

## **The Enlightenment at Court, and Anti-Court Polemics in the Enlightenment.**

*Halle/Saale (Germany), 12-14 October 2017*

### 1. Objectives and Questions:

Scholarship on the Enlightenment is changing. Dichotomies that were apparently firmly-rooted ("Enlightenment and Religion") are wobbling, and concepts that have long dominated ("Enlightened absolutism," "the bourgeoisie," "public sphere") have faded. Current research within the history of ideas and cultural history shows the Enlightenment in more complex intellectual, social, and communicative contexts than before.

The point of departure for this conference is an apparent paradox: On the one hand, the princely court and court society are the objects of negative attributions in many Enlightenment writings— the court is portrayed as the site of despotism, hypocrisy, superficiality, intrigue, effeminization, foreignness, luxury, corruption, greed, personal ambition, moral decline, fornication, etc. Courtiers appear as effeminized and hedonistic sycophants who are concerned only with their own position, and not at all with the common good. The court serves in these writings as a negative contrast to the canon of virtues of classical republicanism, which distinguished itself through strict morals, dutifulness, modesty, authenticity, and readiness to sacrifice for the common good. These dichotomies all have older origins and drew upon ancient texts and Reformation discourses, but in the eighteenth century political discourse they were ubiquitous.

On the other hand, it is clear that many authors who used these anti-court stereotypes and invectives were actually involved with networks and patron-client relationships that were connected with the political-social world of the court, or at least with individual members of court. Many authors who represented themselves as "enlightened" were quite close to courts in their social relationships, and often they were even part of the social figuration of courts. Even some rulers, such as Frederick II of Prussia, used anti-court topoi, even though they stood at the head of a princely court.<sup>1</sup>

It is the goal of this conference to examine this entangling of social constellations and discursive practices and thereby to reconsider the relationship between European princely courts and the protagonists of the Enlightenment and their ideas.

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<sup>1</sup> Biskup, *Friedrichs Größe*; idem, "Höfisches Retablissement."

Two basic issues stand in the foreground:

First, European courts should be considered as Enlightenment "places of encounter." How and how much were Enlightenment projects and authors tied to princely courts? Were courts not among the most important institutional and social spaces for enlightened practices? Other institutional and social communicative spaces (such as universities, academies, societies, salons, clubs, Masonic lodges, etc.) can be identified as centers of the Enlightenment in some countries, but not across Europe generally. Nevertheless, until now research on the Enlightenment has focused on these various institutionalizations of sociability and intellectualism and largely neglected to consider princely courts: In a recent textbook on the Enlightenment princely courts are not even mentioned.<sup>2</sup>

Second, it should be asked why princely courts were so often a focus of criticism, especially for Enlightenment authors, despite courts' important function in the Enlightenment. Therefore, to understand the social and political function of anti-court discourses in the context of the courts is another important issue for this conference.

## 2. Defining Terms:

The terms "court" and "Enlightenment" require brief definitions. We use the term "princely court" to describe the entourage and social milieu of the ruler.<sup>3</sup> Especially significant is that the court regularly served as the site where the social lives of the royal family and the leading nobles played out, and the court was where political decision-making processes and governmental activity took place. Until the end of the eighteenth century there was only a very limited differentiation between sociability and political activity at court, and generally a court was simultaneously the site of royal and noble self-representation as well as the praxis of rulership. Both functions of the court should be considered at the conference.

As "Enlightenment" writers mean those people in the eighteenth century who claimed a certain social role and spoke out in public with the goal of "improving" the religious, social, economic situation (addressing particular concrete issues, or demanding fundamental change). Because they intended with their speech to change the existing situation, this speech usually included criticism of specific conditions or—more commonly—specific people or groups of people. Authors in the eighteenth century who described themselves as *philosophes*, *Aufklärer*, or even "enlightened" demanded to be allowed to express criticism openly, without having any special status or office in their society to distinguish themselves. They claimed to

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<sup>2</sup> Thoma, *Handbuch europäische Aufklärung*.

<sup>3</sup> See Birke and Asch, eds., *Courts, Patronage and the Nobility*; and Adamson, ed., *The Princely Courts of Europe*.

be thinking and arguing rationally, and they denied that their antagonists did so. They claimed righteousness and defamed their opponents.<sup>4</sup> In these public debates "Enlightenment" was a untrademarked brand name for those claiming the moral high ground, even as they sought thereby to improve their own personal well-being. The term "Enlightenment" comprised their own values, speech, and writings, but not those of their opponents. Therefore "Enlightenment" in the eighteenth century was a loaded term; it was a polemical battle cry used by certain actors to legitimize their own positions.<sup>5</sup> Even where there was no explicit reference to the "Enlightenment" (for example, Britain), there were comparable rhetorical practices in similar institutional contexts that used the same strident tone.

### 3. State of the Field:

Until now three interpretations of courts and the Enlightenment have played prominent roles in the social and cultural sciences. These interpretations have distorted the subject more than they have clarified it.

The classic terms "enlightened absolutism" or "enlightened despotism" (*Aufgeklärter Absolutismus, despotisme éclairé*)<sup>6</sup> portray the Enlightenment either as a governmental program or as a means of political self-representation; it is either a synonym for a political reform agenda,<sup>7</sup> or it describes an ultimately insurmountable contradiction between the functioning of royal governments and any enlightened, emancipatory project.<sup>8</sup> This is not the place to discuss the plausibility of the term, or to go into the fundamental criticisms of the term "absolutism," but suffice to say that the connection between Enlightenment and monarchy formulated by "enlightened absolutism" neglects entirely the princely court as a social and political place of exchange. "Enlightened absolutism" then implies that rulers renounced their own courts as social and political centers. This would even apply to those courts where "reform absolutism" is attributed to leading ministers (members of the court) rather than the rulers themselves.<sup>9</sup> Especially this last point should be critically discussed in light of the multifarious princely courts in Europe in the eighteenth century.

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<sup>4</sup> Oevermann, "Der Intellektuelle."

<sup>5</sup> On this, see Pečar & Tricoire, *Falsche Freunde*, 27-35.

<sup>6</sup> Aretin, *Der aufgeklärte Absolutismus*; Birtsch, "Aufgeklärter Absolutismus"; Scott, *Enlightened Absolutism*.

<sup>7</sup> Birtsch, *Reformabsolutismus*; Birtsch, *Aufgeklärter Absolutismus*; Baumgart, "Aufgeklärter Absolutismus (Preußen)"; Kunisch, *Absolutismus*, S. 31-36; Demel, *Vom aufgeklärten Reformstaat*. Neuerdings auch Walker, *Enlightened Absolutism*.

<sup>8</sup> Vierhaus, *Deutschland*; Sellin, "Von der aufgeklärten Monarchie"; Sellin, "Friedrich der Große."

<sup>9</sup> Martens, *Der patriotische Minister*.

Also classic is the idea of a public sphere in the eighteenth century, that is, Jürgen Habermas's postulated "structural transformation" in the Enlightenment from a representative court to a rational-critical bourgeois public.<sup>10</sup> For Habermas the court was the traditional stage for the theatrical spectacle of rulership, and it was displaced over the course of the eighteenth century by an emerging bourgeois public that existed beyond the princely court, in salons, newspapers, periodicals, societies, etc.<sup>11</sup> If one takes this structural transformation for granted, then criticisms of the court, the nobility, luxury, and ceremony appear to be the attacks of a rising bourgeois public against the dominant princely courts—many historians have interpreted them this way.<sup>12</sup> However, recent scholarship has not only questioned the validity of the Habermas model, but also has clearly demonstrated that some people at princely courts played central roles in the *république des lettres* as audience members, correspondence partners, financial backers, and kindred spirits.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, some prominent scholars of the Enlightenment have tried to differentiate various strands of the Enlightenment, based on the social positions of the authors or the radicalism of their social criticism. According to Robert Darnton, anti-court pamphlets were the work of socially and economically marginalized authors ("Grub Street"), who criticized the political system and social hierarchy from their position as outsiders.<sup>14</sup> However, Jeremy Popkin and Simon Burrows have shown that many of the pamphleteers cited by Darnton actually stood in the service of high-ranking members of the court, who were thereby fighting out their conflicts at court in print.<sup>15</sup> Even fundamental criticisms of the monarchical system found a resonance at princely courts. Building on Darnton's model, emphasizing the social position of the author, Jonathan Israel (following Margaret Jacob) has differentiated between moderate and radical Enlightenments. Israel locates the moderate Enlightenment (including Locke, Voltaire, Rousseau, Wolff) close to the princely courts and therefore denies it the will to offer any comprehensive criticism of existing political conditions. Israel's radical Enlightenment is a smaller group (such as Spinoza, Raynal, Diderot, Holbach, Helvetius), acting always at arm's length from the political elite, and hence in a position to radically

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<sup>10</sup> Habermas, *Strukturwandel*. The translation of the book into English in 1989 inspired a revival of the theme, see Calhoun, *Habermas*.

<sup>11</sup> Gestrich, *Absolutismus und Öffentlichkeit*; Im Hof, *Europa der Aufklärung*; Im Hof, *Das gesellige Jahrhundert*; Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment*; Lilti, *The World of the Salons*.

<sup>12</sup> A sophisticated approach to the history of media is offered by Bauer, "Buchmarkt, Hofpublizistik, Interaktion."

<sup>13</sup> See, as an example, Abrosimov, *Aufklärung jenseits der Öffentlichkeit*.

<sup>14</sup> Darnton, *Forbidden Bestsellers*; Darnton, "Philosophical Sex."

<sup>15</sup> Popkin, "Pamphlet Journalism"; Burrows, *Blackmail*.

question and criticize the existing political conditions.<sup>16</sup> Many of these authors (for example, Raynal and Diderot), however, did have close connections with princely courts.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the particularly "radical" writings of Diderot circulated exclusively in the *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique*, whose subscribers were almost invariably members of the court nobility, and a number of especially "radical" Enlightenment thinkers found refuge from prosecution and employment at princely courts.<sup>18</sup>

Each of these three interpretations presents oversimplified dichotomies: between Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment, between princely courts dominated by nobles and a bourgeois public sphere, between progress and inertia, between a pre-modern feudal society and a modern Enlightenment society. Rather than envisioning explicit and enduring social and political borders and fronts, we want to focus in on specific concrete expressions and actions in their respective discursive and political contexts. In this way we expect to reveal multiple overlapping lines of connection between people at courts and people outside courts through at least the end of the eighteenth century. It was by no means only those uninvolved with princely courts who played up anti-court rhetoric and sentiments to make their intended arguments, to pursue their intended goals, and to bring about their intended consequences.

#### 4. The Conference:

With this conference we are calling for a fundamental reexamination of European princely courts as sites of the Enlightenment, as places of encounter for Enlightenment thinkers, as "resonance chambers" for Enlightenment discourse, and as spaces for formulating Enlightenment projects. We hope to build upon recent scholarship which has uncovered the social and communicative connections between Enlightenment authors and the political elite at princely courts. Moreover, we see this conference as part of the current reconsideration of the Enlightenment, which is breaking down long standing dichotomies such as "religion and Enlightenment" in favor of more sophisticated approaches that highlight personal, institutional, and conceptual connections.<sup>19</sup> "Enlightenment and princely courts" is overdue for such a reevaluation.

The focus of the conference is the eighteenth century, especially the decades after 1730, when the role of the *philosophe* or *Aufklärer* or Enlightenment thinker was increasingly

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<sup>16</sup> Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*; Israel, *Revolutionary Ideas*.

<sup>17</sup> See, as an example, Pečar & Tricoire, *Falsche Freunde*.

<sup>18</sup> Abrosimov, *Aufklärung jenseits der Öffentlichkeit*; Jauch, *Jenseits der Maschine*; Champion, *RRepublican Learning*.

<sup>19</sup> Sheehan, "Enlightenment"; Robertson, "Religion"; Gregory, "Introduction"; Theis, "Religion"; Theis, et al., "Aufklärung"; Grote, "Religion and Enlightenment."

firmly established and a running debate can be observed about what the Enlightenment was and what it should do.

As many European courts as possible should be compared at this conference. In addition to presentations on the classic French, British, and (to a lesser extent) German variations of the Enlightenment at their respective courts, we also seek presentations on the Enlightenment at the courts of Spain and Portugal, Italy, Poland, Russia, Denmark, Sweden, and beyond. In each case it should be asked which political actors were active as sponsors of the Enlightenment or as participants in the Enlightenment. Vice versa: which Enlightenment authors were active at court? In what ways did members of princely courts seek contact with Enlightened authors, or respond to contact from them? What kinds of ideas for projects or contributions to debates came out of these relationships, and what was the reception or what kind of consequences did these cause at court and beyond the court? At the same time, participants should reflect on what these relationships say about princely courts as Enlightenment places of encounter and resonance spaces.

Furthermore, at this conference we want to examine comparatively anti-court discourses and anti-court expressions within the bounds of the court. Therefore the following questions are central: What kind of infrastructures can be distinguished, whereby Enlightenment thinkers could be drawn into communication networks at princely courts? In addition to holding office at courts, were there also social mechanisms of integration, such as banquets, music, or games? Were there key offices for the institutionalization of the Enlightenment at courts, such as court chaplain, physician, or librarian? What was the significance of institutions and associations that were related to princely courts (such as royal academies or schools) and could be amalgamated into a broader definition of "court," but were not technically part of the court itself? Which authors and thinkers at various princely courts distinguished themselves as prominent court critics? What genres spawned court criticism, and what kind of media did critics use? To what audience were these criticisms of courts addressed? What exactly were the points of criticism? Where did anti-court discourse derive its legitimacy? What kind of positive counter-model was offered? Were the authors of anti-court polemics in dependent relationships with members of courts? What consequences did the use of anti-court rhetoric have among the circles of critics?

We also want to ask about positioning and self-description: How common was it for people at court to identify with the Enlightenment? If it was possible or even advantageous to appear to be "Enlightened" at some courts, was it difficult, uncommon, or impossible at others? Of course we want to include those courts (such as the British) where there was no

explicit reference to the "Enlightenment" or *philosophie*, but where there were comparable communicative and social practices in a similar institutional context. We take a critical view of the scholarship that places the Enlightenment at court either at the end of an extended humanist tradition of learned advisors to rulers or at the beginning of modern intellectualism; we want to ask whether Enlightenment thinkers at court constitute a unique model.

Therefore, we understand this conference to be engaging the political history, the history of ideas, and the cultural history of the eighteenth century. Beyond the history of the Enlightenment and princely courts, we foresee the conference provoking a fundamental reappraisal of the later stages of the early modern period.

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