



**Call for Papers: Reframing the Enlightenment. Intellectual and political disputes today**  
**Conference of the International Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (ISECS)**

**Paris, 10–12 June 2026, German Historical Institute Paris, Collège de France, Maison de la recherche de la Faculté des Lettres de Sorbonne Université**

Early career scholars in particular are warmly invited to submit proposals for papers for this interdisciplinary conference on the current debate surrounding the Enlightenment. The conference will focus on the question of how research into the historical Enlightenment and contemporary references to or critiques of the Enlightenment challenge each other.

Proposals for papers, including a half-page explanation of the topic, a short CV, and assignment to one of the three sections listed below, should be sent to the President of ISECS/SIEDS by 26 October: [daniel.fulda@germanistik.uni-halle.de](mailto:daniel.fulda@germanistik.uni-halle.de). Travel and accommodation costs are expected to be covered by the organisers. The conference languages are English and French.

**Why this conference?**

Both ISECS and most of its member societies were founded when the Enlightenment movement of the 18<sup>th</sup> century enjoyed the highest reputation among scholars and perhaps even more so in society: as fighters for freedom of thought and self-determination, as advocates of progress and as pioneers of a democratic society. This of course was a view that experts always knew to be idealising, but it suited the mood of the democratisation push in Western societies and beyond in the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since around the turn of the millennium, the winds of scholars's and society's favour towards the Enlightenment have changed. Today, it seems that the society that the Enlightenment thinkers envisioned has not been realized. We are still facing fundamental inequalities: namely a power imbalance between the sexes, between elites and the people, between Europeans and the »rest« of the world. Some exponents of the post-colonial agenda see the Enlightenment, not only in its racial doctrines but also in its standards of rationality, primarily as a justification of European colonial domination and exploitation. On the other side of the political spectrum, the Enlightenment is also criticised by those who see it as an arbitrary destruction of traditions or the self-serving empowerment of a small group of the intellectual elite. The current situation can be summarised in a variation of Jonathan Israel's well-known book title: »Enlightenment contested again«.

Anyone studying the 18<sup>th</sup> century is doubly challenged by this development. Firstly, the research in the 18<sup>th</sup> century is not unaffected by the respective social conditions. Secondly, the experts of the 18<sup>th</sup>

century are able to substantially contribute to current debates on the role of the Enlightenment in the history of humanity. Organizing a conference, titled »Reframing the Enlightenment / Le défi des Lumières«, ISECS is consciously taking on these challenges. This conference reflects the contemporary context in which we conduct our research and takes a well-founded position on the assessment of the Enlightenment in today's debates based on our research. The focus of the contributions should therefore be both on the historical subjects and on the assessment of the Enlightenment in our present day. The aim of the conference is to overcome the too simple positioning oneself either for or against the Enlightenment and to emphasise the complexity of both the Enlightenment as a historical phenomenon and its legacy for the present and the future.

Co-organisers, alongside ISECS (represented by its President Prof. Daniel Fulda, Halle): German Historical Institute Paris (Dr. Christine Zabel); Chaire d'Histoire des Lumières, XVIII<sup>e</sup>–XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle, Collège de France (Prof. Dr. Antoine Lilti); Société Française d'Étude du Dix-huitième Siècle (Prof. Christophe Martin), Bibliothèque Polonaise de Paris (Prof. Dr. Maciej Forycki); Prof. Florence Magnot-Ogilvy (Sorbonne Nouvelle); Prof. Dr. Chunjie Zhang (University of California, Davis)

### **The conference will focus primarily on the following topics.**

1. Social privileges and exclusions: Who makes and benefits from the Enlightenment? Is it a problem that the Enlightenment was mainly designed and carried out by white men and their supporters? Or is that not true at all?
2. How do we negotiate between acknowledging the postcolonial critique and making use of the Enlightenment legacy for the thorny issue of contemporary migration and related human rights? How do we navigate between the request to »provincialize« Europe and the Enlightenment and the potential to reframe the Enlightenment for greater global justice?
3. Epistemological questions: Was there any enlightenment at all or is it just a retrospective construct, driven by political interests and too willingly supported by research?

Brief explanations of the resulting three sections follow.

### **I. Did the Enlightenment promote Equality or Elitism?**

The Enlightenment is regarded as the foundation of modern, liberal democracy, particularly by the wider public (Pinker), but also by many scholars (Israel, Padgen). The political principles of the revolutionaries in North America and France are not the only ones in mind, but also more general values that were advocated by Enlightenment thinkers in other countries, such as the general gift of reason and the dignity of each individual, equality before the law and religious tolerance. Until the Atlantic revolutions, however, reality had little in common with these ideas, as all European societies of the 18<sup>th</sup> century were estates-based societies; social inequality, not equality, was a main principle. The estate into which someone was born largely determined their life chances. And what is more, many authors of the Enlightenment cultivated a very elitist habitus and sought the applause of the privileged; they often had nothing but contempt and derision for the uneducated (Lilti). Most Enlightenment protagonists were far from the

idea that society could and should be remodelled in such a way that all people could live self-determined lives.

In important respects, so the recently mounting accusation goes, the Enlightenment even reinforced social hierarchies or created new ones. Taking care of public affairs was assigned to men alone, just as Europeans (or at least some of them) saw themselves called upon to civilise the world as a whole. It would therefore not be enough to continue the historical Enlightenment where it had not worked »enough« towards equality. Rather, anthropology and the social vision of the Enlightenment must be fundamentally revised, because they are supposedly characterised by hierarchies that privilege rationality, masculinity, »whiteness« and property (Dhawan).

Enlightenment research can respond to this in different ways. Firstly, this criticism is not always well informed historically. It is often based on a one-sided rationalist image of the Enlightenment, orientated towards »great« male thinkers, which has long been outdated in research, and does not do justice to the diversity of positions developed by the enlighteners, from elitist to egalitarian. In addition to differentiation, historicisation is also required: It is hardly possible for authors of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to do justice to today's ideas of equality and equity; rather, where this is expected, there is a danger of anachronistically distorting the image of the historical Enlightenment. For historical insight does not consist in recognising the present in the past, but in reconstructing the process that took place between the two. What the Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century »achieved« is to be measured by the impulses for change that it gave to the subsequent development, which continues to this day (Robertson).

At one central point, however, it is difficult to relativise the criticism of enlightenment formulated from an ideal of equality. After all, doesn't »enlightenment« always require a disparity between those who are to be enlightened and those who can pursue enlightenment because they are at least a little more enlightened? Emancipation presupposes both an emancipation deficit and an emancipation effort that has at least begun, without which this deficit would not be recognised and could be combated. As much as it would be a reduction to understand enlightenment as an inevitably paternalistic endeavour (and therefore to declare it contradictory), the difference between knowledge and non-knowledge or, to put it more cautiously, more and less knowledge, i.e. a relationship of inequality, is fundamental to it. If this is the case, however, we can ask the egalitarian critics of the Enlightenment the counter-question of whether they are not placing themselves in the position of knowing better and therefore being entitled to criticise.

Consequently, the standard by which the Enlightenment is accused of being stuck in a variety of inequalities also deserves critical reflection (McMahon). Although the ideal of equality enjoys almost self-evident validity in democratic modernity, it itself produces contradictions. Accordingly, there are fierce debates in today's societies about which inequalities should be prioritised: those between men and women, those between the rich North and the global South, or those between the privileged and the disadvantaged within the still relatively prosperous countries in which the Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century emerged?

Possible guiding questions for contributions on this complex of topics are:

- In what form or under what conditions did the enlightenment protagonists accept social inequality? Or did they reject it?
- Is there a connection between the Enlightenment's critique of privilege within European societies and the Europeans' growing sense of superiority over other parts of the world during and after the Enlightenment?

- How participatory or how authoritative was the Enlightenment in its practical realisations? Was the Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (mostly) an elite endeavour?
- How much »pedagogical authority« is inevitably part of enlightenment, and this not only when children are the addressees? What dangers and opportunities does it harbour?
- How should the academic elites, of which Enlightenment studies are a part, respond to the fact that in Western societies today they are subject to strong political attacks that accuse them of elitist arrogance? How can the claim to generating and imparting knowledge be defended against the accusation that the academic elites are using their enlightened self-image to secure a principally superior position of speaking?
- How must enlightenment be organised today in order to have the greatest possible impact? Which audiences are important and which social groups should be targeted?
- How inclusive are Enlightenment studies? What biases and blind spots result from the fact that they have long been a male and Western-white academic discipline and still are to some extent? Should and can this be counteracted?

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## **II. Enlightenment, Migration, and Global Justice**

»Why Nations Fail?« is the key question raised by two Nobel laureates in economics (2024) in their influential book about power, poverty, and prosperity. These themes have also remained central for post-colonial and poststructuralist critique since the late 1970s. As much as the European eighteenth century was a key historical period in colonial history, the Enlightenment has emerged as a primary intellectual resource as well as a target for postcolonial and decolonial scholarship, revealing Orientalism and misrepresentations of non-European cultures in the Western tradition of thinking and practice. In particular, scholars have contested the question about whether and how the Enlightenment intellectual legacy has ideologically legitimized the enterprise of colonialism and philosophically endorsed Western imperialist expansionism in Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas. For example, Immanuel Kant has been often regarded as the inventor of the Enlightenment idea of race and the founder of racism in modern philosophy and beyond. In a moralizing tone, the »color of reason« seems to adamantly redefine the Enlightenment program of rationalism, universalism, and freedom as logocentrism and Eurocentrism. Democracy seems to be only reserved for the few ruling elites and their allies. At the same time, Kant's insistence on the universality of ethics, or the metaphysics of morals, has inadvertently provided the philosophical foundation for this criticism.

Moreover, Kant's understanding of teleology in the discourse of race is deeply entwined with the rise of historicism, the teaching of the development of cultures and nations from lower to higher stages. While historicism is inherently associated with eighteenth-century thinkers such as Voltaire or Johann Gottfried Herder, Herder is recognized for his critique of colonial violence, slavery, and hegemony. Yet it is undeniable that historicist thinking has become more prominent through thinkers of the next generations including Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Karl Marx. It still serves as one of the pillars for developmentalist thinking in today's global political economy. Poststructuralist and postcolonial efforts to question the legitimacy of the singularity of origin and historicist hierarchy has theoretically challenged historicism. Facing contemporary crises and warfare, we realize that more things need to be achieved than postmodern deconstruction. Indeed, less-discussed aspects of Enlightenment thinking about ethics, human duties (and rights), climate theory, hospitality, sociability, movement, the soul, and spirituality could be made more fruitful for our contemporary debate on democracy, migration, and justice. The strength and the energy of postcolonial and poststructuralist critique of the Enlightenment in sociohistorical and philosophical-cultural realms could be channeled toward a broader discussion about migration and justice in the global context.

A section of the proposed conference devoted to the questions about migration and justice promises a lively discussion about Enlightenment legacy and contemporary challenges. Keynote speakers for this section could be Lea Ypi, Jonathan Israel, Simon Gikandi, or Felicity Nussbaum.

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### III. Did »the Enlightenment« ever exist?

Recently, some scholars have raised doubts about the existence of the Enlightenment. To speak of »the Enlightenment«, they argue, assumes a coherent movement with uniform goals, whereas, in the reality of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there were very different and often conflicting ideas of reform that we latecomers summarise with the term »Enlightenment«. We would have to differentiate between countries, languages and denominations, perhaps also between professional groups and genders, and could therefore at best speak of »enlightenments« in the plural (Pocock). Furthermore, it is pointed out that the epochal term »enlightenment« only became common in most languages after the Second World War, fuelled by a new need in Western democracies construing a prehistory that was no longer merely national (Clark). Thus, however, it is non-scientific purposes to which the term owes its career: to speak sympathetically of »the Enlightenment« serves to attach a »badge of moral superiority« and political progressiveness. Consequently, according to Clark, the term with a leading capital can no longer be saved for unbiased scholarly use. On the contrary, it tempts us to anachronistically project political values of our present day or, more precisely, of the liberal West onto the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

This critique builds on the self-reflection that Enlightenment studies have pursued by researching their own history and the history of the Enlightenment concept and discourse (Ricuperati, Schmale, Coppola, Cronk/Décultot). At the same time, it takes up argumentation techniques of »deconstruction« to give them a conservative twist. Enlightenment studies should not react allergically to this, even if it is attacked, but with a double clarification that is regarding to the socio-political context of our research as well the 18<sup>th</sup> century's usage of language: On the one hand, it is important to realise and to make explicit that research does indeed work in a context in which »Enlightenment« triggers highly positive or negative associations, and that scholar's work can therefore not be free of political implications, however methodologically sound they may proceed. On the other hand, it is by no means historically certain that the authors retrospectively labelled as enlighteners did not themselves already had an awareness of contributing to a movement that they imagined as the »Enlightenment«, even if they did not always call it that way, as has been customary since the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Research into the use of terms, metaphors and images with which the proponents of the Enlightenment identified themselves with like-minded people and opponents alike is still in its infancy. It promises to shed some light on the self-image of the enlighteners and the formation of the Enlightenment as a more or less coherent movement (Edelstein, Fulda).

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the English noun *enlightenment* still meant »religious enlightenment«, but the verb *to enlighten* and the adjective *enlightened* increasingly took on the new secular and reformist meaning.

The other European languages often had a much broader Enlightenment vocabulary, but this has only been researched to some extent for German (*aufklären, aufgeklärt, Aufklärung, Aufklärer*) and French (*éclairer, éclairé, lumières, philosophe*). In connection with these key words, we find the assertion early on in what is now known as the Age of Enlightenment that people were living in a new, namely »enlightened age«. As early as 1719, Abbé Dubos spoke of the »lumières que l'esprit Philosophique a répanduës sur nôtre siècle«. Despite their sometimes serious differences, various reform approaches were perceived as part of one movement, even across national borders – for example by Johann Christoph Gottsched. The synthesis of heterogeneity, which some accuse the retrospective talk of »the Enlightenment« of, already took place in the discourse of the historical actors.

On the basis of this debate and state of research, questions such as the following arise:

- What political interests and trends is the study of the Enlightenment subject to, and how do scholarly and political points of view depend on each other?
- How much grounding in historical usage should be demanded of historiographical terms? Does the legitimacy of a term such as »the Enlightenment« depend on its use by historical actors? Assuming that this is not the case, what does the historiographical term gain if it was already in historical use?
- How »elastic« can we imagine the term »Enlightenment« to be? How much difference between its historical and current meanings can the term tolerate?
- What follows from the fact that the key vocabulary of the Enlightenment usually had either a partial or even predominantly religious meaning in terms of its origins? This applies to *enlighten* and *lumières* as well as to *illuminato* (Italian), *ilustrado* (Spanish), *Verlichting* (Dutch), *Просвещение* [Prosveshcheniye] (Russian). Can it be understood as part of the Enlightenment's strategy of assertion that they appropriated a vocabulary and visual repertoire that was also used elsewhere and in part in an anti-Enlightenment way?
- Why was the Enlightenment vocabulary (and imagery?) so differently developed in different European regions? And what does this tell us about the character or the strengths and weaknesses of the Enlightenment in the different language areas?

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