Knowledge, Education, and Economic Growth:

Evidence from the Enlightenment in France

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We advance and test the hypothesis that economic development crucially depends on the interaction between two distinct notions of productive knowledge: human capital – knowledge embodied in people and at least partly acquired in schools – and the availability of codified knowledge. To test the hypothesis, the analysis makes use of a unique historical setting that allows us to disentangle the variation in both dimensions of productive knowledge and thereby to identify their interaction. Based on newly digitized data on the establishment and curriculum of public secondary schools in France from 1500 to 1789, the analysis documents several pieces of new evidence. The investigation of the cultural and institutional determinants of access to secondary education, in particular education with scientific curriculum, reveals an important role of the historical origins and of the enlightenment during the 16th century. Regarding the interaction between embodied and codified productive knowledge, the empirical results document that cities with a secondary school that provided scientific education also exhibited a greater demand for codified productive knowledge as measured by subscriptions to the newly available Encyclopedia, consistent with the hypothesis that human capital acquired in schools provided students with the epistemic knowledge required for the ideas of industrial enlightenment. Regarding the implications for economic development, the results show that education was instrumental for the adoption of codified knowledge, and affected long-run development through this channel.