

# How the History of Philosophy Was Born

*By Ariane Revel*

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**The history of philosophy is a discipline in its own right that invented itself as such in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. But it is also an imperialist practice intended to mark the triumph of European reason. Catherine König-Pralong’s book traces its history.**

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Review of: Catherine König-Pralong, *La colonie philosophique. Écrire l’histoire de la philosophie aux XVIII<sup>e</sup> et XIX<sup>e</sup> siècles*, Éditions de l’EHESS, 2019, 253 p., 21 €.

*La Colonie philosophique*, or “the philosophical colony,” is the name given by Catherine König-Pralong to the project of asserting European modernity operated by the history of philosophy at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. König-Pralong proposes a plural, diffracted history of this history which straddles France and Germany: The unity of the object lies neither in the content of histories of philosophy, nor in the position of the historians of a particular kind who produced them, but in the way that the discipline was elaborated within shared frameworks that were inseparably epistemological and political. The virtuosity of the book, then, stems from the fact that it deploys the history of a discipline—the history of philosophy—from a single image, that of the colony, and on a multitude of terrains: Having opted to study the history of philosophy “as a socio-cultural practice” (p. 17), König-Pralong approaches it as part of an “interdisciplinary history of the history of philosophy” (p.

22). The six chapters of *La Colonie philosophique* thus cover a series of intellectual loci that were key to the development of the history of philosophy as a disciplinary practice and as a discourse on truth: The investigation builds on a series of elements—from the problematization of the historian’s subjectivity to the relations between philosophy and geography and to the question of philosophical language—which may at first glance seem independent of one another. Not to mention the fact that each of these loci worked on by the history of philosophy had ramifications that intersected with the others.

König-Pralong warns the reader: “By paying particular attention to intersections, I reconstruct interdisciplinary schemes instead of narrating events or an advent” (p. 22). The investigation does not so much offer a thesis on the nature of the history of philosophy as it describes the stakes of this intellectual practice in a specific context. By writing the history of the history of philosophy and of the manner in which it appropriated and produced knowledge, König-Pralong shows how Western reason reflected and projected itself.

## **From “Utopian Dream” to “Intellectual Imperialism”**

The book begins with the creation of the history of philosophy as a discipline. Yet, this creation is itself told as the product of a displacement. The “philosophical colony” that gives its name to the book designates first of all a locus of the post-revolutionary period which was at once concrete and fantasized: a territory governed by philosophers with imperialist aims and organized according to the principles of philosophy. This is exemplified by two texts cited at the beginning of the introduction. In 1798, in his *Memoirs, Illustrating the History of Jacobinism*, the Jesuit Augustin Barruel denounced the Voltairians’ secret actions in the 1760s that aimed to establish a “colony” in Prussia, the failure of which was compensated, in their view, by the Parisian triumph of impiety that actively prepared the Revolution. In 1830, the counter-revolutionary writer Jean-Claude Clausel de Coussergues described the liberal movements present in Spain during the Napoleonic Wars as a “philosophical colony” on the fringes of Spanish society which proclaimed a constitution written according to the principles of *The Social Contract*. This “geopolitical” (p. 12) conception of philosophy as an imperialist practice became widespread around 1800, especially in counter-revolutionary writings. Yet, König-Pralong begins by evoking this

conception derived from the utopian imaginary of the philosophical colony only to immediately take it in reverse. At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and in the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as the imaginary of a colony with imperialist aims was becoming a commonplace, another imperialist practice of philosophy imposed itself with a far more consequential legacy: the history of philosophy. Indeed, if the idea of a politics of philosophy persisted, it was through a “double scholarly colonization” (p. 13): that of the rest of the world and that of the past. As a scholarly, professional practice engendered by the disciplinarization of philosophy that began at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Germany and continued at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in France, the history of philosophy appeared as a sub-discipline whose scholarly character helped to conceal its political dimension.

However, the whole book tends to show that this history was, on the contrary, eminently political insofar as it dealt with the spatially and temporally situated advent of reason—and, necessarily, of its other. The rational and secularized modernity of which Europe was the theatre had as its counterpoint the elsewhere, namely the Orient and the Middle Ages, Islam and Greece, Judaism and ancient India, mysticism and barbarism. A counterpoint more than an opposition: The strength of König-Pralong’s argument lies in showing how modernity constructed its own history via genealogies whose composition varied depending on the positions occupied by actors. While the places were common, they were treated in diverse ways: At times a site of elaboration, at others a foil, those elsewhere were re-appropriated to serve the history of a philosophy whose apogee was intrinsically modern and European. The past and the extra-European world formed a “projection surface” (p. 39) that allowed for a definition of philosophy through difference—a temporalized and spatialized definition.

## **Writing the History of Truth?**

This history was built within the university philosophy curriculum. This internalist dimension was fundamental because it determined what was at stake in the practice: The history of the discipline produced by philosophers themselves proceeded from the critical moment characteristic of the Enlightenment, a moment of reflexivity in which modernity conceptualized and questioned its own advent at once. Yet, writing the history of truth was not self-evident: In the first two chapters of the book,

which are devoted to the emergence of the discipline and to the definition of the historian's position, König-Pralong endeavors to show that the history of philosophy distinguished itself by the fact that it sought to produce the history of a truth conceived, by definition, as an invariable absolute. Contrary to the doxographies of the preceding period, "the historiography of the Enlightenment discarded this conception of the history of philosophy as a reservoir of intellectual experiences and as an opinion market" in favor of a "grand narrative of the history of philosophical reason" (p. 36). The question then arises as to the status of the historian: "judge or referee" (p. 37) concerned with discriminating truth from falsehood in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, and, especially in Brucker, with tracing the long advent of reason through the ages and across cultures; scientific observer of the internal developments of philosophical rationality and of the causal relations between ideas in Tiedemann and in the pragmatic historiography of Kantian inspiration, but also in Degérando on the other side of the Rhine; advocate of a culturalist model in the context of German Romanticism, for instance in Schlegel; architect of a teleological approach fully oriented by the complete self-realization of the Spirit in Hegel, etc.

König-Pralong explores the range of proposals, showing how each reflected an epistemological option and appropriated the methods and knowledge of the human sciences that were developing at the same time. From 1830 onwards, the objectivity of the historian became the predominant issue: The historicism of Schleiermayer and Droysen, the Austrian school and neo-Kantism, but also the work of Victor Cousin in France challenged, each in their own way, the overlooking position of which Hegel was the most accomplished representative in favor of critical self-reflection and of a historicization of their own practices.

## **Interdisciplinarity**

The history of the history of philosophy presented by König-Pralong is also a history of interdisciplinarity. A history "among a thousand possible histories" (p. 22), except that the strong holistic claim that philosophy retained, even as it developed as a university discipline and became primarily the work of professionals, gave its relationship to other disciplines a particular hue. The last four chapters of *La Colonie philosophique* describe how historians of philosophy relied on conceptual and methodological apparatuses that they borrowed from the human sciences but also

from the natural sciences—notably biology, with its predominant use of the concept of “race.” These chapters, which are dedicated to “the reconstruction and study of the intellectual and institutional positioning strategies adopted by historians of philosophy in the new scientific landscape emerging in the 18<sup>th</sup> century” (p. 183), have stakes that are also inseparably epistemological and political. Epistemological because these chapters highlight both the cross-disciplinary exchanges that enabled philosophers to develop the tools for a history of their own discipline—with the specific problems it posed—and the strong interdisciplinarity that characterized a moment otherwise generally considered as that of disciplinary autonomy. Political because the history of philosophy conceived as the history of modern reason contributed to a partitioning of reality that led to “an exclusive conception of the West as the territory of reflexive, critical, and analytical rationality” (p. 205) naturalized as the “biotope of philosophy” (p. 85). By highlighting a number of commonplaces in the discourse of philosophers on the genealogy of their own practice, König-Pralong shows how borrowings from other disciplines added to the ideological weight of the history of philosophy.

Here again, the subtlety of the analysis lies in the fact that König-Pralong seeks less to trace a general movement than to describe the complex combinatorial pattern delineated by philosophers’ interdisciplinary uses: From a series of elements, the theories put forward by historians of philosophy outlined singular trajectories. Take the following example: The problem of the language of philosophy examined in Chapter 4 allows for tracing the multitude of choices that were made by actors in a given intellectual, cultural, and political context. The double terrain—French and German—makes it possible to highlight the nationalist stakes of the debate: Having established the idea that German belonged to the Indo-European family, the first studies of comparative linguistics made language a marker of the spiritual strength of a people. Philologists and philosophers found themselves asserting a history of the spirit based on the study of language. While in Germany the question of German’s proximity to Sanskrit and Ancient Greek, which granted it a certain primacy among modern languages, became a decisive issue, the debate in France centered on the relative positions of scholastic Latin and modern French in the history of modernity.

Yet, these national debates and the contrasting positions to which they gave rise were revived throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, on the one hand by the Franco-German cultural antagonism that brought each of them to bear on either side of the Rhine, and on the other hand by the question of the other of the Indo-European system, through the status of Oriental languages and, in particular, of Chinese. König-Pralong’s entire

study, then, tends to show that histories of philosophy must be understood as relative positions within a constellation of problems whose very existence was conditioned, in a perfectly inextricable manner, by the evolution of knowledge and by the ideological representations of which they were both the result and the expression.

Drawing on the Anglophone history of knowledge and on the sociology of disciplines, König-Pralong's book opens up a singular path. By deploying a comparative method with multiple foundations and by insisting on the intertwining of knowledge practices and political representations, *La Colonie philosophique* shows how the creation of the discourse on the history of philosophy proceeded from a series of relations that outlined, through resemblance and difference, the image of a modern rationality whose claim to the absolute was eminently situated.

First published in [laviedesidees.fr](http://laviedesidees.fr), 28 November 2019.

Translated from the French by Arianne Dorval.

Published in [booksandideas.net](http://booksandideas.net), 30 April 2020.