

Conference Report: Humanism & Revolution: Eighteenth-Century Europe and Its Transatlantic Legacy

“Since the events of the eighteenth century, in particular the French and American Revolutions, the concept of revolution has become one of the most important, and most widely used, concepts of modern political and philosophical thought. The revolutions of the eighteenth century are, however, also marked by a temporal logic that questions their radical departure from the past, both intellectually and practically. Indeed, the concept of revolution is often coupled with a renewed interest in ideals of human self-conception, moral beauty and education that are seen as having emerged in the classical antiquity of Greece and Rome. On both sides of the Atlantic, references to classical antiquity support contemporary achievements, on the one hand, and are used to question the existing state of political and intellectual affairs, on the other.”

Bringing together renowned scholars from Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and the U.S., the conference *Humanism and Revolution: Eighteenth-Century Europe and Its Transatlantic Legacy* (December 11-13, 2010, Rice University) examined the influence of the ideas of humanism and revolution on philosophy, literature, art, and politics. Itself a truly transatlantic collaboration, the conference was organized by Uwe Steiner (Rice University), Christian Emden (Rice University), and Martin Vöhler (Freie Universität Berlin). It was supported by Rice's School of Humanities, the Department of German Studies, and the Humanities Research Center, as well as two of the foremost German institutions, the Freie Universität Berlin and the Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut Essen.

After welcoming comments from Allen Matusow (Dean of the School of Humanities) and Caroline Levander (Director of the Humanities Research Center), Uwe Steiner presented some introductory remarks on the subject of “Humanism and Revolution.” His prolegomena offered a meditation on Jacques-Louis David’s *The Oath of the Horatii* (1784), a painting which was “to become an icon of the French Revolution.” As Steiner elaborated, “the huge canvas proclaimed the virtues of heroic sacrifice and civic loyalty above family,” which explains its never intended appeal to the French revolutionaries who were to take “the ideas of equality, fraternity and liberty to the streets.” It was against the backdrop of a gigantic projection of David’s painting (both literally and figuratively) that the presenters set off to explore the relationship between humanism and revolution along (1) historical, (2) political, and (3) aesthetic lines.

Hubert Cancik (Universität Tübingen, Germany) examined the ancient foundations of “human rights” and elucidated the hidden correspondences between “human rights” and natural rights that characterize the constitutions of modern nation states to this day. Delving both into the Greek and Roman roots of the concept of “human rights,” Cancik laid the historical groundwork that elucidated why, for instance, an article such as the first article of the German constitution—‘Human dignity is inviolable’—may well present itself as “positive” law while still insisting on its ‘eternal’ status, which reveals its essentially unacknowledged indebtedness to natural rights. In various ways, Georg Essen (Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen, The Netherlands) continued where Cancik left off: Exploring the relations between “Human Rights, the Catholic Church, and the Ideas of 1789,” Essen presented a system of coordinates within which the eighteenth century debated the question of human rights. In accord with the subtitle of his paper (“Adding Complexity to a Master Narrative”), Essen concluded his analysis

with a threefold distinction: “the *first* one is represented by the republic of scholars.... These scholars are involved in a project which aims to make the ethical and legal order an autonomous one”; “the *second* sphere is represented by the very heterogeneous constitutional discourse in the revolutionary republics in America and Europe”; “the *third* sphere of discourse is represented by Pope Pius VI,” according to whom the frame of reference for human society was precisely not the revolutionary principle of the sovereignty of the people but God.

Günther Lottes (Universität Potsdam, Germany) also tackled the intricate issue of human rights by juxtaposing them with historical ideas of “progress.” Lottes argued that there had always been “an undercurrent of criticism, starting in the eighteenth century itself, which warned against materialistic or simplistic misunderstandings of growth and progress and advocated a much more holistic interpretation.” Thus his analysis probed the sub- or counter-discourses that existed alongside predominant notions of the rights of man. Lottes concluded by suggesting that “the idea of progress had effectively undermined the emerging ideology of human rights and continued to do so even in the heyday of the French Revolution.” If Lottes was essentially concerned with the progressivism that “formed the basis of a Eurocentric world view which still shapes our perception of non-European cultures,” Barbara Hahn (Vanderbilt University) elaborated on this legacy in the context of her meditation on “Hannah Arendt’s Struggle with Her Century.” Hahn sought to shed light on the age of totalitarianism not, as is often the case, via Arendt’s monumental *Origins of Totalitarianism*, but by scrutinizing selected passages from Arendt’s work *On Revolution*. Reflecting on the two eighteenth-century revolutions (the American and the French Revolution) vis-a-vis the horrors of twentieth-century totalitarianism, Hahn examined the paradoxical temporal structure of revolutions; she explored, concretely, the Arendtian imperative “to tell a story about revolutions ... that accounts for something that is different from the historical facts.” Since Hahn had already argued at the outset that “the treasure of ... revolutions ... is probably not to be found in a theory of revolution,” it seemed only plausible that she would end on a similarly cautious note: “There is a story that needs to be told. It is not the one that conceives of revolutions as locomotives of all history, and it is not the story of war and revolution as it determined the twentieth century ... What would be the constellation to write the story of the lost treasures of the revolution?”

This first group of presentations, invested in the historical logic of “humanism and revolution,” was put into dialogue with a more politically oriented second set of papers. Rachel Zuckert (Northwestern University) examined Immanuel Kant’s ambivalent stance toward the French Revolution, which is characterized by personal enthusiasm and outspoken support, on the one hand, and philosophical reservations based on his conception of autonomy, on the other. While many have challenged Kant “on the grounds that pure rationality is *not* (alone) the human true self,” Zuckert implied “that there might be another, different difficulty with [the] [...] Kantian structure of legitimation: that it requires that one *already is* rational, that such rationality is not only one’s aim or ideal, but is already at least part of one’s actual being. Otherwise, one would not oneself be amenable to the claims of rationality ...” To be sure, Zuckert acknowledged that this may seem like an uncontroversial, even trivial assumption, but, as she indicated, “this apparently liberating ideal may underlie Kant’s moment of greatest authoritarianism, of using reason to support absolutist, irresistible claims of power: his denial of the right to revolution, apparently even against his own sympathies.” Partly drawing on Kant as

well, Hauke Brunkhorst (Universität Flensburg) tackled the issue of “cosmopolitanism in the eighteenth-century constitutional revolutions” and made clear from the start that “cosmopolitanism ... is nothing specifically European,” as is often assumed. Because “cosmopolitan ideas were invented independently in different global regions between Beijing and Rome, and in very different religious and profane contexts,” Brunkhorst described cosmopolitanism as an “evolutionary universal.” The universal claim of the French Declaration of Rights from August 1789 served Brunkhorst as a case in point for what one might describe as the aporia of cosmopolitanism in that it declares nearly all other constitutions “null and void.” “It declares world war against monarchy, and demands no less than universal democracy, or with the American President Wilson nearly 140 years later: ‘To make the world safe for democracy.’”

Explicitly referring to current U.S. politics, William Rasch (Indiana University—Bloomington) introduced his paper with the following question: “If placed in a position of political responsibility and faced with the choice of having to save your city or your soul, what would you do?” In extreme situations, “does security trump legality or morality?” Rasch goes about answering this question—a question much discussed over the last decade—by distinguishing three possible responses: “One may remain morally steadfast and follow exclusively the dictates of the soul; one may place the survival of the city above all else; or one may simply deny the validity of the question by maintaining that the needs of the city and the dictates of the soul never conflict.” Needless to say, the matter is more complicated than any of these three answers suggests, which is why much of Rasch’s talk revolved around *variants* of the three options (that he identified with reference to examples taken from early modern humanism and the late Enlightenment). In conclusion, Rasch left the audience with the following disillusioning questions: “Is not a state or movement or revolution that claims to embody or champion pre-political, natural, and human rights—is not such a state necessarily and unavoidably imperial? Or, to use the words President Obama uttered ... in his [Nobel] Peace Prize acceptance speech: Does not such a state always define its wars as just and its enemies evil?”

The third group of presenters explored the efficacy of works of art in the light of their implicit theorizations of the nexus between humanism and revolution. Mark-Georg Dehrmann (Universität Hannover) offered a close reading of Friedrich Schlegel’s essay “On the Study of Greek Poetry” (1795). In this essay Schlegel put forth the concept of the “aesthetic revolution,” which, according to Dehrmann, connected aesthetics with politics. It goes without saying that Schlegel’s theory not only claimed a political dimension, but could hardly be understood other than in the context of the French Revolution: “In order to avoid despotism, the political revolution must be preceded by an aesthetic one whose purpose is to pre-educate the minds of the masses. This aesthetic revolution in art and culture, however, requires theory as a ruling avant-garde. And to make sure that here, too, despotism finds no entrance, the avant-garde itself must be legitimized by majority decision.” What Dehrmann consequently identified, is the notion of an aesthetic revolution “that seems to be postponing its keystone in a constant regress.” That is to say, the anticipated “effect of the avant-garde must already have come about before it can legitimately commence its legislative work.”

In his paper “The Celebration of Time in the Revolutionary Community,” Alexander Honold (Universität Basel) discussed Hölderlin’s *The Death of Empedocles* and Schiller’s *Wilhelm Tell*. Honold reminded the audience that “at the time when Hölderlin was working on his *Empedokles*, it was mainly in the sphere of *cultural* and *pedagogical* activity that he located any specifically German possibilities for implementing social change.” If Hölderlin intended his *Empedocles* drama as a public festival play following French models, Schiller’s *Tell*, too, Honold argued, “marks an attempt to reconstruct the social dynamics of the French Revolution out of the concept of fraternity.” Ultimately, Honold proposed that the revolutionary festivals engaged in a cult that promulgated political maxims through communal theatrical experiences. It is therefore “not coincidental that literature perceived far more clearly than historiography that this political subject matter [i.e., the formation of communities] lent itself to dramaturgical adaption.”

Shifting the focus slightly, John T. Hamilton (Harvard University), in his paper “‘Ich liebe Dich wie das Grab’: Rhetoric, Revolution, and Necromancy in *Dantons Tod*,” examined a certain circular logic of the theater and theater’s relation to history: “in order to stage Danton’s death, the hero must be brought back to life; but in order to be brought back to life he first had to die. This fatal circularity, moving in turn from life to death and back, already suggests a revolution of sorts and may even demonstrate the specific link between death and life that has characterized most revolutionary movements, including, of course, the French Revolution.” According to Hamilton, Büchner’s dramatic treatment of the proceedings emphasizes this underlying movement, “a kinetic force that is simultaneously and almost indistinguishably necrotropic and biotropic.”

Karin Gludovatz’s (Freie Universität Berlin) presentation “Goya’s Revolutions and the Solitude of Heroes” probed the political ambivalence of the French Revolution as it became manifest in Goya’s paintings. Anna Brickhouse (University of Virginia) focused on the question of humanism and the *other* American Revolution, as exemplified by the African American poet Phillis Wheatley, one of the earliest North American writers and the first African-American woman to publish a book of poetry. As Brickhouse mentioned at the beginning of her presentation, “With her owners, John and Susannah Wheatley, Phillis Wheatley traveled in the early 1770s to London, where her volume *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* appeared in print in 1773.” Ironically, from this “simultaneously authorial and enslaved position, Wheatley entered into a distinctly transatlantic literary arena and offered up ... what we might call a kind of humanist intervention into the debate over the future of political order in England’s North American colonies.” Brickhouse accordingly examined what happens if we were to expand the conceptual “geography of humanism”: “If the revolutionary humanist dimension of Wheatley’s poem lies in its geographical embrace of ethical questions concerning both ‘America’ and the poet’s ‘Afric’ homeland, it is also significant that the poem’s American purview is geographically delimited by New England, which she emphasizes repeatedly ... by referencing the ‘northern clime’ and the ‘northern skies.’”

Still further expanding the geographical scope of the discussion, Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert (De Paul University) revisited “Alexander von Humboldt’s Presentation of the Spanish American Landscape” and interpreted it as a “case of interpretative justice.” Millán-Zaibert argued that “Humboldt’s commitment to the life of his subject matter led him to be more open about the cultures he encountered in Spanish-America and much more cautious about claims of European

cultural superiority than many of his contemporaries were.” While Humboldt has been charged with “imperial eyes,” Millán-Zaibert submitted that Humboldt’s gaze was anything but imperial: “his was a generous gaze that helped Europeans come to a better understanding of Spanish America.”

It would appear frivolous to summarize here the ‘results’ of this remarkable and rewarding three-day event, but thankfully a volume of essays based on the conference is in preparation: Uwe Steiner, Christian J. Emden, and Martin Vöhler (eds.), *Humanism and Revolution: Eighteenth-Century Europe and Its Transatlantic Legacy* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, forthcoming in 2011), as part of the book series *Humanismus und Antikerezeption im 18. Jahrhundert / Humanism and the Afterlife of Antiquity in the 18th Century*.

Martin Blumenthal-Barby
Rice University