

Transmitting Knowledge in the 18th Century: The Case of Président de Brosses and Abate Antonio Niccolini

John Rogister

In the societies of the Ancien Régime, as the French sociologist Raymond Boudon recently pointed out, religious doctrines supplied explanations for the origins of the Universe, thus enabling human beings to marshal into a ready-made framework the increasing amount of data gleaned from perceived experience. Boudon (2004: 25) also made the useful point that traditional societies are characterized by the fact that the interpretations of the universe to which they subscribe evolve only very slightly. In such societies there is the possibility that new data, especially scientific data, will not fit conveniently into the established and accepted framework. Yet was this necessarily the case at all times and places?

The 18th century in Europe is the ideal period to study the interaction of traditional beliefs and new ideas stemming from scientific observation and philosophical rationalization. Usually, the participants in the intellectual debates of the period are divided into two camps: 'Enlightenment' and 'Counter-Enlightenment'. This distinction was popularized by Isaiah Berlin, writing in 1973, and it is maintained by Darrin M. McMahon (2001). It is open to the criticism of being too reductionist (Miller, 2003: 29). 'Enlightenment' can become a portmanteau word, meaningless because it is all-embracing. How can one place Montesquieu and Sade in the same category, unless Montesquieu is viewed as an 'early' figure of the 'Enlightenment', which would be illogical (see Lough, 1985: 1–15). Moreover, there is a problem once one regards the *anti-philosophes* as the sole defenders 'of the primacy of the Church' and of the idea that the Catholic body politic could 'heal itself' (Miller, 2003). Those defenders may also be found among the ranks of the 'Enlightenment' thinkers including Président de Brosses and his friend, the Florentine patrician Abate Antonio Niccolini. Indeed, the transmission of knowledge often came through influential members of a European aristocracy that remained attached to traditional

Copyright © UNESCO 2008

SAGE: Los Angeles, London, New Delhi and Singapore, <http://dio.sagepub.com>

DOI: 10.1177/0392192108090741

values. The purpose of this article is to examine the role of de Brosses and Niccolini in this process.

A member of the hereditary nobility of the French monarchy, Charles de Brosses (1709–77), president and later first president of the *Parlement* of Dijon, is chiefly remembered nowadays for a posthumously published work, the *Lettres familières sur l'Italie*, a carefully reconstructed epistolary account of his travels in Italy in 1739.¹ Recently, anthropologists have taken renewed interest in his published treatise of 1760, *Du culte des Dieux Fétiches, ou parallèle de l'ancienne Religion de l'Égypte, avec la religion actuelle de Nigritie*, which Michel Mauss considered to be the first comparative study of religion (David, 1974). Five years later, the president published his *Traité de la formation mécanique des Langues et des principes physiques de l'Étymologie*, considered by many to be his most significant work (Coulaud, 1981).

The de Brosses family's background and education lay at the heart of the structure of the French Ancien Régime and of the president's cultural world. He belonged to an ancient noble family. He owned large estates in Burgundy and on the borders with Switzerland. He was a *seigneur* exercising feudal rights. Voltaire was his often disagreeable tenant at Ferney. De Brosses entered the *Parlement* of Dijon, a royal sovereign judicial court with certain political attributions in 1730, and in 1742 he purchased an office of *président à mortier* in the same court. He had been educated in part by his father, a notable savant, but mainly at the Jesuit College of the Godrins in Dijon. A phenomenon of the 'Enlightenment' was that many of its leading figures were educated, and well educated too, by their implacable enemies, the Jesuits. Voltaire was the most striking example. De Brosses was never in later life as hostile to the Jesuits as some of their other former pupils were to be. He himself proved to be an excellent pupil. The Jesuits taught him Greek and Latin, as well as Italian and some elements of Spanish and Portuguese. Later, he developed an interest in the Celtic languages.

Antonio Niccolini (1701–69) also came from an aristocratic background,² his family tracing its ancestry to the 13th century.³ Five of its members were, from father to son, senators of the Florentine Republic. Another member of his family had been archbishop of Pisa and a cardinal in 1565. Eleven years later, Senator Giovanni Niccolini bought a large palace on the Via de Servi in Florence, where he installed a rich collection of medals and Roman antiquities. The senator's son bought the impressive Medicean villa of Camugliano near Pisa, and he received the title of Marchese of Ponsacco and Camugliano. When the elder branch of the family died out in 1666, Antonio Niccolini's grandfather inherited the title and the properties. The Niccolini Palace in Florence became widely known not only for its collections of sculptures and medals, but also for its paintings. The Niccolini *Madonna* by Raphael, which was sold to Lord Gower after the Abate's death by his nephews, is now in the National Gallery of Washington. The great scholar Bernard de Montfaucon was a visitor to the *palazzo* and recorded his admiration for its collections.

As a younger son, Antonio Niccolini was destined for the Church, in which two of his older brothers were already making their careers. He was educated at the venerable University of Pisa, where he became one of the brilliant pupils of the scholar and jurist Averani. Niccolini's fellow pupils included Bernardo Tanucci, the future first minister of Naples, and Gaspare Cerati, who became *provveditore* of the

University (see Carranza, 1974; Coppini, 1985). Niccolini produced the epitaph for their teacher, Averani, and his thesis was deemed so accomplished that a copy of it was sent to the Grand Duke of Tuscany. A career was opening up for him, as a papal diplomat perhaps, or as governor of Rome, a post which would have brought him a cardinal's hat, his family connexions having been enhanced when his eldest brother married Virginia Corsini, the niece of a cardinal who was later elected Pope as Clement XII in 1730. Thereafter, there were few references to the Abate that did not include the mention that his brother had married the Pope's niece.

These hopes of promotion in the Church did not materialize for several reasons. First, Niccolini made clear his lack of sympathy for the translation of the Duke of Lorraine, the future Emperor Francis I, to the throne of the extinct Medici in 1737, instead of the rightful heir, Don Carlo, Infant of Spain, son of Elisabeth Farnese. Don Carlo had already conquered the Kingdom of Naples, where he was to employ Niccolini's friend Tanucci as his chief adviser.

Second, Niccolini's friendships with English noblemen who, while on the Grand Tour, had introduced freemasonry into Tuscany, had also alienated the agents of Lorrainer rule in the Grand Duchy. Finally, despite the election of Cardinal Corsini to the papacy, the Corsini *milieu*, led by scholars like Bottari, was perceived as a subversive Jansenist influence. Jansenist attempts to ground Christian practice in Augustinian doctrine were resisted by the Roman *Curia*. Although, over the years, Niccolini was entrusted with some secret and delicate diplomatic missions by the Papacy, he did not achieve high office in the Church. His criticism of the Lorrainers governing Tuscany led to his being exiled from his native land in 1749, though he was allowed to return a few years later. The death of his eldest brother left him with the burden of educating his nephews, the continuators of the family line. His growing involvement in these family concerns acted as a brake on his career and on his scholarly activities towards the end of his life, when he was once more in relative favor with the new pope, Clement XIV.

Because of his family wealth Niccolini was able to indulge his cultural avocations, albeit intermittently. He played a significant role in the life and work of the Tuscan academies, in particular of the *Accademia della Crusca*, which sought to renovate and to purify the Italian language. The academy's work consisted of sifting the language, of separating the wheat from the chaff, as its name implied.⁴ Voltaire and Niccolini's friends, Montesquieu and the antiquary Lacurne de Sainte-Palaye, were made honorary members of the *Crusca*. Niccolini, no mean scholar himself, assisted the savants Gori and Venuti in producing those expensive volumes of text and reproductions of Etruscan gems, medals, sculptures and other artefacts, all relics of Classical civilization, known collectively as the *Musaeum Florentinum*. Both de Brosses and Lacurne de Sainte-Palaye, who had met Niccolini on their celebrated journey to Italy in 1739, purchased these volumes, the production of which was expensive; financed by rich subscribers; finally had to be abandoned after publication of just the first few volumes. Niccolini himself was financing the day-to-day running of the enterprise in 1738.

The transfer of knowledge, particularly of the civilizations of the past, was the work of antiquaries like Gori, Venuti, Lacurne de Sainte-Palaye and, to a lesser extent also, of Niccolini and de Brosses. Unfortunately, not much has been written

on the work of the *Crusca*, of which Niccolini was a leading light. To gain a more detailed picture of its probable role, it is best to take as an example a similar academy which has been studied and to which Niccolini also belonged, the *Accademia etrusca* of Cortona.⁵ This academy owed its origins largely to his friends, the Venuti brothers, who also came from a noble family. Like Niccolini, Marcello Venuti had studied with Averani. In 1748 he published an early description of the archaeological discoveries at Herculaneum. He helped launch the artistic neo-classical movement when he commissioned artists to produce pictures that were imitations of the newly discovered frescos, like the Muse Polimnia. Marcello's brother, the Abate Ridolfino, produced a guide in three languages, English, French and Italian, to what the English edition called 'the Finest Prospects in Italy' (1762). Another of Ridolfino's works, the *Accurata e Succinta Descrizione Topografica delle Antichità di Roma*, was published in two volumes in 1763. The list of subscribers to the work is impressive: Neri Corsini and Antonio Niccolini figure among the 71 Italians, while the English subscribers numbered 192 (Barocchi and Gallo, 1985: 24–5, 57–8, 69–71, 90–1).

It should not be assumed that this activity went only in one direction, from the Italian peninsula out to the rest of Europe. The third Venuti brother, Filippo, translated Louis Racine's poem on Religion into Italian. He sought to link this and other poems with the literary and philosophical legacy of Dante and Petrarch. Of the 500 copies printed of his translation of Racine's *La Religion*, 50 were purchased by Montesquieu. This brief survey of Filippo Venturi's contribution would not be complete without some mention of the part he played in arranging for the *Encyclopédie* to be published in Lucca from 1758 onwards (Barocchi and Gallo, 1985: 92–6). As with Niccolini so with Venuti, the Catholic faith was not incompatible with the pursuit of science and new learning. There was also on the part of both men a desire to transmit knowledge to kindred spirits abroad and to establish cultural links through the network of the academies and the exchange of publications.

Arnaldo Momigliano, Leo Strauss and, more recently, Marc Fumaroli (1988) have rehabilitated the role of 18th-century antiquaries as vectors of classical learning. However, the argument needs to be taken a stage further. The rediscovery of the Classical heritage and its dissemination in print, albeit an expensive enterprise, was not deemed by men such as Niccolini and de Brosses as incompatible with their traditional religious beliefs. The unpublished correspondence between these two men provides the evidence for this claim. They exchanged information about the continental nature of Australasia, about the latest mathematical discoveries, about the origin of languages, about oriental religions. At the same time, their religious and political convictions remained firmly based on the received notions about religion and society.

For de Brosses, the true *parlementaire*, France was threatened by ministerial despotism which sought to destroy the fabric of the Body Politic and of the well-ordered structure of society. He was twice sent into exile by Louis XV, in 1744 and during the period of the Maupeou coup d'état in 1771–4. He shared his experiences with Niccolini, who had traveled more widely, although war prevented him from visiting France and staying with his other great friend, Montesquieu, at La Brède. Between 1746 and 1749, the abate went on a Grand Tour of Europe, staying in England for almost two years.⁶ There he became acquainted with scholars such as Sir

Hans Sloane and Richard Meade. His stay in England at the time when the British colonial empire was being created gave him the opportunity to see at close quarters the society that had produced Newton, whom he regarded as a pillar of modern science (and who had been a religious believer). Although Niccolini held to the view that ‘cento Newton non farebbero uno Montesquieu’, his experience of English life and his grounding as a classicist gave him an acute sense of the rise and decline of States. His native Tuscany, after the glorious period of the Medici, had become a mere geographical expression, whereas Britain was on the way to world hegemony. Only in its past, in its depositories of ancient civilizations, could Tuscany derive glory and perhaps hope. He and his friends had helped to make those discoveries better known to a wider European public, while at the same time absorbing new intellectual stimulus from England, France and Germany.

John Rogister
Corresponding Member of the Institut de France, Paris

Notes

1. The most recent study of Pr sident de Brosses is the introduction by Letizia Norci Cagiano de Azevedo to the edition by Giuseppina Cafasso of de Brosses (1991).
2. Little has been written specifically on Niccolini, though he appears frequently in cultural histories and published correspondence and memoirs of the period. For an important study, see Rosa (1980).
3. For histories of the family, see Passerini (1870), which is not always accurate, and Niccolini (1933).
4. In Italian *crusca* means chaff, the husk that covers the grain and is discarded, from which comes the idea of separating impurities from the fine flower (or flour) of the language.
5. See the impressive account of its role in Barocchi and Gallo (1985).
6. The author of this article is completing an edition of the correspondence between Niccolini and de Brosses.

References

- Barocchi, P., Gallo, D. (1985) *L'Accademia etrusca*. Milan: Electa.
- Boudon, R. (2004) ‘Quelle th orie du comportement pour les sciences sociales?’, *Soci t  d’Ethnologie, Conf rence Eug ne Fleischmann iii*, Nanterre, pp. 27–8.
- Carranza, N. (1974) *Monsignor Gaspare Cerati, provveditore dell’Universit  di Pisa nel Settecento delle riforme*. Pise: Pacini.
- Coppini, R.P. (1985) ‘Bernardo Tanucci e Antonio Niccolini: una corrispondenza ritrovata’, *Boll. Stor. Pisano*, LIV: 155–69.
- Coulaud, M. (1981) ‘Les M moires sur la mati re  tymologique de Charles de Brosses’, *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, CXCIX: 287–352.
- David, M. (1974) ‘Histoire des religions et philosophie au XVIII  si cle: le pr sident de Brosses, David Hume et Diderot’, *Revue philosophique de la France et de l’ tranger*, CLXIV: 145–60.
- De Brosses, Ch. (1991) *Lettres familiales* [sic], ed. G. Cafasso, preface G. Macchia, 3 vols. Naples: Centre Jean B rard.
- Fumaroli, M. (1988) ‘La R publique des Lettres’, *Diogen *, 143: 131–40.
- Lough, J. (1985) ‘Reflections on Enlightenment and Lumi res’, *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, VIII: 1–15.

- McMahon, D. M. (2001) *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Miller, C. (2003) 'Defenders of Truth', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 3 Jan, p. 29.
- Musitelli, P. (2006) 'Filippo Venuti, ami de Montesquieu et collaborateur de l'Édition lucquoise de l'Encyclopédie', *Dix-huitième siècle*, XXXVIII: 429–48.
- Niccolini, G. (1933) *The Chronicles of a Florentine Family 1200–1470*. London: Cape.
- Passerini, L. (1870) *Genealogia e Storia della Famiglia Niccolini*. Firenze: Cellini.
- Rosa, M. (1980) 'Un "giansenista" difficile nell'Europa del '700', in M. S. Mazzi, S. Raveggi (eds), *Studi di Storia Medievale e Moderna per Ernesto Sestan*, pp. 761–91. Firenze: Olschki.