

Explorations in the Digital History of Ideas

What would the history of ideas look like if we were able to read the entire archive of printed material of a historical period? Would our ‘great men (usually)’ story of how ideas are formed and change over time begin to look very different? This book explores these questions through case studies on ideas such as ‘liberty’, ‘republicanism’ or ‘government’ using digital humanities approaches to large-scale text datasets. It sets out the methodologies and tools created by the Cambridge Concept Lab as exemplifications of how new digital methods can open up the history of ideas to heretofore unseen avenues of inquiry and evidence. By applying text mining techniques to intellectual history or the history of concepts, this book explains how computational approaches to text mining can substantially increase the power of our understanding of ideas in history.

Peter de Bolla is Professor of Cultural History and Aesthetics at the University of Cambridge. His publications include *The Architecture of Concepts: The Historical Formation of Human Rights* (2013), which won the Robert Lowry Patten Award in 2015. He is the author or editor of nine books, including *The Discourse of the Sublime: Readings in History, Aesthetics and the Subject* (1989), *Art Matters* (2001) and *The Education of the Eye: Painting, Landscape and Architecture in Eighteenth Century Britain* (2003). He directed the Cambridge Concept Lab between 2013 and 2017, a £1.5 m funded project on the structure of concepts. He is an International Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Explorations in the Digital History of Ideas

New Methods and Computational Approaches

Edited by

Peter de Bolla

University of Cambridge



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The Cambridge Concept Lab comprised four then post-docs, with myself as Director, and our project was to ascertain if it might be possible to discern what we thought of as ‘digital signatures’ for concepts. All of our work was intensely collaborative, and all four of my collaborators were equal partners in our endeavours. I thank them here – Ewan Jones, John Regan, Paul Nulty and Gabriel Recchia – for the amazingly generous spirit of their contributions. In many ways the four years of the project were some of the most intense, creative and productive moments of my research career. They were also (for the most part) fun.

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