



Sonderforschungsbereich 980

**EPISTEME IN  
BEWEGUNG**



**Academies:  
The Historiography of Learned Societies in the 'Age of Sociability'  
International Symposium**



**Organizers: *University College Roosevelt* (Utrecht University),  
*Sonderforschungsbereich 980 'Episteme in Bewegung'* (Freie Universität  
Berlin) and the *Koninklijk Zeeuwisch Genootschap der Wetenschappen***

**Middelburg (the Netherlands), 13-14 December, 2019  
UCR, (City-hall) Raadzaal**

**Academies:  
The Historiography of Learned Societies in the ‘Age of Sociability’  
International Symposium**

The eighteenth century is often referred to as the ‘age of sociability’, an idea that can be traced back to eighteenth century authors marvelling at the amount of ‘academies’ or, more generically, learned and literary societies, that were founded throughout Europe as well as in European colonies both in the East and the West. These authors (and later historians in their wake) tended to identify the rising tide of local, provincial and national learned/literary societies as a single and homogeneous phenomenon. They did so despite the striking variety of societal names, organizational structures, types of activities, and groups of members.

In writing histories of how the age of (learned) sociability came to be, historians often (unreflectively) take evidence and claims from the (long) eighteenth century as their starting point, while also working within an established paradigm of methodological nationalism. As a result, with only a few exceptions, writing European or even global syntheses of the history of learned sociability, from before the eighteenth century and from then on, has not yet been tried. James McClellan’s *Science Reorganized* published in 1985 remains one of the very few attempts to write a European history of the eighteenth-century phenomenon. It situates the academies in the history of the Scientific Revolution. Others have studied the academies from the perspective of the history of the Enlightenment. Since the 1980s no major shifts seem to have occurred in the study of the academies.

Writing transnational and long-term histories of academies is complicated due to the lack of a common framework for the comparative study of academies and their interactions. Thus, creating a sound working definition of the object of study remains one of the major challenges in the slowly emerging field of transnational histories of academies. Definitions that remain unreflectively grounded in eighteenth or (maybe more often) nineteenth century definitions of the phenomenon run the risk of tacitly accepting long-established genealogies and hierarchies of the academies. Before embarking upon further research, it seems crucial to investigate our categories of thought and *their* genealogies, and analyse attempts at writing histories of the phenomenon from the eighteenth century up until the present day.

Against this background, the organizers of this symposium have invited participants to reflect on the historiography of the (paradigmatic) eighteenth-century academies with a focus on 1) eighteenth century histories and genealogies, 2) later surveys and their implicit and explicit biases, 3) historiographical debates and controversies. The aim is to uncover genealogies, definitions, and categories as well as theoretical frameworks, and assess them critically as a first step towards a more rigorous definition of the object of study, and to identify the issues, questions, problems, hypotheses and certainties that drove the field so far in various national historiographies and in the emerging comparative/transnational ones.

## Friday, 13 December

9:00-9:15

Opening

Bert van den Brink (Dean University College Roosevelt) & Hugo Schorer (President *Koninklijk Zeeuwsch Genootschap der Wetenschappen*/ Royal Zeeland Society for the Arts and Sciences)

9:15-9:45

Anita Traninger (Freie Universität Berlin), Arjan van Dixhoorn (Utrecht University/UCR)

Introduction

### Session I

9:45-10:45

Martin Urmann (Freie Universität Berlin)

Theoretical and methodological debates in the current historiography of learned societies

10:45-11:15 Coffee break

11:15-12:15

Klaas van Berkel (University of Groningen)

The disciplinary mindset. Eighteenth-century Dutch academies in the historiography of the nineteenth century

12:15-13:15

Rienk Vermij (University of Oklahoma)

Re-evaluation of the historiographies of the learned societies in their relationship to (evolving) ideas about the Enlightenment

13:15-14:45 Lunch break (speakers only)

### Session II

14:45-17:00 Visit to the collections of the *Koninklijk Zeeuwsch Genootschap der Wetenschappen* (speakers only)

17:00-18:00

Caspar Hirschi (Universität St. Gallen)

The Académie française as historical model: controversies about equality in the Paris Académie des sciences

19:30 Conference Dinner (speakers only)

**Saturday, 14 December**

Session III

10:30-11:30

Elisabeth Décultot (Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg)

The Royal Academy of Berlin as viewed from France in the nineteenth century. On the *Histoire philosophique de l'Académie de Prusse* (1850-51) by Christian Bartholmès

11:30-12:30

Sebastian Kühn (Universität Hannover)

Manufactories of natural knowledge. Organizing and writing common action in eighteenth-century academies

12:30-14:00 Lunch break (speakers only)

Session IV

14:00-15:00

James McClellan (Stevens Institute of Technology)

The historiography of the academies: a personal journey

15:00-16:00 Concluding session: what's next?

**Discussants**

Isabelle Fellner (Freie Universität Berlin)

Hilde de Ridder-Symoens (emeritus Ghent University)