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***Anthropology beyond empires. Samuel Stanhope Smith and the
reconfiguration of the Atlantic world.***

Monday 21 January, 5 p.m.: Old Combination Room, Trinity College

The author

Silvia Sebastiani is maître de conférences (Associate Professor) at the École des hautes études en Sciences Sociales in Paris, where she teaches seminars on *Historiographies des Lumières*; *La race à l'âge moderne* and *État, empire et circulation des savoirs dans les mondes britanniques*. She is member of the editorial board of *Modern Intellectual History*. Her book on *I limiti del progresso. Razza e genere nell'Illuminismo scozzese* (Il Mulino, 2008) has been translated into English, with revisions, and will appear in the next months with the title of *The Scottish Enlightenment. Race, Gender, and the Limits of Progress* (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2013). Her current research focuses on the Enlightenment debate on race and history-writings in the Atlantic world, from Scotland through Mexico and United States. A first article of this new project has been published in the *Annales* a few months ago (67/2, 2012): “L’Amérique des Lumières et la hiérarchie des races. Disputes sur l’écriture de l’histoire dans l’*Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1768-1788)” and is available in English in j-store as « Enlightenment America and the Hierarchy of Races. Disputes Over the Writing of History in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1768-1788)”.

The paper

In 1810 the Presbyterian Reverend Samuel Stanhope Smith, Principal at the College of New Jersey (Princeton), published the second American edition of what has been defined as “the most ambitious and the best known American treatise on physical anthropology” in the Eighteenth century (J. C. Greene): *An Essay on the Causes of the Variety of Complexion and Figure in the Human Species*. Initially published in Philadelphia in 1787, it was reprinted in London in the same year, while a new edition appeared in Edinburgh in 1788, introduced and annotated by the American physician Benjamin Smith Barton.

The concurrent study of the three editions of this text and the entangled analysis of their different agencies allows to shape a new Atlantic and trans-imperial perspective in the understanding of the emergence of western racial anthropology. The importance of Smith's *Essay* does not depend on its original approach to the topic. It lies in its capacity to appropriate the Enlightenment debate about the "science of man" and to reformulate it for postcolonial America and its political framework. Within the context of a slave society, such it was the American one, where an increasing anti-slavery movement was taking shape, the debate on human diversity was transformed into a dispute about the inferiority of human races vs. the equality of human beings.

As President of the College of New Jersey, Smith was instrumental in placing the question of race at the centre of the academic curricula—Moral Philosophy, Medicine, and Natural History—, in a moment in which they were under construction. He took part in the process of reframing disciplines, in close dialogue – and polemics – with Britain, where many American students continued to be trained. Benjamin Smith Barton, who studied Medicine in Edinburgh and from 1789 taught Natural History, Botany, Materia Medica and the Practice of Physics at the College of Philadelphia (later University of Pennsylvania), is a case in point: he both diffused Smith's *Essay* in Europe, and brought the European classifications of human race, together with the new attention to antiquities, to the United States.

Smith's work thus provides an opportunity to understand the production of racial knowledge through its circulation across the Atlantic world, and to connect the social history of early modern colonialism and the intellectual history of racial knowledge. It also allows to trace the fluctuating and unstable semantics of "race" at the end of the Eighteenth century.

Related Literature

Primary

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