Introduction to
‘the Republic of Letters’

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The Republic of Letters was...

- The ‘scientific community’ of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries:
- Scholars and scientists working as professors, secretaries, courtiers, physicians, lawyers...
- ... communicating by letters about their work plans, published books, colleagues (gossip), students, universities, politics, religion...
- forming a multilayered network covering the whole of Europe
Chronology

• 1417: first mentioning of the term ‘Republic of Letters’ (Francesco Barbaro in a letter to Poggio Bracciolini: ‘Respublica litterarum’)
• 15th c: no other use recorded, but similar concepts are in use
• 1495: Erasmus starts using the term
• 16th c: frequent use of the Latin term, but also in Italian
• 17th c: communication intensifies, term now also used in the vernacular (e.g. in French)
• 18th c.: term is subject to discussions of what it means or should mean
• Rise of the historiography of the Republic of Letters
• End 18th c.: disintegration of the Republic of Letters
• Survival in the 19th c.? Republic of Belles lettres
• 20th c.: frequent reference to Republic of Letters by intellectuals, scientists and artists in the interwar period
Chronology (2)

- Emphasis is on the early modern period
- i.e.: ca. 1500-ca. 1800
- Most letters in our corpus are from 1600-1750
Nomenclature

- Respublica litterarum
- Respublica litteraria
- République des lettres
- Repubblica delle lettere
- República de las letras
- Gelehrtenrepublik
- Literarische Republik
- Republiek der letteren
- Republic of letters
- Respublica (‘the’ Republic)

- Orbis eruditus/-orum
- Orbis doctus
- Orbis literatus universus
- Societas eruditorum
- Sodalitas doctorum
- Sodalitas literaria
- Omnes (viri) eruditi
- Omnis literatorum cohors
- Commonwealth of learning
- Republic of the mind
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Geography

• In principal: a ‘European’ phenomenon
• As far as we know: mostly Italian, Spanish, French, German, Dutch, English
• But also Scandinavian, Polish, Austrian-Hungarian, Baltic, Russian
• Colonies: North-American, South-American, Indian, Asian
• We know still little about Greece, Ottoman Empire, Balkan
People

• People employed as scholars/scientists, by (1) schools, (2) governments, (3) churches, e.g.:
  – (1) Professors, school rectors
  – (2) Court astrologers, diplomats
  – (3) Jesuit missionaries, preachers
• Independent scholars, e.g. physicians
• Rich (wo)men with leisure, e.g. aristocrats
(1) Schools: Academic contexts

- Professors, extra-ordinary professors, lectors, tutors, teachers, rectors at:
  - Universities
  - Colleges
  - Academic gymnasia (illustrious schools)
  - Latin Schools (grammar schools)
  - ‘Academies’
  - Vocational training environments?
(2) Governments: Political contexts

• Courts, state apparatus, diplomacy:
• Secretaries, librarians, diplomats, scribes, astronomers, court poets, genealogists, secretaries of (city)states,
• Occasional remunerations of professors, historians
(3) Churches: Religious contexts

- Catholic church: popes, archbishops, cardinals, bishops, priests, deacons, etc.
- Lutheran church: pastors
- Calvinist church: ministers of the word
- Anglican church: (arch)bisops, preachers
- Dozens of smaller, dissenting groups
Means of communication (1)

- Conversation (few traces left)
- Published books
- Pamphlets
- Scientific journals (since 1665)
- Poems
Means of communication (2)

• Letters (usually 1 or 2 pages)
• Survive by hundreds of thousands in original versions or in handwritten copies
• Survive also by hundreds of thousands in printed form (published by authors themselves or by students/next of kin)
Languages

• Latin dominates (1400-1700)
• Italian and Spanish used often (1500-1600)
• French becomes important (1600-1800)
• English and Dutch enter the scene (1650-1800)
• German too (1700-1800)
• Scandinavian languages? Polish? Hungarian?...
Ideals of the Republic of Letters

• Reciprocity
• Exchange of knowledge: cult of communication
• Religious tolerance
• Acceptance of political differences
• Universal knowledge for the common good
• ‘The sciences are never at war’
• Well educated rulers
• Modesty, industry, friendliness, openness, constancy, patience, forgiveness

• [In practice: many pamphlet wars, vicious polemics, personal hatred, charlatans, lying, spying, prying, plagiarism, vanity, arrogance, mudslinging, etc.].
Exchange of what?

- Attachments:
  - Poems (funerals, births, anniversaries)
  - Lists with notes and remarks
  - Tables
  - Drawings
- Manuscripts (drafts of books; old manuscripts with texts from Greek and Roman authors; ancient inscriptions etc.)
- (Proofs of soon to be) published books
- Catalogues of books
- Objects from antiquity (coins, stones)
- Natural objects/specimens (plants, bones, stuffed animals, mounted insects)
- Etc.
Monsieur de l'Empire. — On voit le soir la Gare des vingt quartiers de la Seine. — On rentre dans une grande construction, dans laquelle il y a une grande piété de la Gare. — On y arrive par une petite porte que les gens qui y viennent empruntent par une petite porte que les gens qui y viennent empruntent. — On y arrive par une petite porte que les gens qui y viennent empruntent. — On y arrive par une petite porte que les gens qui y viennent empruntent. — On y arrive par une petite porte que les gens qui y viennent empruntent. — On y arrive par une petite porte que les gens qui y viennent empruntent.
About what?

• Universal knowledge:
• History, poetry, antiquity, ancient literature, church history, grammar, theology, law, medicine, philosophy, (logic, physics, metaphysics, ethics, politics), mathematics, astronomy, geography, animals, plants, etc.
• About books, politics, wars, discoveries
• About each other (deaths, new talents, illnesses, family life, friends and foes)
Correspondence networks

• Metadata of letters contain:
  – Author, place, date, recipient, place
  – Additional info: indexing of named entities, synopses, language identification, library holdings, incipits (first 6-10 words),
• Links between people and places: diplomatic mail, commercial routes (book trade), travelling students carrying letters, private couriers, state-run postal systems, complaints of postage

• Problems: multiple authors/recipient, undated/approximately dated letters; unknown places
• Variations in names and place names
• Various solutions (see previous Cultures of Knowledge –seminars)
Nodes (topography):

- Courts
- Universities
- Scholarly and scientific societies
- Salons
- Libraries
- Private academies
- Botanical gardens
- Collections of coins, stones, stuffed animals, rare objects, etc.
Nodes (people)

• Famous scholars
  – Fame generates more fame

• Well connected knowledge-brokers
  – Less conspicuous, but with fat address books
Famous ‘republicans’

• Angelo Poliziano (1405-1457)
• Antonio de Nebrija (1441-1522)
• Johannes Reuchlin (1455-1522)
• Desiderius Erasmus (1467/9-1536)
• Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527)
• Thomas More (1478-1535)
• Philipp Melanchthon (1497-1560)
• Petrus Ramus (1515-1572)
• Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592)
• Justus Lipsius (1547-1606)
• Joseph Scaliger (1540-1609)

• Hugo Grotius (1583-1645)
• James Ussher (1581-1656)
• Athanasius Kircher (1602-1680)
• Pierre Bayle (1647-1706)
• Gottfried W. Leibniz (1646-1717)
• Jean LeClerc (1657-1736)
• Voltaire (1694-1778)

• Joh. Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814)
• Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867)
• Stefan Zweig (1881-1942)
• T.S. Eliot (1888-1965)
Citizens: how many?

- Ultee (1987) 1,200 ‘members’ around 1700
- Brockliss (2013): 30,000 around 1790.
- Arenhold (1746):
  - lists 927 individual authors whose epistolaries were published (ca.1500-1746).
  - Each epistolary contains $x$ correspondents
  - $927x$ active correspondents in 250 years
- How complete?...
Citizens: Holy Roman Empire, 1575-1675

- Estermann (1992):
  - lists ca. 600 published (1600-1750) epistolaries of 17th-c. scholars from German territories
  - 600x active correspondents in 100 years in German lands

- Bürger (2002)
  - Lists 1020 published (1751-1980) epistolaries of 17th-c. scholars from German territories
  - 2,585 authors
  - 30,000 letters
Letters: how many?

• German Empire, 17\textsuperscript{th} c.: ca. 50,000-70,000 published letters?

• Whole of Europe, published letters: 300,000? 500,000?

• Whole of Europe, 1500-1800: 1 million? 2 million?

• ?......
How many unpublished ones?

- German Empire, 18\textsuperscript{th} c: from Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz alone some 20,000 letters survive.
- Kalliope (German letter catalogue in ca. 100 German libraries, all periods):
  - 2,2 million handwritten letters
  - 237,142 individual letter writers
- CEN (Dutch letter catalogue, all periods):
  - Ca. 2 million handwritten letters
- Whole of Europe, all periods: 10 million? 20 million?
- Period 1500-1800: 1 million? 5 million?
- ?....
Problems:

• How can one visualize and analyze the geographical changes of the network over time?
• How do we visualize the accumulated biographical data of people in the network?
• Assuming we have not only metadata, but also texts of letters; how do we mine them?
• Additional metadata: current whereabouts of letters (library holdings). The history of the transmission of these letters.
• Global standards for making various, differently organized digital letter collections compatible (towards an international meta-(meta)-catalogue of letter-meta-data
• How to serve users without a complicated manual?
T.S. Eliot (1944):

All men of letters ... have, irrespective of nationality, language or political bias, a common interest, and about which we might hope to have a common mind ... Such agreement would give more content to the phrase “the republic of letters”. The “republic” or (to use a stronger term) the “fraternity” of letters, does not, fortunately, demand that all men of letters should love one another – there always have been and always will be, jealousy and intrigue amongst authors: but it does imply that we have a mutual bond, and a mutual obligation to a common ideal.