

Preface

Michael Palencia-Roth and Jean-Noël Robert

The international conference 'Routes de l'histoire' (Paths of History) was held on the occasion of the 35th annual congress of the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations (ISCSC). Started up in Salzburg in 1961 by the historians Othmar Anderle and Arnold J. Toynbee, the scholarly society moved its headquarters in 1970 to the USA, where most of the annual meetings have been held since then.

Keen to breathe a new dynamism into French and European thinking as part of ISCSC's discussions, Professor Eiji Hattori, chair of the Japanese committee, took the initiative of suggesting that the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes (EPHE) should host the 2006 congress in Paris. In partnership with the University of Paris-VII, the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (INALCO) and the Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO), the EPHE seized the opportunity thus offered to illustrate the richness of our cultural and linguistic diversity in a context of thinking 'globally' about civilizations. At the 33rd congress in Fairbanks, Alaska, in 2004 Marie-Françoise Courel, EPHE's president, Jean Baubérot, her predecessor, and Claude Allibert, then vice-president of INALCO, proposed the theme finally selected for the Paris event: 'Paths of History: Transmitting civilizations, bearing cultural diversity – point and counterpoint'.

Organized in tandem by its three academic committees in the USA, Japan and France, the congress took place as four parallel workshops¹ on 6 and 7 July 2006 at the Institut National d'Histoire et d'Art, followed by a plenary on 8 July at UNESCO, under the patronage of the director-general, Mr Koïchiro Matsuura.

Over and above the great wealth and diversity of the 75 papers presented, important academic issues made the international congress a crucial meeting, in terms of both methodology and content.

In respect of methodology it was an excellent – and all too rare – opportunity to allow researchers to meet and even challenge one another, researchers whose widely differing approaches are sometimes perceived as irreconcilable. Witnessing the near-simultaneous exposition of perspectives that were so diverse was a true 'lesson in life', to use an old-fashioned but evocative phrase.

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The paths of history and the bridges between civilizations are built by those bearers of cultural diversity – travellers, missionaries, merchants, conquerors, administrators – to whom the comparative analysis of civilizations owes the fact that it is a viable and stimulating discipline. Indeed it is thanks to them that we are civilized human beings, rooted in the specificities of our cultures and societies yet open to elements of the universal in an increasingly globalized world.

These three days in 2006 brought together many researchers who started from a specific case, often the most recent point in their research, and ended with questions whose scope was much more general. Others focused immediately on the level of theorizing and generalizing, while nevertheless grounding their thinking in a perspective of action on the world. And there were others who did not hesitate to introduce categories – ones to which we are not or no longer accustomed – that relate almost to aesthetics, but an aesthetics that could be called epistemological. Things had been organized so that each paper should have a methodological counterpoint in order to encourage researchers to go back over their own methods and ask questions about the validity of what they see as indisputable and universal.

As regards content, it should be mentioned that many presentations tackled the issue of orientalism, so much debated over the last few decades, and at the point when important publications all over the world, whether in Russia or the UK, are inviting us to put new effort into the thinking that inevitably needs to be done about that research field and about the motives for embarking on it.

The historian Herbert Lüthy once asked the following rhetorical question: ‘What is the history of humanity but the history of colonization?’ Today it can be asked in less arrogant terms: ‘What is the history of humanity but the history of encounters and exchanges between cultures and civilizations?’ Some of those encounters are at times imposed, violent, a relationship of exploiter to exploited. Others may be more peaceful.

From French gardens to roads in Siberia, from the ice age to the World Exhibition, from ancient alphabets to medieval Chinese, the rich plethora of topics covered could induce dizziness. But at a time when one cannot but acknowledge the crucial differences of perspective required for the study of the human sciences in Europe, the USA and Japan, it was essential to provide a forum for ideas to meet and be exchanged in the spirit of greatest freedom.

Political or military history, the large-scale historical processes that typified the education of historians in the 1960s, occupied only a modest place in ‘Paths of History’. This was an event that emphasized instead the more spiritual dimensions of human history. Maybe we should see in that circumstance the sign of a paradigm shift in the making.

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Note

1. (a) Definitions of, encounters and borders between, civilizations; (b) *Topoi*, climates and migrations; (c) Transfers of cultures and religion; (d) Transfers of knowledge.