

CIPSH World Conference in the Humanities Liège 2017

Background

The World Conference in the Humanities, which took place at Liège on 7-11 August 2017, was the product (mainly) of a partnership between CIPSH (the Conseil Internationale pour la Philosophie et les Sciences Humaines/International Council for Philosophy and the Human Sciences), UNESCO, and the University, town and province of Liège. The conference was announced at the XXXII CIPSH General Assembly in Beijing in December 2015. This was a very late date to announce a major cross-disciplinary conference and it was unclear to many how far the organizers could succeed. In fact though there were problems, especially with the information flow, the event went off (from the participants' perspective) smoothly. There was some uncertainty whether FIEC would be involved and on what scale, since initially the organizers offered no financial support and the cost of running a panel would make a disproportionate impact on FIEC's limited resources. In the event, money was found to support some participants and the priority given to FIEC meant that participation was virtually cost-free for us.

Scale and attendance

The official figure for the overall attendance is approximately 1,000, though as often with such events the actual figure at any time was considerably lower, since delegates were arriving and leaving at different points in the schedule. In terms of organizations, there was a substantial presence from history, languages, (some) philosophy, anthropology, religion, cultural heritage management. Languages were present essentially *as* languages, i.e. with little or no emphasis on literary studies. Creative texts prose and verse were absent. Likewise film studies and drama were invisible. Demographically Africa and the Far East were heavily represented, with Europeans and North Americans in the minority. These are my own estimates, not official figures.

Format

The format was familiar to FIEC, a mixture of plenary sessions (at least one per day) and parallel panels. The large number of parallel sessions meant that attendance was often very low even at sessions (such as those on decolonialization) which might have been expected to attract large numbers. The length of the day, with sessions continuing usually up till 8 pm, probably contributed to this, since one result may well have been seminar-fatigue. Possibly also with such diverse subjects in play people may have been cherry-picking sessions with very specific interest for them. Frequently of course the value of a conference is in the interaction outside of the presentations, especially in an event like this. So low numbers at any given session need not cause concern.

Focus and content

What follows reflects my own experience of the event. With hundreds of papers one individual could only attend a few, with the result that any synopsis is both highly subjective and fragmentary. I did however get to a range of sessions. The conference themes were prompted by the list of challenges identified by UNESCO for 'a planet in transition' and were as follows:

1. humans and environment;
2. cultural identities, cultural diversities and intercultural relations;
3. tangible and intangible heritage;
4. borders and migrations;
5. history/memory/politics;
6. scholarly work in a changing context.

The general description from CIPSH in advance of the conference stated:

'Until the Second World War, Humanities were at the heart of both the public debate and the political arena. In recent years, their part has faded and they have been marginalized. It is crucial to stop their marginalization, restore them and impose their presence in the public sphere as well as in science policies.'

There were therefore two main dimensions to the conference: i. the contribution which the Humanities can make at the level of public policy; ii. support for and challenges faced by the Humanities. As FIEC noted when the call for papers was being formulated, elements which would usually feature in a Humanities conference programme — research methods, developments and outcomes — were largely absent, and another such element, pedagogy, had only a limited presence. FIEC had sought at the draft stage to open up the texture of the programme to allow content-driven sections/sessions and CIPSH were responsive to the suggestions. And even the themes selected allowed opportunity to explore contemporary issues through a historical lens or through literary texts of visual/performative media. However, a conference has a momentum of its own and the emphasis on responses to contemporary challenges in the further particulars inevitably meant that a minority of papers were devoted to specific research questions and methods.

Nonetheless, the intellectual level of what I heard was uniformly high, certainly much higher than in the CIPSH General Assembly in Beijing. I found some of the papers fascinating, especially those from Africa. The plenary lecture I would single out was Paul Shrivastava, *Future earth*.

Classics/FIEC participation

Though FIEC through its website and through Classicist List advertised the programme, presence from Classics was limited. Professor Ølvind Andersen on behalf of the International Union of Academies (IUA) organized a panel on large databases such as the Corpus Vasorum, and one or two researchers in classical fields contributed to other panels. FIEC presented a panel on new approaches to ancient texts on 10 August, specifically (like Prof Andersen's panel) designed to explore the marriage between ancient texts and modern technologies in order to stress the dynamism of Classics as a field. The FIEC panel was devoted to the use of modern imaging technologies to recover and make accessible otherwise unreadable texts (such as the Herculaneum papyri). The speakers were Dr Kathryn Piquette of UCL, a trained Egyptologist and an expert in the creation and use of digital resources, Professor Bob Fowler of Bristol, who has played a major role in the Herculaneum project, and myself (relating to my work on the Hypereides palimpsest). Attendance was sparse, as with so many of the panel presentations. With hindsight one can see that the advance presentation could have been more sexy, though it is uncertain whether this would have made a major difference. CIPSH have asked all panel chairs for a text relating to the panels they ran for online publication and I am optimistic that this will give FIEC a more pronounced presence in the continuing footprint. I would like to record my thanks to my two colleagues for their contribution, especially at such short notice.

I attended for almost four of the five days and so was involved in a number of other aspects of the programme. At Luiz Oosterbeek's request I joined the plenary panel on *History, Memory and Politics* on 8 August. I also participated on behalf of FIEC in a plenary session about CIPSH and its member organizations which introduced the offering of each organization and the shared opportunities and challenges, though probably the ultimate aim was team building. CIPSH had been relatively inactive for some time. It is now under its current General Secretary seeking a more dynamic role for itself (as witnessed by this conference) and the creation of a sense of solidarity is (understandably) an important part of the immediate agenda, especially as the membership is growing. CIPSH (as FIEC proposes) revised its criteria for membership (though in a different way), specifically to allow expansion and enhance reach. The expansion is especially visible in the east, where Chinese involvement (and subsequently influence) is the most striking.

I also participated in a session devoted to a proposed CIPSH project. Part of the process of consolidation noted above consists in seeking large scale projects. The one currently planned is a global history of mankind. Discussion was lively but the proposal was broadly welcomed, though with individual reservations and concerns about the need to address some challenging questions about planning and implementation. There are a number of largescale competitors in this field and the project would have to be very carefully scoped in order to make a difference. It would also need to be very carefully thought through in terms of process, since the plan is to publish online and follow up with print publication. The management process will also be demanding, giving the competing interests in play. And the resources needed would be considerable. But those involved are talking to publishers and others about these issues and the plan will certainly go ahead in some form. And both the process and the outcome will be interesting.

Overall

The official resume of the outcomes can be found at <http://www.humanities2017.org/fr/content/un-nouvel-agenda-pour-les-humanites-au-xxieme-siecle>. What follows is simply my own view. Measured against its goals I think the conference can be judged a firm success. I would myself have preferred to see more emphasis on research content, since this seems to me the best way to showcase what the Humanities have to offer (on the 'medium is the message' principle). And I think the emphasis on policy tended to sideline the contribution of the Humanities to the public good and to public awareness through education and the media. But as a first step in raising the international profile of the Humanities collectively it worked well. And it proved that the General Secretary, Prof Oosterbeek, can establish important links with the international agencies. FIEC has understandably questioned the value of its relationship with CIPSH in the past. But the growth in CIPSH suggests that it may offer a useful umbrella for networking across the Humanities and we have much to gain from being part of that. The move toward specific cross-disciplinary projects suggests that here too the Classics may benefit from the link, especially if they come with appropriate funding.

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