

The querelle that wasn't? “Old” and “New” in the intellectual culture of Habsburg Europe, 1700–1750

When the Austrian Benedictine Bernhard Pez called his anthology of medieval spiritual texts “*Bibliotheca ascetica antiquo-nova*” (12 vols. 1723–40), the concept of the “old-new” resonated well with how he approached historical sources: It encapsulated both his erudite “critical” distance to the past and his hope of reviving some of the virtues expressed in those sources in his own time. But more than that, tensions between old and new ideas, texts and definitions of useful knowledge also lay at the heart of many debates within the intellectual culture surrounding him. “Critical” historical research as propagated by the Maurists, Leibniz and others instigated a wide range of conflicts concerning the relationship between past and present: Far from being only a matter of theoretical interest, the authenticity of diplomas and historiographical accounts touched on theology, jurisdiction, titles of ownership and communal identities, and eventually necessitated a redefinition of the related régimes d’historicité.

Both attempts at a thoroughly rejuvenated history of ideas and pre-Enlightenment Central European history have been enjoying rising attention by historians lately; still, no systematic endeavours at combining the two have been made for decades. Building on results of more praxeologically oriented research on early modern cultures of knowledge, the conference aims at preparing the ground for a history of ideas in Habsburg Europe in an era that has too often been treated as a mere prelude to the Maria Theresian age of reforms. This latter perspective has led not only to some amount of neglect, but also to a tendency to rather one-sidedly search only for early signs of Enlightenment discourses and other progressive tendencies. Yet actually many sources of the time speak far more to their learned protagonists’ predominantly “conservative” agenda – which nonetheless not seldom presented itself under the label of innovation.

The conference will address the conceptual and epistemological uses of “old” and “new” in four more or less distinct fields of early 18th century learning:

- 1) Law and institutions
- 2) Theology and ethics
- 3) Aesthetics and taste
- 4) Natural philosophy and the practical sciences

Members of the Pez project will contribute analyses of Bernhard Pez’ manifold controversies as a starting point for discussion. We welcome contributions employing a bottom-up approach to intellectual debates, ideas and developments which relate to one of the mentioned fields of knowledge and can be seen under the aspect of tensions between “old” and “new”. Geographically, the focus is on the Habsburg monarchy and its neighbors. Topics could comprise, for instance, debates about the merits of historical and literary texts and their worthiness for publication from a theological, aesthetic or political point of view, the historicization of imperial law and other implications of learned enthusiasm for „*Teutsche Altertümer*“, the employment of learned and scientific knowledge in politics, the definition, promotion and institutionalization of expert knowledge, the intellectual dimensions of relations between state and church or between factions inside the church, court or government structures, or how the deterioration of interconfessional relations from the 1720s onward played out in the intellectual sphere.

Habsburg Europe may never have experienced an explicit querelle des anciens et des modernes; however, the challenge of renegotiating the relation between past and present knowledge was the same in Paris and Vienna. Hence, what could emerge from the conference, are new insights into an intellectual culture not to be judged against the well-known narratives of the Enlightenment, but to be evaluated in its attempt to reinvent tradition.

The conference will take place at the University of Vienna, Universitätsring 1, 1010 Wien, Oct. 11th–13th 2018. The organizers are applying for funding to reimburse travel and accommodation costs. Please send an abstract to ines.peper@univie.ac.at by Dec. 31st 2017.