

**Emulation, Fame, and Knowledge Transfer:  
Prize Contests in the European Republic of Letters  
(1670–1800)**

International Conference

Collaborative Research Centre *Episteme in Motion*  
Freie Universität Berlin

13–15 July 2022

“Toute sorte de personnes de quelque qualité qu’elles soient, seront reçues à prétendre à ce prix” (“All sorts of persons, of whatever character they may be, will be allowed to take part in this prize contest”). This was one of the articles regulating essay competitions at the Académie française, attesting to their accessibility and openness. In their heyday in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, having been institutionalised by academies and learned societies all over Europe, such essay competitions attracted participants from diverse social strata and non-standard intellectual backgrounds. Even artisans and peasants took part in what was a relatively meritocratic medium, formally open to the general public regardless of social rank, gender, confession, or means. In France, the contests organised by state academies and judged on the basis of strict anonymity mobilized more than 12,000 participants between 1670 and 1793.

Some of the most renowned questions, for example the contest proposed by the Free Economic Society of St Petersburg on the property of peasants in 1766 or the question of how to prevent infanticide, sponsored by Ferdinand Adrian von Lamezan in Mannheim in 1780, found resonance all over Europe. Such debates, generated by the prize contests, established both a transnational public and a cross-European pool of participants. Royally sponsored academies were not the only institutions drawing on this public means of collective brainstorming and expertise-gathering. Prize contests were also organised by economic and patriotic societies, learned journals, universities, masonic lodges, and sometimes wealthy individual sponsors. Together they constituted a genre of public debate that can be regarded as a general cultural pattern in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Europe. Thematically ranging from poetry and eloquence to the natural sciences and history, prize contests covered the most significant fields of contemporary research and public interest.

Despite the central role this medium played in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century public sphere, it has received relatively little scholarly attention. Beyond Daniel Roche’s pioneering 1978 study of the French academies from a social history perspective, only Jeremy Caradonna’s monograph on the *concours académique* in France (2012) has been dedicated squarely to the topic. Other recent publications focus on single contests, specific themes, or (more usually) famous laureates such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau,

Madeleine de Scudéry, Cesare Beccaria, or Moses Mendelssohn. Prize contests were, however, the medium through which largely unknown authors could gain visibility in the Republic of Letters. The history of the competitions, their characteristic patterns and implicit rules remains to be written. Another aspect of the contests that requires focussed attention is the evolution of the literary genre of the prize essay itself.

*Emulation, Fame, and Knowledge Transfer* sets out to fill such gaps while examining the contests through new analytical and theoretical lenses. Contributors are encouraged to take into account the particular medial format of the competitions. What were the specific conditions of the genre from institutional, literary, or epistemic points of view? In what ways did the medium influence the message of the submitted essays? What were the specific modes and patterns of argumentation in contests focussed on different fields of knowledge? To what extent were submissions fact-oriented or influenced by the rhetorical tradition of agonistic argumentation?

At the same time, participants are encouraged to concentrate on new evidence by analysing individual competitions or authors and engaging in close readings of submitted essays. Particularly welcome are papers on contests in the ‘peripheries’ of the Republic of Letters and beyond Europe. Equally important are comparative approaches and transnational perspectives on the prize contests, which after all constituted a shared practice across countries and institutions. Another crucial aspect is gender: what were the differences, if any, between male and female motives for participation, approaches to the set themes, and patterns of authorship? Finally, can prize competitions be regarded as a medium of Enlightenment, given the attempt to produce impartial knowledge and promote reforms in different areas? How participatory and open was this medium?

Convenors: Avi Lifschitz (University of Oxford), Martin Urmann (Freie Universität Berlin)  
Venue: Collaborative Research Center “Episteme in Motion”, Freie Universität Berlin, Schwendenerstraße 8  
Date: 13–15 July 2022  
Contact: Martin Urmann, e-mail: martin.urmann@fu-berlin.de