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Frederick the Great and the Republic of Letters. Thomas Biskup, University of Hull; Katrin Kohl, University of Oxford; Stiftung Preußische Schlösser und Gärten Berlin-Brandenburg, Potsdam; Voltaire Foundation, Oxford, 13.07.2012-14.07.2012.

Reviewed by Thomas Biskup
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Frederick the Great and the Republic of Letters

The conference 'Frederick the Great and the Republic of Letters' analysed the role the Prussian king played within the European 'republic of letters' by means of his philosophical works, historiographical writings, and poetry, and by his contribution to the arts as a patron and practitioner. The conference was organised by Thomas Biskup (University of Hull) and Katrin Kohl (University of Oxford) in association with the Stiftung Preußische Schlösser und Gärten Berlin-Brandenburg (Potsdam) and the Voltaire Foundation (Oxford). In his *Opening Statement*, THOMAS BISKUP (Hull) expressed hope that the conference would question the traditional fascination with the supposed dichotomy of 'power' and 'intellect', and the supposedly 'self-contradictory' personality of the Prussian king by building on recent scholarship both on monarchy and the 'republic of letters'.

The introductory paper by KATRIN KOHL (Oxford) on "Frederick and the Republic of Letters" highlighted that the way in which we conceive the 'republic of letters' is central to our conception of Frederick the Great. Examining the concept as a spatial metaphor that evokes a timeless context, Kohl demonstrated its varied deployment in eight specific textual situations. As prince and king, Frederick drew on this metaphor in its conventional form, which gained meaning from the classical tradition. The protean quality of the topos suggests that Frederick's view of the relationship between these spheres was ever-changing and responsive to context. Thus, Frederick was able to develop a rhetorical identity that was capable of sustaining a role as ruler and philosophe simultaneously and interactively.

In his paper "How should we read the works of a king? Frederick as self-promoter", ANDREAS PEČAR (Halle) argued that Frederick's texts should not be read as confessions or autobiographical reflections, but as political speech acts as defined by Quentin Skinner. Pečar argued that Frederick presents himself in his writings in terms of three different roles: philosopher, historian and patriot. The projection of his learning and certain political convictions which he would later appear to break - traditionally considered as attributes of a 'changing' personality - are thus better understood as consequences of different speech acts that were conceived for different audiences in different contexts. Much of the discussion of the first two papers focussed on the terminology of the 'republic of letters' and the applicability of the concept of 'speech acts'. The problem of translation (linguistic as well as metaphorical) and distance (irony) figured prominently. It was discussed whether *all* of Frederick's writings were political speech acts, which led to a debate about the publishing histories of individual works.

IWAN D'APRILE (Potsdam) opened his paper "Frederick and the Berlin Enlightenment" with the statement that the Berlin Enlightenment was characterized by its particular proximity to the Prussian state. Though Frederick himself was often distant from the city's intellectual life, his institutions had a close relationship with thinkers, which in turn often led to a particular form of self-censorship. D'Aprile outlined the strategies through which the Berlin intellectuals used the figure of Frederick for their own ends, arguing that they promoted a broader concept of Enlightenment which encompassed a 'public sphere' and, increasingly, a popular Enlightenment (*Volksaufklärung*) that went beyond Frederick's socially limited vision of the Enlightenment.

URSULA PIA JAUCH (Zurich) argued in her paper "Frederick's 'cercle intime': philosophy at court" that Frederick's circle of philosophical couriers existed only between 1748 and 1751. In the writings and correspondences of its members (not least La Mettrie, Algarotti, and Voltaire), two interrelated topics were discussed most prominently: the problem of *eros* (the Platonic question of love and nature), and the question of homosexual desire. Jauch placed this clandestine philosophy more

broadly within Frederick's reign and within the wider tradition of philosophical *symposia* between antiquity and Immanuel Kant. Much of the discussion of these two papers concerned the position of La Mettrie in the philosophical landscape of Berlin-Potsdam. Jauch's critical interpretation of the Berlin Enlightenment invited debate on whether publishing conditions in the Prussian city really were more restrictive than elsewhere, such as in Paris, for example.

KIRILL ABROSIMOV's (Augsburg) paper "Negotiating the rules of conduct in the republic of princes and philosophers: the example of Friedrich Melchior Grimm" focused on Grimm's *Correspondance littéraire* and foregrounded a special form of communication between royalty and the 'republic of letters' as Grimms' journal was specifically aimed at, and limited to, an exclusive readership of royalty and the high aristocracy. Abrosimov identified two phases of the relations between Frederick and Grimm: the period 1763-66, during which Grimm attempted to recruit King of Prussia as a subscriber, and the years from 1769 to Frederick's death when Grimm's role flourished, and he became Frederick's cultural ambassador in Paris among a network of philosophers.

In his paper "Atlantic Frederick: cultural transfer between the Anglophone world and Friderician Prussia", THOMAS BISKUP (Hull) challenged the notion of Frederick as an exclusively Francophile monarch, and reassessed the King's place in the 'republic of letters' by considering his response to British literature and philosophy. The paper examined the scholarly genealogies drafted by Voltaire and Algarotti, who to a large extent mediated Frederick's reception of 'English' letters, thought, and architecture, which should be seen as part of the King's attempts to transform Prussia into a 'civilised' nation alongside the role models of Britain, France and Italy. The first half of the discussion considered the consequences of Frederick's alliance with the Parisian philosophical party. Frederick wished to confirm his position on the European stage through a coordinated effort to integrate foreign policy and philosophical interaction, and his increased activities after 1769 should be seen in the context of new developments elsewhere (Voltaire's correspondence with Catherine II). The second half of the discussion turned to the filters through which Frederick perceived Britain and America.

In his paper "Frederick, Voltaire, and the anti-Machiavel tradition", RITCHIE ROBERTSON (Oxford) discussed Frederick's famous denunciation of the doctrines put forward by Machiavelli in "The Prince", and his own conception of the ideal monarch. Machiavelli was not only demonised from the 16th century onwards, but also read with respect, often together with Bacon and Tacitus as a tool to access the *arcana imperii*. Secondly, Robertson highlighted that Frederick's concept of a good monarch derived especially from Fénelon's *Télémaque*.

AVI LIFSCHITZ (London), in his paper "On the use and abuse of self-love: Frederick and Rousseau", pointed out that although Frederick II and Jean-Jacques Rousseau were in touch only briefly and indirectly in 1762, the King was consistently preoccupied with the themes discussed in Rousseau's two *Discourses* of the 1750s, in particular *amour propre*. Lifschitz pointed out that Frederick appreciated strict morality but considered it impracticable in modern commercial society. Lifschitz thus highlighted Frederick's moderate Epicureanism (in the ethical and political spheres) and put his opposition to early modern and ancient notions of civic virtue into a wider intellectual context. The discussion of these two papers centred on two aspects: other influences on Frederick's concepts, and the tensions inherent in his texts. It was suggested that Locke's and Lucretius' concepts of the social contract had equal influence on Frederick's concept of self-love, just as Mandeville's political thought left traces in the Voltairean concept of self-love. Robertson emphasised that Frederick did not always engage with Machiavelli's arguments, but used him as a handle to discuss his concept of the ideal monarch and to define a position for himself among contemporary European princes.

The relationship of poetry and reason was at the centre of the paper delivered by KEVIN HILLIARD (Oxford) on "Frederick and lyric poetry". In his dispute with d'Alembert about the possibilities of poetry in a philosophical age, the Prussian King defended the ancient poetic tradition and argued that the demystifying tendency of modern thought had to be stopped at the point where it threatened poetic fancy. Hilliard showed how the hybrid genre of the letter in prose and verse plays an important role in making a reconciliation of seemingly contradictory impulses possible.

In his paper "An art collector on the European stage", CHRISTOPH VOGTHERR (London) made the point that the Prussian king was one of the greatest European art collectors of his age. In the Potsdam palaces, paintings and sculpture formed a network of signifiers that conveyed an image of the king to other European courts, to the German educated public, and in particular to the enlightened society of Paris. Vogtherr argued for the need to put Frederick's collecting of art into a European context and described some of the strategies by which he

reached international audiences. Much of the discussion focussed on the role of mediators and advisors - such as Algarotti and Matthias Oesterreich - in both literary and artistic taste. In the discussion, the similarities and contrasts between Frederick's poetry and his collecting were considered striking: both exhibited a hybrid interest in the contemporary and the ancient (or even 'old-fashioned'), but as Nicholas Cronk pointed out, Frederick was much more 'modern' in his art collecting than in his literary practice. His favoured hybrid epistolary genre was a poetic ritual derived from the Grand Siècle, which was deliberately used by the King, since the *géomettres* were politically anti-monarchical, in contrast to the *anciennes*.

JÜRGEN LUH (SPSG, Potsdam) discussed the reflective element of Frederick's military thought in his paper "Military Action and Military Reflection: Frederick's 'Eléments de castramétrie et de tactique' of 1770". He focused on Frederick's last paper on military tactics, which presents Frederick as a teacher of his officers who is prepared to concede mistakes and learn from the enemy. Translating the experiences of the Seven Years War into military reflection, Frederick gave the holding of territory a new priority - a revision of his earlier thought that demonstrates how flexible the King's thinking remained well into the second half of his long reign.

In the final paper "'Le roi historien': Frederick the Great as a writer of history", CHRISTOPHER CLARK (Cambridge) placed the Prussian king in a wider context of questions of time and continuity, and the interplay between history and politics. Frederick's historical writings, Clark argued, should not only be seen in the context of Enlightenment historiography, but also be placed in the longer tradition of dynastic advice. Here, Frederick's history of Brandenburg is striking in its near complete erasure of the prolonged conflicts between the Electors of Brandenburg and the nobility, which has the effect of letting the state appear as a transcendental entity that cannot be accounted for historically. In the discussion, Pečar and Biskup asked if Frederick's historical writings were not more about himself and about the dynasty than about the abstract concept of the 'state'. Clark emphasised the need to distinguish between the King's writings, which all focus on different aspects, from dynasty and warfare to statehood and civilisation. Nicholas Cronk pointed out that the roles of *roi historien* and *roi philosophe* are not necessarily contrasts, but should be seen as differing manifestations of the same thing, since philosophers also write history.

In the concluding roundtable, Nicholas Cronk (Voltaire Foundation, Oxford) suggested that the term 'republic of letters' should be further explored, as it is currently experiencing a renaissance, albeit with anti-Enlightenment overtones. In this context, Joanna Innes (Oxford) remarked that the very openness of the concept had thrown up questions during the conference that a more specific definition might have suppressed. Several of the themes highlighted were developed by Dan Wilson (Royal Holloway, London), Kate Tunstall (Oxford) and Tim Blanning (Cambridge). Tunstall pointed out that questions of Frederick's distinctiveness would require further comparisons with other rulers (both past and contemporary - Louis XIV was mentioned here again). Questions of his legacy were picked up by Blanning and Wilson, who suggested that in the light of current scholarship, earlier historiographical debates surrounding Frederick's relationship to German literature and the complex question of the German 'republic of letters' should be revisited. The publication of conference contributions in a collection of essays was considered desirable by all participants.

Konferenzübersicht

Realm of discourse (Chair: Thomas Biskup)

Katrin Kohl (Oxford), Frederick and the Republic of Letters

Andreas Pečar (Halle), How should we read the works of a king? Frederick as self-promoter

Situating the Enlightenment
Chair: Caroline Warman

Iwan Michelangelo d'Aprile (Potsdam), Frederick and the Berlin Enlightenment

Ursula Pia Jauch (Zurich), Frederick's "cercle intime": philosophy at court

Exchanges
Chair: Dan Wilson

Kirill Abrosimov (Augsburg), Negotiating the rules of conduct in the republic of princes and philosophers: the example of Friedrich Melchior Grimm

Thomas Biskup (Hull), Atlantic Frederick: cultural transfer between the Anglophone world and Friderician Prussia

Mastering state and self
Chair: Kate Tunstall

Ritchie Robertson (Oxford), Frederick, Voltaire and the anti-Machiavel tradition

Avi Lifschitz (London), On the use and abuse of self-love: Frederick and Rousseau

Practitioner and patron
Chair: Katrin Kohl

Kevin Hilliard (Oxford), Frederick and lyric poetry

Christoph Vogtherr (Wallace Collection, London), An art collector on the European stage

The sword and the word (Chair: Tim Blanning)

Jürgen Luh (SPSG, Potsdam), Military action and military reflection: Frederick's "Eléments de castramétrie et de tactique" of 1770

Christopher Clark (Cambridge), "Le roi historien": Frederick the Great as a writer of history

Roundtable & Discussion
Chair: Nicholas Cronk, Voltaire Foundation

Panel: Tim Blanning (Cambridge), Kate Tunstall (Oxford), Dan Wilson (London)

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

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