

23rd World Congress of Philosophy

Athens, August 4–10, 2013

Philosophers and philosophy-lovers rejoiced in the possibility to connect and intensely share their experiences about research and teaching for more than a week of philosophical cornucopia: the twenty-third *World Congress of Philosophy* took place in Athens, Greece, from the 4th to the 10th of August 2013. The WCP is a quinquennial event organized by the International Federation of Philosophical Societies (Fédération Internationale des Sociétés de Philosophie – FISP) and one of its member societies. Thus, last year’s Congress’s Organizational Committee, the Hellenic Organising Committee, consisted of members of the Hellenic Philosophical Society. The topic of this major philosophical symposium was “Philosophy as Inquiry and Way of Life”/“Philosophie comme questionnement et mode de vie”.

Through the inspirational idea that an unexamined life is not worth living, the Congress had several goals and multiple objectives coalescing into the two-fold understanding of philosophy as wonder and as a manner of living. The wondering, the seeking for answers, the amazement, the quest, on one side; and the ways of leading an examined, self-reflective life as a passionate reaction to that wonder on another side, make the philosophical work essential for the authentic self-affirmation of the lovers of wisdom, and goodness, and beauty, and truth.

Set in the sacred setting for philosophy, the Athens *World Congress of Philosophy* aimed at a fruitful connecting of scholars and teachers from all over the world in the spirit of examining philosophy as a necessary theory and an unavoidable practice. The role of philosophy in the contemporary world was appraised both by analysis of different philosophical traditions and by cross-cultural comparisons of what these various traditions offer. The place philosophy has in the contemporary multicultural world been examined also through its abilities to serve as a back-ground for intellectual endeavours, and as a connective tissue bridging versatile disciplines, enabling them to productively coexist. Pondering the possibilities of philosophical involvement in a rapidly changing world characterised by an intense socio-economic stratification and technological advancement, one of the goals of the Congress was to offer an overview of the responsibilities of philosophers in the present. The modalities for a more intense participation in the public sphere were also heavily considered.

The general topic of the Congress was developed in four Plenary Sessions (“Philosophical Method”, “Philosophy and the Sciences”, “Philosophy as Practical Wisdom” and “Philosophy and Public Life”); seven Symposia (“The Relevance of Ancient Greek Philosophy Today”, “Eros”, “Philosophy and Religions”, “Art and Cultures”, “Technology and the Environment”, “Current Trends in Epistemology” and “Philosophy in Modern and Contemporary Greece”); four Endowed Lectures; four Special Philosophical Sessions; over sixty Invited Sessions and seventy-five Thematic Sections for Contributed

Papers; as well as in Round Table discussions; lively Student Sessions; busy Society Meetings and Poster sessions. The modest, cool rooms of the venue, the huge, concrete building of Athens' School of Philosophy, located in the Cemetery District of Athens proved to be an excellent setting for intense philosophical discussions. The distant sparkling of the sea and the effervescent sparkle of experiences and ideas in the School of Philosophy merged into an inspirational setting wired with passionate dialogue and friendly sharing of opinions. The Special Sessions were held in the ruins of places Socrates, Plato and Aristotle walked and worked. The overwhelming sensation of connectedness with the very source, the very core of philosophy was ever-present during the Congress. It was intensified, however, in these Special Sessions that took place in the remains of Plato's Academy and of Aristotle's Lyceum, as well as on top of the hill of Pnyx and the Assembly of the People, which is the birth place of democracy, and at the setting of Plato's *Phaedro*. The pressing concern that the archaeological excavations of Plato's Academy in the garden still dotted with olive-trees are being endangered by a potential shopping mall was raised both by protesting local residents during the Special Session, and by members of FISP during the General Assembly, prompting for protection of this sacred place of the philosophical past and present.

This intricate and meticulously outlined structure of the Congress offered the possibility to tackle hundreds of problems and express thousands of ideas. Mainstream topics were pluriperspectively analysed, and somewhat "exotic" ones were made accessible and fun. The growing, prodding concerns about current inequalities and injustices in the world were expressed and the ways in which philosophy can help to better understand and possibly resolve them contemplated. But also more light-hearted explorations were present, like those of the place of humour in philosophy, or imagery, philosophy and play. Prestigious lectures by famous theoreticians were given, but also tentative expositions of young scholars' research encouraged.

One of today's most famous philosophers, Jürgen Habermas, was supposed to give a lecture at an Honorary Session on "Cosmopolitanism", but he explained that, albeit considering himself the last person who would feel uneasy expanding on the topic, he would prefer to focus on the demanding perspective of constitutionalisation of international law. Cosmopolitanism, according to Habermas, unless it confronts the issues of expansion of the merits and achievements of the constitutional state, or their transnationalisation, is a loose conception failing to address the main problems of legally taming and channelling political power beyond the nation state. Instead he focused on the constitutional problems apparent in the European Union, showing the two trends in modern European history – the constellation of political power and of law which is shifting together with the change in substance of the state power. Habermas also tackled the problem of the position of the individual in a world of inter-connected nation-states, and the possibility of forming a world constitutional order without founding a sort of world government. However, the democratic legitimating process would go across national boundaries to a community with political power and legitimacy beyond the nation state only when it will become possible to differently combine the three building blocks, constitutive for every democratic system within a supranational system, which are the people (the bearer of political will-formation), the state (the organisation enabling the collective action of its members), and the legally constituted community of citizens, conceived as community of equal, free individuals. Diagnosing one of the main problems of the European

Union as the crisis-propelling conflict between justice and solidarity, Habermas dissected it under the banner of the importance of relationships between individuals: while justice needs institutions to endure, solidarity is about inter-connectedness and shared interests between individuals, who not need be bound by formal arrangements in institutional contexts. The more democratic a political system is, the more solidarity, flourishes, albeit it being a moral, rather than a political value.

Another star of contemporary philosophy, the Italian philosopher Umberto Eco, was supposed to deliver the prestigious Maimonides Lecture, but was unfortunately absent due to poor health and unable to appear via Skype, so his address, accompanied by a formidable-looking photograph of him sporting his signature fedora was read out by William McBride.

The questions about philosophy in the public sphere gravitated around the idea of philosophy for all, and the concern whether it means that philosophy should be accessible to everyone, which is growing increasingly easier now that philosophical sources and events are being made much more public thanks to the internet, or that it should mean that philosophy should drop the alleged pretence of exclusivity and be stubbornly, relentlessly, almost violently put out there into the world, to everyone, no exceptions (and whether that is a plausible conception).

At the General Assembly, a hopeful trend of involvement of more philosophical (and related) societies from more corners of the world was made obvious, a geographical shift that defocuses from Europe and expands southward. As the next venue for the Congress was being decided in a tense atmosphere, a choice between Rio de Janeiro and Beijing (the Beijing philosophers won the vote, basking on their experiences in planning huge events), certain concerns were raised about the obstacles philosophers from some countries never cease to face at an international scale – the inability to freely travel and work being some of them.

As it always happens with philosophy – where questions are more important than answers, the main topic remained unsettled, so did the questions raised in the hundreds individual lectures, symposia, and discussions. Should philosophy as inquiry overshadow the importance of philosophy as practice in a world plagued by conflicts and discrepancies, or should a philosophical mediation and arbitration of such conflicts be deemed more important than its metaphysical, contemplative, esoteric or even acroamatic functions? Should philosophy be kept separate from the modern-day agora, kept preciously safe in meetings of philosophical societies and at philosophical symposia, be they as massive events with four thousand participants, as this Congress? More importantly, can philosophy afford (and is that even possible) to be separate from the public sphere, now that the contact with philosophers is not limited to town squares where youth gather, but knowledge of whole world lies at the tip of the fingers and only a few clicks away? The issues of philosophy in the contemporary world are issues of philosophers in the contemporary world – of *their* goals and hopes. Philosophy is, undoubtedly, a philosophy of its own time, and philosophers are people of their own epoch. Maybe it is true that, as by the words of Luca M. Scarantino during his address at the FISP General Assembly, the success of the 23rd Congress can be summed up in the words “we are here” (“nous y voici”). But where is “here”? Cosily between friends and colleagues, or anywhere and everywhere? Philosophers should be there, out in the world, engaged, passionate, unearthing untruths and unmask-

ing injustices, there, out in the world, in the continuing pursuit of wisdom, and goodness and beauty.

The 23rd *World Congress of Philosophy* was an organisational, theoretical, practical success, but only by what is done between congresses can the true worth of philosophy be shown and acknowledged.

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