

Introduction

From 3 to 7 July, the Italian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies had the pleasure of hosting the 16th World Conference of the International Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (ISECS - SIEDS) at the Sapienza and Tor Vergata Universities in Rome. The chosen theme, *Antiquity and the shaping of the future in the Age of Enlightenment*, proved to be of particular interest for the study of the eighteenth century, an age that saw the imposition of such an interpretation of the past as to significantly transform the dominant perspective up to that time.

In itself, the idea of reflecting on the relationship with tradition was nothing new. We all know that the comparison with antiquity has always been a constant leitmotif: no civilisation could ever think of itself in isolation from its past, from which it generally inherits its themes, images and figures, thus triggering those dynamics which, implicitly or explicitly, come to question its present and its future. It is in the fragile balance between continuity and discontinuity that traditions and, at the same time, innovative tensions are projected into the future. If the discourse on classicism brings to mind the controversial relationship that the West has established with the Greco-Roman world, we cannot ignore the fact that other great civilisations – the Chinese, the Japanese, the Indians – have also repeatedly drawn on the latter, borrowing forms, meanings and values from it in one way or another. For, on closer inspection, it is history itself that feeds on contamination, on confrontation with *otherness*, both temporal and spatial.

However, in terms of the way and the intensity with which men and women looked to antiquity, it is the eighteenth century that we must look to in order to study the characteristics of what was configured as an entirely exceptional observatory. An epoch of discoveries and new knowledge, of innovations and revolutions, the age of the Enlightenment – and of the Anti-Enlightenment – was in fact characterised by the marked originality with which it knew how to construct its shared memory; it was then that, on the basis of a chronologically distant past, tastes and values, ideals and planning were reworked with highly innovative features and languages.

The political history of the eighteenth century provides effective examples of relationships that were, however, not unrelated to traits of ambivalence played out in ambiguous processes of acceptance and, at the same time, rejection. In the course of the great events that marked the eighteenth century (the dynastic crises and struggles, the American and French Revolutions, the various republican experiences, the Napoleonic era), reference to the institutional, legal and philosophical models of the Greek and Roman worlds was a constant source of inspiration. Art, literature, theatre and music have always sought and succeeded in developing innovative languages in relation to the themes and forms of expression of classical antiquity. While archaeology, museology, the science of the book and scholarship grew out of the need to know and classify the classical world in its various forms, rethinking the relationship with the knowledge codified by tradition, the sciences and techniques renewed the body of established knowledge with courage and determination. The 18th century redefined the cultural foundations of the Renaissance, transcending the traditional opposition between “ancients” and “moderns” and considering the actual condition and realization of existence. The subsequent epochs, characterised by a dynamic interplay of recognition, both of debts owed to History and of the ruptures that engender original patterns of thought and unprecedented forms of expression, became epigones, exhibiting periods of both fidelity and creativity.

On the basis of these considerations, ISECS-SIEDS wished to delve into the deeper meaning and significance of these transformations and their variables, analysing them according to the wide variety of interpretive perspectives and methodological approaches that have always animated the International Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies. Hence the idea of dedicating the quadrennial World Congresses to this theme.

As is well known, it is often the case that the scientific option is separate from the logistical one. But in our case, in an inextricable web of cross-references and mutual references, the two components immediately

merged when, naturally, Rome was chosen as the venue for the congress work.

If the Urbe was an indispensable destination on the eighteenth-century Grand Tour, it was precisely because it was the absolute capital of antiquity. For artists and men of letters, travellers and women travellers, a stay in what was then the city of the Pope was the best viaticum to acquire the key to a more general understanding of history, both individual and social; a perspective from which every project for building the future could draw nourishment and lifeblood. Because without direct, intimate, deep, total contact with what was still the *caput mundi*, any experience would have been mutilated, devoid of meaning.

The extent to which the call, addressed to the scholars of the eighteenth century, was intended, almost ideally, to evoke the projects of those who, three hundred years earlier, had already prepared grandiose achievements (the Capitoline Museum, 1734; the Pius-Clementine Museum, 1771), precisely in order to attract scholars from all over the world, could be a suggestive hypothesis to which the author deliberately does not wish to give an answer.

What is certain, however, is that the ISECS-SISSD call has met with a tremendous response from historians and philosophers, historians of art and architecture, historians of science and literature, jurists and musicologists from all parts of the world.

As active as it was intense (more than a thousand speakers took part), the participation of researchers from the five continents in the work of the conference forced the organizers to set up some 250 panels in which the question of antiquity and its various declensions were dissected from different angles. At the end of the work, the results seemed exciting for the quality as well as the quantity of pointed questions about patterns, about the internal links between Greek and Roman culture, about the channels of mediation through which events, myths and figures of the past circulated, suggesting diversified and ideologically oriented reading hypotheses that now activate forms of sociability, formal and informal, centred precisely on the revival of the classics.

What were the effects of this presence in the creation of academies, in the development of new pedagogies, even in the articulation of itineraries? And what was the impact of this rebirth of the ancient at the level of the market, of professions, of companies? Again, was it really a rebirth – of interests, of passions – or was it not rather the re-proposal of motifs and stylistic features that had never been dormant, onto which original, obsolete languages and contents were grafted?

In the light of the hypotheses formulated, the questions about the definition of “neoclassical” have been

cloaked with new questions and meanings. The papers presented at the conference clearly demonstrated how themes and problems of an aesthetic nature can transcend the boundaries of art history and literature to invest the social sciences themselves. Many speakers presented original interpretative hypotheses that linked the recovery of classical forms and the rational foundations of beauty to a need for perfection that ultimately activated projections of political value. The most striking case, that of the French Revolution, is certainly not the only one capable of demonstrating how the declension of the memory of ancient republics and the cult of the past succeeded in acquiring ethical and civic values, impulses with which even public institutions were invested.

However, any consideration of the ISECS - SIESD Colloquium in almost exclusive terms of reflecting on the links that bind the history of the West to its deepest and most distant roots would risk being misleading. In fact, as the organizers of the Colloquium, we have been careful, from the very first stages of its organization, to encourage potential speakers not to get caught up in the rigidity of Eurocentrism, and also to question the relations that various non-European civilisations had with the founding fathers of the societies to which they belonged. And so, in the name of the refusal – shared by many, if not all – to remain entangled in identities that are as elusive as they are dangerous, we welcomed contributions that included studies of the forms, times and ways in which societies geographically distant from the old continent related to their ancients in the century that matters most to us.

In the background is the once again polyvalent major theme of the circulation of figures, protagonists and cultures between purely distant spaces, which in turn is linked to the question of the translation of texts and the related mechanisms of reception. In what ways did other times and territories give rise to ideally characterised retrospective visions? Was the concept of the universal classic the preserve of the West alone, or did it also mature in areas outside the West? And to what extent were the disputes over the Greek and/or Latin canon transposed into the aesthetic, philosophical, legal and ethical elaborations developed by civilisations that differed from the West in terms of characteristics, balances and forms of internal organisation?

These are just a few of the many questions that ran through the days of the World Congress on the Eighteenth Century. Unable to give a precise and detailed account of them, precisely because of their richness and multiplicity, I will confine myself to noting that, among the hundreds of contributions devoted to the affirma-

tion of antiquarianism and its epigones, known and not so known, particular curiosity was aroused by those that focused on the use of antiquity in the elaboration of future-oriented planning. This was fully in line with the call for papers, which invited participants to avoid reading the subject as a static and timeless category. The contributions placed on this ridge have in fact attracted the most attention and have come to represent the most innovative figure of the possible declinations of the point under consideration. In particular, this interest proved to be as strong as ever among young people, girls and boys, not yet academically structured, who, in the days preceding the World Colloquium, had already participated in a one-week seminar dedicated to them on the subject of *The Forms of Time in the Age of Enlightenment*. Obviously, the course, which was a kind of prelude to the subject of antiquity and its various uses in the eighteenth century, had succeeded in sharpening sensitivities and expectations that were sometimes latent, helped by the splendid setting of the representative seat of the University of Rome Tor Vergata, Villa Mondragone (Monte Porzio Catone), which hosted the meeting.

The results of such comparisons between scholars of different backgrounds and training, and at different stages in their careers, will soon see the light of day in a special publication. More difficult – or rather impossible – would have been to collect the hundreds of papers offered at the World Conference proper. Given the objective impossibility of presenting all the papers discussed in July 2023, and in the common desire to avoid making a painful and arbitrary choice among them, the ISECS-SISSD organs agreed that it might nevertheless be useful to give written form at least to the keynote speeches that launched the work of the various sessions. Hence the present special issue of the SISSD journal “Eighteenth Century”, an expression of the desire to leave a trace of a fruitful and totalising scientific experience, not least by providing the main coordinates of the problems and sub-themes addressed. To its authors, who are among the most representative scholars of eighteenth-century studies in the world, we therefore offer our collective thanks, to which I would like to add my personal thanks and my hope that the resumption of the dialogue between the ancient and the modern will encourage a commitment to mutual respect and confrontation in that harmonious and cosmopolitan dimension that we have inherited from the Age of Enlightenment.

In any case, I could not conclude these brief notes without paying a warm tribute to those who have worked concretely and “behind the scenes” to ensure the success of a demanding work that has taken years to prepare: I refer to the governing bodies of the Italian Soci-

ety for Eighteenth-Century Studies and, in particular, to Silvia Tatti. On behalf of all of us, I would also like to thank FASI - Communication Events and its director, Fabrizia Rossetti.

A due mention, finally, to the prestigious institutions that believed in this initiative:

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To these must certainly be added the “Sapienza University of Rome” - Sapienza Crea and the University of Rome Tor Vergata, with their respective Faculties and Macroarea of Humanities, for their active willingness with which they hosted our work.

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