

# Giambattista Vico's Universal Right: a cross-disciplinary and transcultural perspective



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When:  
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Where:  
Room B112.B – School of Arts and Humanities  
University of Lisbon

On Zoom: <https://videoconf-colibri.zoom.us/j/98002599685?pwd=QmtDSkgyU1V0c2tVbzNjYUg1OHpSdz09>

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## Giambattista Vico's Universal Right a cross-disciplinary and transcultural perspective

Giambattista Vico has lived many different lives, often at odds the one with the other. He has been a theorist of historical and environmental change who explained the physiology of human civilization. In the nineteenth century, he held a spot among the philosophers of history even becoming, to the likes of Jules Michelet and Benedetto Croce, a forerunner of Hegelian historicism. Vico's career continued with renewed energy in the twentieth century, providing inspiration to discourses ideologically ranging from Marxism to traditionalist conservatism. Vico's thought played a role in the theoretical foundation of structuralism, specifically in the field of literature and anthropology. By the early 1920s, Erich Auerbach was fascinated by Vico's architectural imagination. A different take on the same author sparked the curiosity of thinkers as different from Auerbach as Robin G. Collingwood and Isaiah Berlin. An anti-Cartesian Vico dominated the 1970s and 1980s, with this great revival of his fortune in a post-modern light stretching to the 1990s. Arguably, the famous 1968 symposium, the acts of which appeared in a volume edited by Giorgio Tagliacozzo and Hayden White, kickstarted this last Vico's renaissance. White went on using Vico as a cornerstone of his *Metahistory*, roughly in the same years when the Neapolitan thinker found a new, and unexpected, lease on life in Edward Said's postcolonial theory.

Those interpretations of Vico, often a far call from the images of the same philosopher produced by the Italian, French and, in a minor way, German tradition in the history of philosophy, resulted eventually in the globalisation of Vico's thought. This global Vico entered South America and East Asia, becoming a presence in the local cultural debates. One can find traces of Vico so far away from home that, by the 1990s his name pops up even in writings by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (*Machines and Living Things*, but one could argue that already *Autopoiesis and Cognition* was a fundamentally Vichian work). It is within that period that most of Vico's work saw new and broadly accessible translations, from Leon Pompa's in 1982 up to the first ever English version of *The Universal Right* (Giorgio Pinton, Margaret Diehl) in 2000. The latter ideally marks a turning point in this later Vico's revival, which symbolically ebbed away with the closure of the iconic journal *New Vico Studies* (1983-2009).

After the translation of the esoteric and complex *Universal Right*, a work that Vico had published between 1720 and 1722, this last wave of "Vico studies" seems to have subsided. Nevertheless, from then on, studies on the Neapolitan philosopher worldwide have enjoyed if not an ulterior broadening a deepening of their scope. To the point that, recently, even a Japanese translation by Uemura Tadao of the *Universal Right* in Japanese came out of the press, which implies a significant level of conceptual and linguistic elaboration in order to transfer in *kanji* characters the still unstable notions of the eighteenth century work. At the same time, in Europe as well, both in the more traditional milieu of the history of philosophy and in that of political philosophy, Vico continues to be alive and well, and, most importantly, always more accurately contextualised as a scholar of his own age and city. In this sense, the Vico we are examining today is both more than ever the son of his own context and a universal intellectual property of humanity. On the one hand, Vico, even among the non-specialists, is no more just his *Scienza nuova* as an abstract piece of philosophical writing. From this perspective, such result owes much to the decades-long work of the Centro di Studi Vichiani (Then ISPF) in bridging the rigorous and philological study of the text with the dissemination of Vico's thought among a wider public.

Considering this long process of perspectives' multiplication, we do not gather in this workshop merely to reiterate a question, which is nonetheless necessary to pose at regular intervals: what about Vico today? More specifically, inviting together so different a group of speakers, we want to inquire in the ways in which this multifaceted Vico has been crossing geographical, historical, disciplinary, and cultural borders. Looking back at Vico's long hermeneutical history, we aim at recognising the different paths which have brought us to him and ask ourselves: can we recognise each one in the Vico of the other?