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Breaking the Cycle
A Network Approach to the Production, Distribution, and Consumption of Culture

The history of the book has used various models for the analysis and description of the production, distribution, and consumption of texts. However, most models fail to grasp the full complexity of the networks around the production of printed matter. Alternatively, a model for network analysis may be able to grasp the dynamics of book production and to distinguish functions and processes from persons and institutions. Sociological network theory is a discipline that has its roots in the mathematical analysis of graphs. For this statistical analysis several key concepts have been distinguished which can be used, mutatis mutandis, for cultural history.

Networks are situated between loose affiliations and institutions: more structured than the former, less so than the latter. In network theory, players are distinguished according to their function as a net sender, a receiver, or as an intermediary. Other matters that are at the centre of network theorists’ attention are the density of a network (i.e. how many of the potential players are connected to the network, and who are excluded) and, finally, the length of the route via which two players are connected.

In my contribution, I will describe a network analysis of book history, based on several examples of enlightenment publishing, such as Voltaire’s Histoire du siècle de Louis XIV and the spread of the Traité des trois imposteurs. Understanding these underlying patterns of the creation of knowledge brings to light how various circles were connected and who played a pivotal role in the spread of enlightened ideas.

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