



DFG-Research Training Group 2999/1

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# POLITICS OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg  
Interdisciplinary Centre for European Enlightenment Studies

First funding period:  
04/01/2025–03/31/2030

## “Politics of the Enlightenment” Research Training Group

The Research Training Group (RTG) examines the politics of the Enlightenment **from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to today**. Its approach is twofold: firstly, it asks – in terms of the *genitivus subjectivus* – how both the historical Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and also later Enlightenment enterprises think and act in a political sense. Secondly, it questions – in terms of the *genitivus objectivus* – how the conception of Enlightenment is constructed and perpetually renewed through political aims and decisions: **How does the Enlightenment shape politics? And how do politics shape the Enlightenment?**

The group addresses central concepts, narratives, images, and mental figures through which the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment shaped politics as well as the way in which “Enlightenment” and associated concepts have been understood from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century and deployed in political discussions. These perspectives form a factual correlation, for the politics of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment are more than a mere series of static views or assertions, i.e., the primacy of reason or justice: the Enlightenment was and remains a future-oriented project. On the other hand, looking back on this project, it has been interpreted in many different ways, both historically and as a general concept. This process has yet to reach its conclusion, as “Enlightenment,” unlike the names of most historical periods, is still a point of reference appropriated in political discourse.

Today, the **Enlightenment research** at the core of this RTG covers a wide spectrum, with excellent international networks and highly differentiated approaches (history of political thought, conceptual history, social history, cultural history). It considers and emphasizes the diversity, complexity, and inconsistency of the historical Enlightenment. Also frequently cited is the political momentum of the Enlightenment: Conceptual history and research on the origins of the public sphere are particularly fruitful in this domain. One **desideratum even today**, however, is a more all-encompassing examination of our interpretations, uses, and appropriations of Enlightenment, all of which – especially in a more general context – have a significant effect on history. The RTG utilizes the aforementioned methods and combines them with incentives stemming from recent reflections on the Enlightenment, most notably postcolonial theory, to address this need for a more global approach.

We work off the assumption that the **ambiguity and agonism of the Enlightenment** are connected to its political character. Enlightenment has always been a political endeavor, as it aims to change the world and therefore takes action within it; at the same time, it is also always part of political power and interest constellations. This can lead to its often-universal assertions and claims actually serving particular interests, an accusation also made by **post- and decolonial theorists** with regards to “European universalism.” In examining this tension, the RTG aims to distinguish between politics and the political: whereas the notion of **politics** represents concrete decisions and processes, **the political** describes the (predominantly implicit) presuppositions made in the process. These two factors find themselves in a dialogic relationship, allowing for a differentiated analysis of both the internal perspective of Enlightenment discourses and the external perspective of their limitations and exclusions.

This tension is apparent even in the **historical Enlightenment**: it colors the conflict-laden relationship between political beliefs and political reality, the self-glorification of Enlightenment philosophers as politically effective thinkers despite often-limited possibilities to effect change, and the constant debates between different groups over who represents the “true” Enlightenment. Due to this controversy, we avoid defining the concept of Enlightenment, choosing instead to work with **four major axes** that determine the politics of the historical Enlightenment and that continue to be used today when referring to Enlightenment: **civilization, the public sphere, secularity, and plurality**. These all delineate problem areas for which complex, multifaceted theoretical and practical solutions were already being developed and tested in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. They also serve a structural role for the RTG, as every dissertation project falls under (at least) one of these axes and is linked to the others in the “axes seminar.”

The tension inherent to the politics of the Enlightenment also determines its impact, reception, and post-history. This is why the Enlightenment is controversial today: because it has repeatedly been defined in new and different ways, throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and even today. It is precisely the political core of the Enlightenment – namely, its relationship to the French Revolution – that has been and continues to be reinterpreted in new ways. Thus, it is necessary, from a hermeneutic standpoint, to think about the Enlightenment and its impact, i.e., **interpretations, applications, appropriations, and adoptions** thereof, as two sides of the same coin. It is only through its post-history that we can understand why the Enlightenment is still generally understood today as both a historical epoch and a contemporary project or one needing to be brought into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Even in a more general sense**, the Enlightenment did not end around 1800; it continues to be taken up time and time again for projects of modernization, improvement, liberation, etc., which often make emphatic reference to Enlightenment ideals. These movements are as diverse as they are contradictory, and there is a dearth of research concerning them. They often grind away at the hegemony of the “West” and develop critical alternatives that make it possible to understand the limits of the Enlightenment in new ways. It is an explicit goal of our RTG to open dialogue between these critical positions and Enlightenment research, while also emphasizing its sociopolitical relevance today, a time filled with heated debates about the meaning of the Enlightenment.

Our detailed **qualification program** brings together a **diverse range of mandatory and elective courses** and support for participants’ **autonomy**. A broad spectrum of **interconnected formats** – including the research group colloquium, the axes seminar, workshops, retreats, and volunteer working groups – ensure rapid team building, fruitful discussions, and a **synergistic effect** between the group members. Visiting scholars and Mercator Fellows give the RTG its **distinctly international character**.

## Our Team of Scholars

Last Name, First Name, Academic Title, Affiliation	Area of Expertise
Décultot, Elisabeth, Prof. Dr. (MLU, Spokesperson)	German Studies, Modern German Literature
Bluhm, Harald, Prof. Dr. (MLU)	Political Science
Fulda, Daniel, Prof. Dr. (MLU)	German Studies, Modern German Literature
Jung, Theo, Prof. Dr. (MLU)	Modern and Contemporary History
Kern, Andrea, Prof. Dr. (Universität Leipzig)	Philosophy, specializing in the History of Philosophy
Mulsow, Martin, Prof. Dr. (Universität Erfurt, Forschungszentrum Gotha)	Modern European Knowledge Cultures
Nitz, Julia, PD Dr. (MLU)	American and Transatlantic Studies
Weidner, Daniel, Prof. Dr. (MLU)	Comparative Literature

## I. Concept

Today, “Enlightenment” is once again taking the center stage in political debates and discourses. In light of the terrorist attacks in November 2020, Emmanuel Macron declared a “fight for Enlightenment”; Donald Trump’s interactions with the media and public opinion have been called an “Assault on the Enlightenment,” and the German government professed its faith in “the power of the Enlightenment” during the battle against COVID-19. At the same time, the Enlightenment has been subject to scathing attacks, for some consider its alleged universalism in fact to be hegemonial, if not repressive; postmodern and especially postcolonial criticism often detects particular interests and unspoken exclusions hidden behind its claim of general validity. Even in theoretical debates, the critical state of the world has led to calls for Enlightenment. Whereas Steven Pinker called for “Enlightenment now,” expressing the belief that science and reason have a responsibility to continue improving the world, Corine

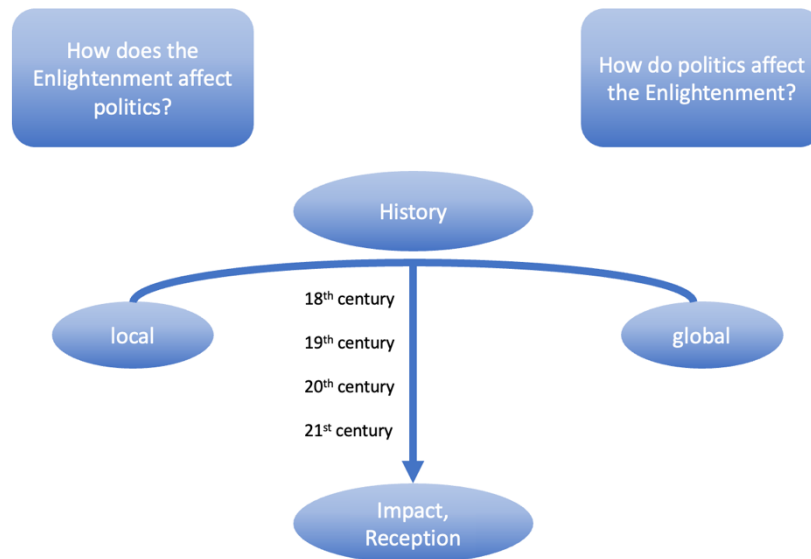
Pelluchon has suggested a “new Enlightenment philosophy” so that we might reconsider, first and foremost, our relationship to nature. Michael Hampe has developed a “third Enlightenment” that does away with the illusions of modernity, while Wolfgang Schmale has called for an “Enlightenment of the Enlightenment” so that it can become aware of its blind spots. The terms “Enlightenment,” “Lumières,” and “Aufklärung” are obviously acquiring new political significance at a time when the achievements of the historical Enlightenment seem to be under threat. At the same time, however, the image of this historical Enlightenment has changed: research has long demonstrated its diversity, complexity, and contradictory nature and also pointed out its limitations.

Because the investigation and interpretation of the Enlightenment is always influenced by the present moment, it is necessary, for hermeneutic reasons alone, to extend Enlightenment research beyond the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the (Western) European space and also to consider the **history of the impact, adaptations, (re)interpretations, and appropriations of Enlightenment(s)**. This form of self-reflection is – as we stated above – nothing new for the historical Enlightenment, which already saw itself, according to Michel Foucault, as a critical reflection of its own present and as a narrative of its own historic consequences. This interpretation prevailed even after the French Revolution, leading to a plethora of new interpretations, recapitulations, appropriations, etc. This **continued history of the Enlightenment** has been analyzed in isolated studies, but only discussed in terms of rudimentary summaries. Yet, this continuation is an integral part of the historic “constellation” of the Enlightenment: the historical Enlightenment has always worked to design a new future, its vision shapes ours, and the dynamics of transformation make the tensions within the historical Enlightenment particularly noticeable, though these can only be understood through fundamental knowledge thereof. Even and especially today, each reflection about the “legacy” of the Enlightenment is therefore inherently connected with a reflection about “us,” each and every speaker claiming to represent this legacy. By examining current discussions with historical depth of focus, the “Politics of the Enlightenment” RTG can help to defuse polarization and polemic exaggerations and give the debate on the Enlightenment the substance that is needed today more than ever.

#### a. Politics...

The organizing team of the planned RTG works off the basic assumption that the **ambivalence and agonism of the Enlightenment** outlined above is linked to its genuinely **political dimension**. This dimension is not secondary to the Enlightenment; rather, other central characteristics of the Enlightenment – autonomy, reason, justice, equality, education, progress, etc. – are *also* always meant in a political sense, because the Enlightenment’s aspiration to shape and change the world must be brought closer to the polity and implemented through concrete actions. It is precisely in these kinds of endeavors that the actual meaning of the Enlightenment and the most important of the aforementioned characteristics have always been and continue to be negotiated.

The question of the politics of the Enlightenment orients itself on the one hand (*genitivus subjectivus*) toward the **policies with which the Enlightenment shapes and wishes to shape the world**, e.g., through the separation of powers, public and private spheres, religion, and reason, through institutions like newspapers, specific interventions and calculated conflicts with the state, etc. On the other hand (*genitivus objectivus*), it addresses those **policies that make the Enlightenment what it is**, for the concept of the Enlightenment is *a priori* the product of extremely diverse discourses, practices, and institutions: from school curricula and research programs to archives, libraries, publishing houses, and museums; the list goes on. A historical phenomenon, the Enlightenment is, *at the same time*, immanently political due to its aspiration to change the world, *and* it is the product of “Enlightenment policies” that took shape through the critical examination of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and its political legacy.



It is through politics and more specifically the **difference between politics and the political** that we consider the diversity of the Enlightenment and its openness to (re)interpretation, thus connecting with the history of ideas and the history of sociopolitical concepts in Koselleck's sense of the terms. We furthermore take inspiration from more recent scholarship on the cultural history of the political in order to examine the full scope of Enlightenment politics: from the *politics* of individual decisions to the massively expanding *policies* of individual political domains observed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the *polities* of political systems that are likewise undergoing drastic changes.

Above all else, French theory plays a central role in our research, e.g., Claude Lefort and Jacques Rancière's distinction between **politics (*la politique*)** and **the political (*le politique*)**: whereas **politics** refers to the **decisions and procedures regulating our coexistence**, the **political** concerns the associated **presuppositions** about what can be **considered mutable** in society and how these changes **can be legitimized**.

We would like to relieve this distinction of the normative asymmetry often imposed by the aforementioned theorists, who prefer the "purely" political (the break, the event) over "merely de facto" politics. We understand **the political** in a purely formal manner as a **metaconception** describing what **prospects and limitations** can be implicitly and explicitly attributed to politics, which **framework** it can be considered in (state, society, civilization, humanity, etc.), and which more or less constant **underlying assumptions** (reason, nature, science, the divine, etc.) can be identified. Decisive for the **differential distinction** between politics and the political is the fact that the latter cannot be **considered in isolation**, but is itself involved in the constitution of politics, i.e., it strives to be implemented within concrete power relations under specific institutional conditions, often still unstable in nature, and in complex cultural contexts. As regards politics, this then leads once again to competition and factionalism, to coalitions, antagonisms, and demonizing images with a decisive influence on debates.

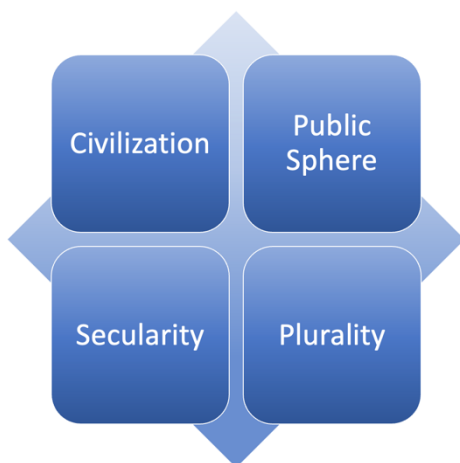
## b. ...of the Enlightenment

The history of research on the Enlightenment as well as current discussions make it clear that a "neutral" history of the Enlightenment is an impossibility. Moreover, the Enlightenment remains, in the words of Walter B. Gallies, an **"essentially contested concept"**: The debate about the Enlightenment was and remains central to its very existence. As previously mentioned, the political dimension of the Enlightenment thwarts all efforts to define it conceptually. Its political dimension is also reflected in the enduring tension between

understanding of the Enlightenment as a historical era and as a normative project, as well as in the competition between historicizing and systematizing approaches.

We do not believe that this tension can be resolved; rather, we would like to draw on it by **considering the Enlightenment alongside interpretations thereof**. What the Enlightenment is results from the respective constellation of its (self-)interpretations; the “**work of the Enlightenment**” on certain topics, situations, and problems lives on in the “**work on the Enlightenment**,” i.e., in the **further development, reinterpretation, and productive appropriation of the Enlightenment**. Such revivals can make use of the various conceptual equivalents of “Enlightenment,” but need not necessarily do so: they can also deliberately ignore them or turn to other conceptual fields, yet they nevertheless form part of the **Enlightenment’s continued history**, as they are part of a complex genealogy of Enlightenment thinking and practices arising from heterogeneous traditions and repeatedly understood in new ways as their history progresses.

The history of research on the Enlightenment shows that its defining characteristics (as the era of “reason,” “autonomy,” “critique”) actually only shed light on one feature at any given time, suppressing others and thus rapidly leading to renewed critique. This is the reason why we avoid working with a fully preconceived definition, instead defining Enlightenment **through four primary conceptual axes** that provide a sufficiently operative preliminary notion of the Enlightenment without ever strictly defining it. These four axes also hold great significance for the structure and operation of the group: participants’ projects can be more tightly interconnected through the chosen complex of issues and thus look at different Enlightenments through a variety of lenses.



These **axes** correspond to four problem areas that influenced political action and the concept of the political even in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and that are still used today when referring to the Enlightenment, which is understood as a **civilizing** project. It is considered to be possible thanks to advances in science, technology, and the fine arts as well as the associated improvement in morals, and it aims to further support this process. The Enlightenment targets the **public sphere** as a central medium of political action and legitimacy, which it sees as a fundamental requirement and an eminently practical project. Its **secularity** manifests itself in the controversial and conflict-laden, but by no

means unambiguous confrontation between the representatives of the Enlightenment and religious claims to knowledge and power. **Plurality** refers to the handling of diversity and dissent, to which the historical Enlightenment remained ambivalent in that it partially welcomed conflict, but also partially suppressed and hid it. These four axes are permeable and interact in diverse ways. Like the Enlightenment itself, they are not unequivocally defined. Rather, they are the site of intense debates, particularly given that these concepts generally imply complex, overdetermined, and asymmetrical dualisms: the “public sphere” is pitted against the “secret,” but also “privacy.” “Secularity” inherently points to “religion,” which it simultaneously proscribes and in a certain sense shapes. Corresponding to the tight interconnections between the axes are changing configurations and tensions for which equilibrium must be restored time and time again. Ties between civilization and plurality in culturally diverse societies or between secularity and the public sphere in post-secular conditions therefore lead to more or less emphatic references to the Enlightenment, wherein these concepts are all thought of together, yet each in varying ways.

The fact that “Enlightenment” – unlike the names of other eras, like the Romantic or Classic periods – is still used in the political arena can be **exemplified** through its antithesis: the



**Counter-Enlightenment.** Recent studies have shown how the notion of an identifiable group of “Enlightenment thinkers” only gained traction through contention with their adversaries. Even in 19<sup>th</sup>- to 21<sup>st</sup>-century history, it is possible to identify constellations in which the Enlightenment / Counter-Enlightenment dichotomy is utilized to frame the discussion of contemporary tendencies (e.g., nihilism, postmodernism, neoliberalism, postcolonialism, populism) as a battle for the legacy of the Enlightenment. By questioning the politics of the Enlightenment, it becomes possible to analyze such constructions as polemic strategies and expound on the ways in which they influence social and political conflicts to this day.

### c. Global Scope, Long Duration

By questioning the politics of the Enlightenment and emphasizing the continued history of the Enlightenment, the RTG can critically consider the global dimension of the Enlightenment, examining it from the margins, as it were, and thus not exclusively fulfilling demands from above concerning Enlightenment research and world history, but also paying heed to, applying, and drawing on postcolonial criticism of the hegemonial claim to universality. In doing so, one primary concern is not to see the **impact** of the Enlightenment automatically as the “reception” or “dissemination” of European thinking, but also as **productive “appropriation,”** the examination of which is supported by a rich vocabulary of **mimicry and hybridization** set forth by postcolonial thinkers. From a decolonial standpoint, on the other hand, terms like the **“coloniality of knowledge”** and **“epistemic injustice”** help us to bear in mind modern-day power structures. It is then necessary to investigate both affirmative appropriations of Enlightenment discourses through independence and national movements in the Global South and criticism of the Enlightenment in modern post- and decolonial theories. The diversity and substance of these theories remains largely untapped in the German-speaking context.

## II. Organization: Four Axes

The RTG is oriented toward **four thematic axes** with both theoretical and practical significance: **Theoretically**, we understand these axes as central issues delineating a sufficiently broad preliminary notion of Enlightenment without defining its contents in advance. **From a practical standpoint**, the axes support the organizational structure of the RTG, among other things.

### Civilization

The Enlightenment is understood by its representatives as contributing to the progress of science, technology, and the fine arts, as well as the associated improvement of morals and morality – developments through which Enlightenment simultaneously becomes possible and is advanced. “Civilization” – conceived of as both a process and a result – makes it possible for actors to understand themselves as historic and to articulate the relationship between civilization and barbarism, between Europe and other parts of the world, but also to initiate practical projects, both to dominate nature and to educate. “Civilization” is thus essentially thought of in its societal sense, leading to more profound consideration of the social and cultural change that gained pace in the early modern period not only in Europe, but also with worldwide impact and interferences in other regions. In this sense, discussion of civilization was ambiguous even in the Age of Enlightenment, already encompassing diverse discourses and voices, including those critical of the notion. Because the boundaries of “civilization” and the relationship between “nature” and “society” are fluid and controversial, they are constantly being negotiated and redefined.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, as well, “civilization” was interpreted in highly diverse fashions: as the “civilizing mission” and “white man’s burden,” as “Nahda,” “Europeanization,” “Westernization.” Often, direct reference was made to the Enlightenment. Civilizing programs frequently involve formulating interpretations of history and educational programs within which the tensions of universalistic notions of civilization are particularly visible. The complex

appropriations of the demands, promises, and patterns of interpretation of the Enlightenment can thus each be situated in the tension between local constellations of power and global processes of exchange and discussion; there is much work to be done here regarding the identification of sources. When examining the politics of the Enlightenment, it is crucial to incorporate impulses from post- and decolonial criticism and to not only emphasize sterile oppositions between Europe and the world, but also to consider the diversity, complexity, and reciprocal interconnections between various discourses on civilization.

### The Public Sphere

The public sphere is not only a central demand of the Enlightenment, but also a key medium for its politics: it presents its demands publicly with an aim to hereby create legitimacy, which is intended to replace tradition and religious belief. In historic reality, the public sphere is always linked to concrete institutions and media like theaters, salons, the press, even the street, each of which is subject to totally different conditions and constraints. Ideally, the public sphere is conceived of as a space of rational criticism, but in all actuality, it is – as research from the last few decades has shown – highly differentiated (scholarly vs. gallant public sphere with corresponding implications for gender norms), with diverse limitations (due to factionalism, the exclusion of certain groups, and transience), and perfectly ambivalent, according to the assessments of Enlightenment thinkers as well as their opponents. This leads to intense debates and varying strategies ranging from clandestine communication to anonymity, pseudoanonymity, and other forms of address; however, it also leads to a surfeit of publicity and to other (more public forms of) criticism.

No less complex is the appeal for Enlightenment in the debates of the 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, in which the public sphere repeatedly underwent a rapid media transformation (press, mass press, film and radio, television, social media). The public sphere has become strongly fragmented and differentiated; now it ranges from situated local and national public spheres to something like a global public sphere, with all its imbalances and blind spots. Corresponding to this transformation, we can observe a discourse that is as vast as it is lively, ranging from the denunciation of the cultural industry concerning rhetorical laments about the decay of criticism, from the current proclamation of a crisis of the public sphere in light of filter bubbles and fake news to the most diverse ventures to establish the counter-public sphere. A complex discussion of the “public sphere” and the political potential of the Enlightenment must necessarily take this long history into consideration.

### Secularity

Particularly after World War II, the Enlightenment was often seen as a decisive step toward a secular society. While it is true that discussions of church and religion actually played a central role as early as the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Enlightenment, in all its diversity, can hardly be described as “secular,” especially as this concept first emerged in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Alongside severe anticlericalism, we can observe attempts to improve Christianity; in addition to the turn toward earthly happiness, the Enlightenment itself bore a clearly religious load, the term itself – at least in German – unquestionably linked to the metaphor of light with its strongly Christian implications. Even the individualization and privatization of religion often retrospectively associated with the Enlightenment proved, upon closer examination, to be an immanently political maneuver, for it was always tied to normative assumptions, e.g., concerning the nature and limitations of the public sphere.

Even today, “Enlightenment” is politicized, precisely in world-wide religious/secular conflicts: it is claimed for the “West,” while being denied and required of others. This is even more remarkable given that the dissemination of “civilization” in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century unproblematically coincided with the Christian mission, leading to myriad hybrid forms of rational Christianity and European civilization as well as the appropriation of religious transmission through political-theological independence movements in the Global South. Analysis of the politics of the Enlightenment shows how the relationship to religion was repeatedly reconfigured throughout the long duration of the Enlightenment, and this is



articulated not only by casting aside religious tradition, but also by displacing it: as political religions, *Kunstreligion*, or scientistic ideologies, often accompanied by rhetorics of political mobilization.

### Plurality

The historical Enlightenment struggles against plurality, which – like secularity – was not a concept at the time. The multiplicity of customs and cultures, languages, or forms of political organization was the subject of intense discussion and reflection, not least because of the increasing prevalence of travel experiences and reports; the diversity of opinions and positions is represented and spread through debates and controversies. However, this recognition and appreciation of the plural existed in tension with unifying concepts like Rousseau's *volonté générale* or the expanding notion of "progress." Conflicts were therefore partially showcased and amplified, while others were suppressed and hidden through fictions of consensus or by relegating them to supposedly unpolitical registers of "nature" or "science."

The interpretation and appropriation of the Enlightenment in the 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries have also involved both the construction of a homogeneous continuity of "the" Enlightenment and also the distinction of highly diverse Enlightenments or even drastically agonistic interpretations in which Enlightenment is polemically criticized or such criticism is once again denounced as "Counter-Enlightenment." However, even in the general political debate, dealing with plurality has proven to be a challenge, particularly today, one which has long been covered up with the aforementioned fictions of consensus or, inversely, depoliticized, moralized, and thus withdrawn from the debate through a unilateral affirmation of cultural differences or diversity. Here, too, an examination of the politics of the Enlightenment can not only consider the various past endeavors of the Enlightenment with greater precision, but also contribute to a reification and differentiation of the debates we are currently absorbed in.

### III. Methods and Goals

From a methodological standpoint, examining the politics of the Enlightenment and the global and epochal pluralization and diversification of our object of investigation makes it possible to **productively integrate diverse research paradigms and disciplines**. It therefore falls in line with the interdisciplinarity that is already characteristic of Enlightenment research. This has long been our practice at the Interdisciplinary Centre for European Enlightenment Studies (IZEA), supplemented by the various critical momenta mentioned above and thus **moving beyond the internal perspective** of Enlightenment research. At the RTG, we thus make it our express mission to connect largely normative and historical discourses when discussing the Enlightenment and work toward bringing **systematic-philosophical and historical approaches into a productive dialogue with one another**. In general, we feel that the RTG has great potential to facilitate the **productive inter- and transdisciplinary combination** of various methodologies and research questions while addressing a common issue. This is further supported by the multidisciplinary composition of our team and the close collaboration between advisors and participants on a number of different levels.

In terms of methodology, the RTG aims to make considerable contributions to the three classical fields of Enlightenment research. Regarding the **history of political thought**, it joins in examining translations and transfers, including those taking place on a global scale. Impulses from constellation research as well as those from postcolonial cultural studies, e.g., "traveling concepts" or "writing back," can contribute to discourse historical contextualization and analysis. The group's investigations will contribute significantly to a comprehensive **conceptual history** in which much work remains to be done beyond the main Western European languages and above the level of lexical semantics (i.e., in relation to underlying metaphors, narratives, etc.). To expand on conceptual history, the analysis of certain **narratives and rhetorics** using methods from literary studies are highly productive. **Digital methods** can also be instrumentalized, e.g., to investigate the resonance of Enlightenments in large corpora.

By focusing on the central question of the relationship between politics and the political, the group is able, *a priori*, to integrate into its research the **social historical** question of which institutions or discursive settings sustain and allow for the associated debates. Key approaches from the **sociology of knowledge** and historical **discourse analysis** can be employed here to investigate transformations in individual historical debates and dispositives as well as to reconstruct the complex conflicts between different groups that generally impact the developing public sphere. This is particularly true for the **continuing history and impact** of the Enlightenment, which also deserves attention in connection with supporting institutions like universities, publishing houses, and museums along with their canonizing inclusions and exclusions. Because these undertakings generally do not depend on established institutions but on personal exchanges and local networks, we also see a great deal of promise in **networking research**, including digital modeling, which was practiced sporadically by journals and postal networks during the Enlightenment.

Research in **cultural history** benefits from the close interconnections between these discourses and their contexts. These discourses are generated upon questioning the politics of the Enlightenment, and we assume that it is often cultural practices that stabilize and process the tensions between aspiration and reality inherent in the politics of the Enlightenment and the negotiation processes associated with it. For example, the close relationship between natural history and collection and publication practices can be described using methods from the **history of knowledge**, whereas approaches from the **history of books** and **media history** can look into the various modes of circulation in the public sphere. Because key cultural differences, e.g., sex and gender, are always being renegotiated – although not necessarily in their modern form – in Enlightenment debates, **gender and intersectionality studies** represent another promising field of work.

This methodological spectrum is further enriched within the group thanks to a variety of other approaches. Research into the impact of the Enlightenment, though sporadic to date, stand to benefit from approaches used in **memory studies**, which is concerned, for example, with museumization processes and cultures of remembrance. As previously mentioned, the group shall not view **post- and decolonial theory** as external criticism of the Enlightenment but instead engage in a productive dialogue with them and embrace the expanding body of sources to be examined to include ostensibly peripheral and subaltern perspectives, as has often been done in social history. The **extension of research beyond the European space** is an integral component of our team's work, thus contributing to transnationally oriented Enlightenment research. This is a necessary next step with regards to truly global Enlightenment research.

#### IV. Qualification Program

The primary goal of the RTG is to offer doctoral candidates the opportunity to write a **distinguished, groundbreaking dissertation with interdisciplinary applications** in a structured program offering a clear focus and optimal research conditions. It is central to our mission that participants can complete their dissertation projects with a high level of academic rigor within **4 years**. The ultimate goal of this training is to qualify doctoral candidates for the **job market, both in academia and beyond**. This includes developing **scholarly, personal, and professional skills** with the support of our highly engaged team. From the very beginning, doctoral candidates will be encouraged to take advantage of **peer-to-peer learning opportunities**, e.g., through self-organized events (workshops, seminars, etc.). To round out their professional profiles, the RTG will offer all doctoral candidates and postdoctoral researchers the chance to participate in courses **to develop essential soft skills** and additional training for both the academic and non-academic job market.

The **scholarly component** of our qualification program includes aspects essential to **specialization** as well as the **development of methodological and interdisciplinary skills**. In addition to the academic training forming the core of the RTG, we also consider **training in research organization and communication** to be among the group's most important

qualification goals. Doctoral candidates are involved in planning workshops, inviting guests, and organization events.

Finally, our qualification program includes **developing personal and professional skills** that also make **non-university** careers a viable option. To this end, the RTG offers **internships** at political institutions (embassies), cultural institutions (museums), and corporations involved in cultural and science policy (publishing houses). These will provide participants with the opportunity to acquire practical knowledge and experience concerning the “politics of the Enlightenment.”

For **postdoctoral researchers**, the group offers an **independent qualification program** aiming to prepare participants for their further career in academia. Among other things, this includes 1) **integration into and the chance to co-plan all group activities**, 2) **absolute autonomy** for their own research projects within the scope of the RTG, including an individually managed budget, 3) **the opportunity to teach** at the relevant institutes as an important form of academic training.

Finally, **academic assistants**, whom the RTG would like to provide an opportunity to get first-hand experience with academia, are an integral part of the qualification program.

**Two shared languages** will form the basis of everyday life within the group: **English and German**. This ensures the international orientation of the group, on the one hand, and smooth institutional and regional integration, on the other hand. Scholars involved in the group should also have other foreign language skills necessary for their areas of expertise.

### Visiting Scholars and Mercator Fellows

Visiting scholars and Mercator Fellows are an essential component of the RTG’s qualification program. In particular, they help to strengthen the group’s international and interdisciplinary character.

Each semester, two **international visiting scholars** will be invited to participate in a number of ways: they will present their research concerning various aspects of the group’s core subjects in a **lecture**, provide (post)doctoral candidates with individual feedback on their projects during **consultations**, and give an **interview** as part of our series on “**Enlightenment is...**” (information available in German [here](#)).

To broaden our scholarly horizons and diversify discussions, **five Mercator Fellows from other European countries and beyond** shall be invited for three months each during the first five-year funding period. By involving these Fellows, we hope to expand the expertise of the group’s members through a systematic, historical, and comparative or transcultural approach, emphasizing non-European spaces. As explained in the program of study, the Fellows play an essential and active role in the RTG’s qualification program, as they will organize an **intensive Mercator seminar**, share their expertise with (post)doctoral students during **private consultations**, and **establish contacts** with other research institutions and relevant scholars around the world. Participants will **actively communicate** with the Fellows **both before and after their stay in Halle, e.g., through videoconferences**. The five scholars below have already accepted their invitations as Mercator Fellows pending successful application. They are listed according to the planned chronological order of their stays in Halle.

**Summer Semester 2025: Liliane Weissberg**, Christopher H. Browne Distinguished Professor of the School of Arts & Sciences and Professor of German and Comparative Literature at the **University of Pennsylvania**.

**Summer Semester 2026: Andrew Kahn**, Professor of Russian Literature at the **University of Oxford**.

**Summer Semester 2027: Leila Gómez**, Associate Professor in the Department of Women and Gender Studies at the **University of Colorado (Boulder)**.

**Summer Semester 2028: Elizabeth Kassab**, Associate Professor of Philosophy at the **Doha Institute for Graduate Studies in Katar**.

**Summer Semester 2029: Chenxi Tang**, Professor of German at the **University of California (Berkeley)** and, since 2019, Distinguished Visiting Professor at **Shanghai Normal University**.

### Program of Study

The doctoral and postdoctoral RTG participants will take part in various **mandatory events**: During the semester, a weekly **colloquium**, the **axes seminars**, the annual **Mercator seminar**, two **guest talks** per semester, organized by the doctoral candidates in consultation with the directors of the RTG, and the **workshops** and **conferences** organized as part of the RTG (including the public conference in the third year and a retreat in the fourth year of the first funding period). The goal of the **retreat** is to strengthen the connection between the individual dissertation topics and the theoretical foundation of the RTG. Each new cohort will additionally receive **training on good scholarly practices, conflict management, and gender sensitivity**. In general, we will ensure that the number of events always contributes to the continued development of doctoral and postdoctoral RTG participants and never becomes an obstacle to their progress. Individual consultations are always possible to discuss writing phases when there are no planned events. The program will be supplemented with **elective events** initiated and organized by doctoral and postdoctoral RTG participants themselves, e.g., methodology seminars, writing workshops, or reading groups. Upon joining the RTG, each cohort will be expressly called upon to develop their own formats. Lastly, the RTG offers interested doctoral candidates the chance to perform a **one- to three-month internship** in an area outside academia *stricto sensu* that is relevant to the group's topic, "Politics of the Enlightenment," e.g., the cultural sector, science management, public relations, or political education.