

The Useful Enlightenment:  
Theories, Practices and Representations of Usefulness in the Long Eighteenth Century

International conference to be held at the  
Interdisziplinäres Zentrum für die Erforschung der Europäischen Aufklärung ([IZEA](#))  
Martin-Luther-Universität, Halle-Wittenberg, Germany, 26-27 June 2025

Organised by Jean-Alexandre Perras, Humboldt Research Fellow

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Call for Papers

*What's the use?* is often the very first question asked of a scientific endeavour. Indeed, the notion of utility has come to dominate our understanding of knowledge in the humanities as well as in the practical and fundamental sciences. It also furnishes the criterion by which we regularly assess the relevance of scientific research, where utility is often linked to potential applications and their economic benefits. This close relationship between knowledge, utility, technological improvement and economic advantage dates back to the Enlightenment. This period saw not only the flowering of reason and human rights but also the beginning of the industrial exploitation of natural resources and the development of the logistical and economic infrastructures necessary to profit from the forced labour of displaced populations. As this conflict suggests, the question of utility has never had a simple answer, insofar as it requires us to consider for whom something is useful and to what ends.

This conference invites researchers from a wide range of historical disciplines (including the history of philosophy, literature, institutions, economics and the sciences) to explore the many aspects encompassed by the notions of utility, usefulness and usage over the course of the long eighteenth century. The aim is to reconsider how the circulation of various conceptions of utility shaped the relationship between knowledge, technology, politics and the economy and how this relationship gave rise, in turn, to the concept of 'useful knowledge', whose links with the historiographical idea of the 'industrial revolution' and the accompanying rise of capitalism have been strongly emphasised through the notion of the 'knowledge economy' (Mokyr 2002). This follows research over the last twenty years that has challenged these intrinsic relationships, whether by applying a gender perspective (Serrano 2022; Maerker, Serrano, and Werrett 2023), by framing approaches in the global context of the circulation, exchange or appropriation of knowledge and commodities (Schäfer and Valeriani 2021; Berg and Hudson 2023), or by focusing on the long-term transmission of practices and knowledge (Nigro 2023).

In the wake of this research, the conference will question the special relationship that developed during the eighteenth century between utility and value, be that economic, scientific, artistic, moral or literary. Contributions will thus shed new light on the emergence of utility as a criterion for evaluating knowledge, goods and cultural production. Particular attention will also be paid to the relationship between utility and improvement, how this was translated into the implementation of social, agricultural or industrial reform and the conditions of such practical application.

During the eighteenth century, the increasing valorisation of 'useful' knowledge, that is to say, practical, experimental and innovative knowledge, challenged the former hierarchy between the 'liberal' and the applied, 'mechanical' arts. This shift caused significant disruption in how the sciences were viewed in relation to nature and society. It also had a significant impact on both nature and society themselves, creating new means of exploiting human and natural resources according to such new criteria as not only utility but also productivity, efficiency and progress. These changes gave rise to the debates that animated the political and intellectual reforms of the Enlightenment in the areas of slavery, luxury and the control of wheat prices, to name but a few examples.

If, in the course of the century, utility did indeed become a central value in the construction of modern Western societies, it is essential to question the causes of this valorisation and relativise its supposed universality, particularly from extra-European points of view or by considering dissident voices, victims and those excluded, who have questioned or suffered from the growth model centred on the politics and economy of useful knowledge.

Contributions may focus on issues such as the following:

- The relationship in eighteenth-century thought between the notions of interest, profit or efficiency and those of utility, usefulness and use.
- The different criteria used to assess utility in various fields of economics, literature, science, technology or morality and the expertise or institutions needed to carry out such assessments.
- How the usefulness of certain types of knowledge, technologies or reform projects was evaluated, for whom they were deemed useful and how this evaluation was carried out.
- The role of learned societies such as academies and economic, patriotic, agricultural or improvement societies in defining, disseminating and implementing useful knowledge.
- The importance of non-Western knowledge in the development of a global economy in the eighteenth century.
- How the notion of utility can be used to reshape and reconceptualise the Enlightenment, particularly in terms of the relationship between centre and periphery.
- Voices against the valorisation of utility: scientists, *gens de lettres*, religious figures; those victimised or left behind by the implementation of public interest projects; those excluded from the determination of utility (colonisation, alternative conceptions of usefulness, criticisms of utility).
- The relationship between innovation, useful arts, science and technology.
- The evolution of the notion of *utile dulci* in art and literary theory; the usefulness of rhetoric; fiction and representation; 'useful' passions; exemplarity and morality of the arts and literature.
- Growth, progress, sustainability and usefulness: the agricultural Enlightenment; exploitation of resources and land; agrarian profitability and the acclimatisation of (useful) exotic plants in Europe and the colonies.
- Women and useful knowledge; women and the sciences; the usefulness of women's labour; social reform projects aimed at women.
- Scientific research deemed futile: squaring the circle, metaphysics, alchemy, etc.
- Pedagogy and usefulness: educational programmes and reforms, popular schools and education and the 'popular Enlightenment'.
- The utility of the Enlightenment in contemporary political, historiographical or scientific debates.

Proposals, including an abstract and a short biography and list of publications, should be sent by 31 December 2024 to the following address: [jean-alexandre.perras@izea.uni-halle.de](mailto:jean-alexandre.perras@izea.uni-halle.de).

The conference will be held in English.

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