

Seminar SAW

Exploring 19th and 20th centuries historiographies of mathematics in the ancient world, 2015-2016

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Jesuit Philosophers-Mathematicians and the Aristotelian Tradition

Abstract – My talk in the forum of the SAW project concerned the positions taken by Jesuit educators in the 17th century towards the traditions of knowledge they were embedded in: in particular that of Aristotle and Aristotelianism. Modern historians tend to interpret commitment to the tradition in terms of a demand for obedience to authorities that oppresses innovation. My reading of the mechanisms by which the discourse on Aristotle was transformed in the 17th century has led me to question such modern interpretations and to emphasize the "dialectics of tradition" and its transformative effects.

The dynamics of a living tradition I tried to reconstruct was presented in my paper through a specific example: the case of Paolo Casati's *Mechanicorum Libri Octo* (1684), a monumental "Summa" of pre-classical mechanical knowledge. I then tried to reconceptualize the attitude of Jesuits to their tradition, following Hanna Arendt's meditation on prejudices against the tradition and the loss of access to our ancestors' experiences. Our history, Arendt claimed, has been shaped by a series of disruptions such as the scientific revolution; the French revolution; the industrial revolution; but mainly by the catastrophic wars of the twentieth century. These have totally destroyed our ability to understand tradition as "the guiding thread through the past and the chain to which each new generation knowingly or unknowingly was bounded in its understanding of the world and its own experience". (Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 22) Indeed, according to Arendt, interpreting new experiences in the light of previous traditions requires figures of authority to play the role of adults in keeping up a public space for education. But this does not necessarily mean an obstacle to innovation. Innovation often grows from discovering a previously unrecognized connection of the present to the past, or simply from representing the past in the present. These acts of re-connecting and representing then construe a network of human relationship that protects a common world. At the same time, new connections, and failure to transmit old ones exercise a transformative force on the tradition itself. It is thus not true to conceive of tradition simply in terms of oppression and negation.