

Call for Papers
The Norwegian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies conference
Tromsø, Autumn 2011

Persistencies: the Eighteenth Century and its Ancestry

Labels such as ‘the Enlightenment’ (‘Lumières’) and ‘the Age of Reason’ are frequently applied to the eighteenth century. They are, however, increasingly being questioned. It has been claimed, for instance, that strict, secular empiricism was a trend with little support outside England and France, and that the ideas of enlightenment philosophy did not spread beyond a narrow elite. In relation to Scandinavia, meanwhile, there is an ongoing debate about whether it is legitimate to talk about a ‘Nordic Enlightenment’ at all (cf. Tore Frängsmyr, *À la recherche des Lumières: une perspective suédoise*). Despite the fact that the so-called ‘century of enlightenment’ readily portrayed itself, and was later portrayed, as a radical break from what had gone before, it nonetheless seems just as appropriate to investigate how the eighteenth century actually developed and extended the forms of knowledge and understanding it had inherited from previous centuries. The political, economic, medical and (natural-)scientific thinking, as well as the theological, aesthetic, artistic and philosophical modes of thought, that entered the discourse in the eighteenth century all stand in a tradition. As such, ‘the Enlightenment’ can just as legitimately be viewed as the culmination of the Renaissance, as it can the beginning, or origin, of our own era. Key terms such as ‘reason’ and ‘knowledge’ have unquestionably been conceptualised in different ways at different times, but is it necessarily the case that an eighteenth century writer’s use of them is more recognisable to us than that of a seventeenth century writer?

This conference wishes to instigate a change of perspective. It therefore invites its participants to turn their gaze towards the transition between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and to look at both continuities and ruptures within different fields of knowledge and practice. What forms of knowledge do we find in the eighteenth century if we look aside from, or before, enlightenment ideas and its knowledge-based notion of reason? How did older traditions and modes of thinking contribute to what we might call ‘typical eighteenth century phenomena’ and how were they productive for new understandings and new practices?

Researchers from all disciplines with an interest in the eighteenth century are welcome. In keeping with the theme of ‘persistencies’, participants are invited to examine social structures, knowledge systems and practices that are not traditionally associated with the century of enlightenment, but that contain features which look back rather than forward in time. Here one might mention baroque features in pictorial art and music, belief in witchcraft and mysticism in popular faith and theology, dogmatic rigidity and Latin erudition in academia and the education system, persisting business monopolies and cameralism in the economy, absolutism in politics, literary and artistic genres that cling to old forms, and so on. Papers are especially encouraged that examine and compare, for example, ‘baroque’ features that cross both (our contemporary) disciplinary and subject boundaries and geographical borders. Participants are further asked to bring in individual agents and groups who are not currently inscribed in the ‘eighteenth-century canon’, either because they have been regarded as representatives of fashionable or of peripheral phenomena.

The dates of the conference, key note speakers, deadlines for submitting proposals and other information will be announced on <http://www.ub.uit.no/1700/konf/conf.htm>.

Tromsø / Oslo / Berlin, 18 May 2010

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