from the history of ideas to the social history of ideas. As such, they represent a chorus made up of many voices that I seek to briefly outline in this introduction.

To begin, I would like to say a few words about space-time coordinates. As far as geography is concerned, while all of the authors focus on the European continent, their gaze originates from a number of different countries; at the same time, the interweaving of connections running across Europe was such that it is impossible to distinguish between national and European phenomena. Guido Abbattista privileges English and French production (from Adam Smith to Raynal and Diderot) while Marc André Bernier chooses a periodical published in Paris, the «*Mercur galant*», to analyze an incident involving Nouvelle France. Mónica Bolufer examines Spanish authors, beginning with Benito Jerónimo Feijoo and his *Defensa de las mujeres* of 1726 and the way his ideas were nourished by Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique* and Barthélemy d'Herbelot's *Bibliothèque orientale*, as well as by Muslim sources including the *Koran* (although read in translation, not the original). Christophe Martin focuses on the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (from *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* to *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité*, from *Essai sur l'origine des langues* to *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* and *Émile*), while Reinier Salverda focuses on *Histoire des deux Indes* and therefore Raynal and Diderot. Ann Thomson gives voice to well-known figures such as Pierre Bayle who moved between France and Holland, even while also privileging lesser-known figures whose texts in French and English enjoyed broad circulation at the time. Although all the works analyzed in the various articles were the fruit of the circulation

tan History from Voltaire to Gibbon, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (UK)-New York 1997; J.J. Clark, *Oriental Enlightenment. The Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought*, Routledge, London-New York 1997. Concerning the relationship among European culture, the Middle East and India, cf. M. Curtis, *Orientalism and Islam: European Thinkers on Oriental Despotism in the Middle East and India*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2009. M.S. Dodson likewise emphasizes that there were a variety of different European gazes on the Indian world in *Orientalism. Empire and National Culture-India, 1770-1880*, Foundation Books, New Delhi 2010. Concerning the relationship with Asia, see U. App, *The Birth of Orientalism*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 2010; S. Aravamudan, *Enlightenment Orientalism: Resisting the Rise of the Novel*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2012.

of ideas within Europe and internationally, this aspect stands out in a particularly evident way in Nadejda Plavinskaia's article dealing with Catherine II's *Nakaz*. This book, published in Russian in 1767, derived from readings of the European classics, especially French ones (from the *Esprit des lois*) or those mediated through the French language (Morellet's translation of Beccaria's *Dei delitti e delle pene*, for instance); later on, *Nakaz* was published in dozens of editions in various languages (German, English, French, Italian, Dutch, Polish, Romanian, Swedish, Greek and Latin).

The protagonists of these investigations are men of letters, clergy and laity, monarchs, statesmen, officers, diplomats, ambassadors, and journalists; mainly men, but also women such as Mary Montagu. Readers will encounter numerous classic figures of the crisis of the European mind and the Enlightenment – Bayle, the Marquis d'Argens, Diderot, Gibbon, Raynal, Rousseau, Smith, John Toland, Volney, and Voltaire – but also lesser-known authors, from Adriaan Reeland, professor of Oriental languages at Utrecht, to Simon Ockley, professor of Arabic at Cambridge, or the French diplomat Jean-Philippe Laugier de Tassy. The sources underlying the various articles are varied: books, travel reports and manuals, and periodicals such as «*La Pensadora Gaditana*» or the «*Chinese Repository*». The authors examine both the content of these historical, philosophical, literary works as well as their editorial stories; they also study the circulation of these sources by analyzing new editions and translations, the latter of which clearly constituted a fundamental channel for constructing international cultural circuits.

The various authors of the texts chosen as case studies in these articles are also oriented in different directions. One such direction is the Islamic world, appearing in Bolufer's article analyzing the past of the Iberian peninsula and in Thomson's article focused on North Africa. While Abbattista's analysis revolves around China, the focus of Bernier's work is relations between the governor of Nouvelle France and representatives of the natives. By unpacking the editorial trajectory of *Nakaz*, Plavinskaia is able to show the linguistic and cultural interweavings behind the conception of this book as well as the events surrounding its circulation that cast it into European space. Salverda looks at European colonial expansion in various contexts by examining the *Histoire des deux Indes*, while Martin's investigation of Rousseau's thought suggests a historical rather than geographical form of alterity.

As far as chronology is concerned, this issue focuses on a long eighteenth century, spanning from the last decades of the seventeenth century where Thomson's

analysis sets out to the first decades of the nineteenth century with Abbattista's research. The various authors engage with the concept of Enlightenment in different ways: in some cases they use and compare it to categories currently occupying a central position in historiographic debate (Jonathan Israel's *Radical Enlightenment*, in particular), while in other cases they employ it as a chronological key to refer to the eighteenth century more generally. Some articles place the Enlightenment at the center of their investigation in that they analyze well-known texts attributed to the *philosophique* school, whereas others focus on the eighteenth century with its various intellectual stances.

The editor posed the question of how the *philosophes* thought about other parts of the world, and the authors invited to speak to this question in this issue of «Diciottesimo secolo» do so, more or less explicitly. The point that clearly emerges from reading their articles, however, is that figures representing the seven case studies selected for investigation took on a wide variety of positions on this question. Thomson in particular invites readers to adopt a historical approach to the problem, taking into account the times, spaces and changes that unfolded during the eighteenth century, both in terms of the political and military events that conditioned relations between civilizations and in terms of cultural events, from the establishment of Arabic professorships (the first at Oxford in 1697) to George Sale's translation of the Koran into English in 1734. Her article clearly illustrates this variety of positions, from the desire for conquest to feelings of fear, from Edward Gibbon's openings towards Islam to Humphrey Prideaux's closures. It also shows the total absence of linearity in Enlightenment culture, as evidenced by the contradictions visible in the various works of authors such as Voltaire. After all, relations with other cultures took on divergent meanings. The dissenting minority that Thomson describes looked at the Islamic world with genuine intellectual interest and opposed anti-Islamic hostility, hostility so widespread among the elite and lower classes alike that the author describes it using the concept of Islamophobia. This dissenting minority was made up of men living between the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who viewed Islam as a more tolerant and rational religion than Christianity and one more in line with deism.

Bolufer's article also focuses on Islam, in this case analyzed in the context of Age of Enlightenment Spanish Arabism. As Bolufer points out, Islamism understood as both language and religion was part of the history of the Iberian Peninsula. It was woven into everyday life and, not surprisingly, foreign travelers thus developed an exotic image of the country in which Spaniards were

identified with Islam. In Spain, therefore, Islam was not a separate, other world; it was part of the country's own history. This article by Bolufer gives voice to men of letters and statesmen such as Campomanes with his policy of patronage towards the Arabists, but even this analysis reveals a wide variety of positions. Some thinkers were genuinely interested in Islam, believing that it provided an important contribution to the formation of European civilization; others instead accepted the common stereotypes of the time, including the idea that the Muslim world was uncivilized. Studying the role that gender played in constructing the image of Islam, the author underlines equally widespread *clichés* framing Islam as responsible for denigratory views of women (female indolence, sensuality and slavery). Indeed, Spain's belonging to a civilized Europe characterized by complementarity between the sexes and the containment of passions was held up as laudatory precisely against the background of the country's Islamic past.

Abbattista likewise rejects the dichotomy between admiration or debasement of the Other exemplified in the commonly-used historiographical categories of 'Sinophilia' and 'Sinophobia'. In fact, the author shows how European views of China evolved as part of the changes in international politics taking place over the course of the century. He identifies a turning point in the last decades of the eighteenth century, a moment that saw the appearance of new perspectives defined as 'prescriptive': in earlier centuries, many men of letters had wanted to change China, first of all by spreading Christianity there. The views expressed by Adam Smith and Diderot – thinkers who were well aware of China's centrality in the international economic framework – testify to a renewal of this desire to transform that world by including it in global relations. It was only thanks to the civilizing (albeit corrupting) power of trade, they held, that China could overcome a state of immobility they saw as stemming from historical and political-institutional processes rather than natural or anthropological factors.

In an article demonstrating that engaging with the Other may entail a shift in time rather than space, Martin shows how impossible it is to reason in dichotomous terms about the relationship between Europe and other worlds. In the work of Rousseau with his search for the state of nature, the engagement or comparison was not between the European world and non-European world; this does not enjoy a central position in his thought. Rather, it is between the present and a past encompassing Romans, Spartans and prehistoric humans. In asking whether Rousseau's work was Eurocentric, Martin compares the contrasting theses of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Jacques Derrida. On one hand,

he highlights Rousseau's critiques of *homo europaeus* for being conditioned by prejudices and incapable of deeply understanding any other peoples lacking in a literary culture; on the other hand, however, Martin sheds light on Rousseau's efforts to educate his ideal man, the character Émile whom the Genevan author had chosen as his ideal model among Europeans but who required an education to perfect his abilities and grow up without prejudice. Above all, Martin shows, Rousseau's Émile had to believe in the unity of mankind while also broadening the frontiers of the human, traveling constructively as befitted a true *philosophe*.

Salverda's article also illustrates the variety of positions voiced in the culture of the Enlightenment: in this case, divergent views around a specific text. With its complex editorial history, *Histoire des deux Indes* is indeed a highly interesting case study for uncovering Raynal's and Diderot's different attitudes on various issues having to do with relations between Europe and other cultures. Salverda interrogates the text in light of Jonathan Israel's categories of 'moderate' and 'radical' Enlightenment, noting that there were different gazes towards the Chinese («wise rulers» according to Raynal and «violent despots» according to Diderot) and Hottentots, a people Diderot viewed positively. On a number of general issues and in particular the question of slavery, however, Diderot's thought was aligned with that of colonial administrators such as Pierre-Victor Malouet when stating that «slavery might be unjustifiable and an abomination, but alas, it is a necessity». Salverda's effort to read Diderot with a focus on his analysis of the intertwining of gender and other cultures through a discussion of the condition of women in various civilizations is also significant.

Plavinskaia's article reconstructs the linguistic and intellectual genesis of *Nakaz*, identifying its *philosophiques* roots and successfully showing that we cannot think dichotomously about what is European and what is non-European, beginning from the well-known question of the identity (European or Asian?) of Russia. In reality, what gave rise to *Nakaz* and caused the book to circulate (including in the periodical press) was the fusion of different cultures and languages. The editorial story of the text and its translations, remakes, counterfeits and even censorship speak to a fundamental element of the history of the European Enlightenment, the introduction of this body of ideas in Russia and its recirculation in the public sphere of Europe.

Taking an interest in the Other did not always entail appreciating or validating other cultures, however. As Bernier points out when considering the colonial imagery of the topical press, one of the variety of stances in

this period was a fascination with exoticism; in the eighteenth century, such fascination was staged as part of a realm of frivolity and playfulness that must be taken into account to understand the construction of the Other. Examining *Accommodement fait entre les Iroquois et les Outaouais en 1705* published in the 1706 «*Mercurie galant*», the author questions how such negotiation was represented. The analysis of the text and, above all, oratorical style allows him to highlight that the Amerindians' speech, to which the journalist gave much space, was represented in such a way as to hide the strategy of Nouvelle France's governor aimed at mediating with the representatives of the Iroquois and Ottawa nations. Indeed, this article shows the inability of the two cultures, French and native, to really understand each other enough to make political use of the Other. Bernier thus hypothesizes a fictitious rapprochement concealing a «transvestism that is both amusing and 'piquant'» because staging this wild style certainly did not mean that the French had any real desire to change their way of life.

National cultures thus intertwined with those of other European countries (France, above all) to delineate a cosmopolitan cultural sphere apparently free of internal barriers; at the same time, European gazes towards other worlds were characterized by such a multiplicity of stances that we cannot possibly read this period according to a dichotomous vision of an eighteenth century bent on constructing Eurocentric categories vs. one characterized by love for other civilizations. The eighteenth century stands out instead as a century of heterogeneity in which thinking about the Other expressed fear or the will to dominate in some cases but a genuine desire for knowledge or the need to rethink one's own culture in others; in still other cases, such thinking reflected an intention to find ways for other civilizations to enter into the international context as well. It remains to be seen whether this is a specificity of the eighteenth century or early modern age or whether it holds true for many eras⁵.

⁵ In relation to this point, see R. Minuti, *China and world history in Italian nineteenth century thought. Some remarks on Giuseppe Ferrari's work*, «*Journal of Modern Italian Studies*», 26, 2021, pp. 208-219 (DOI: 10.1080/1354571X.2020.1866293)