

The World of the Salons: Sociability and Worldliness in Eighteenth-Century Paris

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The World of the Salons is an ambitious book. It shoots loads of ammunition and promises much. An abridged version of *Le Monde des salons: Sociabilité et mondanité à Paris au 18e siècle* (Fayard 2005), this English translation includes the substantive material of the original book, minus the suavity of the original French prose. The result is a more straightforward, succinct argument; but also one that, for being less expansive, comes across as a little less formidable.

In the following pages I am going to focus mainly on two basic, primary aspects of this book: how is the object of investigation constructed, namely, what is *mondanité*? What kind of sources and documents are used in support of the claims made in the book, and how are they selected and interpreted? Special attention is given to the ideological framing of the figure of Mme Geoffrin as historiographical object onto which much of the argument about the private/public nature of the salon is fastened. However I'll also be discussing some of the philosophical and methodological underpinnings of the book: in particular the critique of the Enlightenment public sphere; the claims being made regarding 'social' history; the relationship between class identity and cultural proficiency; the materiality of 'practices' vs. the ideality of representations.

Antoine Lilti sets as his goal to radically revise our conception of the prerevolutionary French salon and to propose new tools for an archeology of the practices of sociability. His claim is that the aesthetic and political object that we name the 'salon' is a composite, quasi-mythical *lieu de mémoire*; the documentary material that informs our understanding of it is a malleable substance that historians and novelists of all stripes have carved to fit their own ideological biases and prejudice. As he puts it, from the early 19th to the late 20th century, the norms and practices of elite French conviviality have been made to reflect alternatively: an idealized site of nostalgia for the refined civility of ancien regime society (Sainte-Beuve); a form of French exceptionalism located in a culture of conversation coextensive with literary expression (Marc Fumaroli; Benedetta Craveri); a vibrant intellectual community brought together by the authority of the women who served as its hosts and moderators (Dena Goodman); an ideal of sociability that migrated from conduct literature, to anthropology, to politics, and resulted in the utopian vision of an apolitical society reconciled under its aegis (Daniel Gordon). All these approaches are being challenged here. Indeed,

they emerge, just below the surface of the argument, like a palimpsest: for this book, faithful to its critical intent, is as much an original work as a rewriting of previous ones.

However, despite a tendency to paint broadly with the same brush and to favor innuendo over direct engagement, Lilti's *différend* is not with the likes of Sainte-Beuve, who may enjoy their peaceful rest, but primarily with two American historians, Dena Goodman and Daniel Gordon. Lilti's argument is that Parisian salons were extension of the court and 'forms of perpetuation of aristocratic prestige' (p. 8). Far from embodying a quasi-democratic space for meaningful intellectual exchange, as Goodman and Gordon have claimed, 'enlightened theories of sociability were mobilized to justify worldly practices' intended to preserve the social preeminence of the Parisian nobility (p. 9). Writers adhered to the ideology of sociability because it allowed them to promote their work, enhance their prestige, and gain access to private and state patronage (such as the Academies and other kinds of royal sinecures). Rather than contribute to the exercise of the critical and political reason that came to fruition in the revolutionary societies of the 1790s, as Jürgen Habermas suggested, the writers who attended the salons were eager to conform to aristocratic norms: 'They were dreaming about the kingdom of *politesse* rather than the Republic of Letters'.⁽¹⁾

Accordingly, Lilti sees no reason to focus on the handful of 'literary salons' singled out by generations of writers, memoirist and historians (namely those of Mme Geoffrin, Mlle de Lespinasse, M. and Mme Necker, M. and Mme Helvétius, the circle of d'Holbach and to a lesser extent the salon of Mme du Deffand), because the notion that anything special had been going on in those houses and not in others is a figment of salon historiography. 'Worldly sociability was a long-term phenomenon' spanning the 17th to the end of the 19th century, surviving the Revolution and even extending in some form to the present day. The subject of his book, Lilti explains, is 'not so much the 'salons' themselves as *worldliness*:' not a 'compilation of portraits and anecdotes,' but 'the complex mechanisms that guaranteed the social and cultural distinction of *le monde*. Comprehension of what was at stake here requires both a hermeneutics of worldly representations and a historical sociology of high society' (p. 7). It also requires 'new sources.'

1. What was Mondanité? From Proust to the 18th Century

How does the author fare in the pursuit of this goal? Can objective, quantitative analysis of the demographics of salon attendance throw new light on this multifaceted phenomenon, which left scant written evidence of its oral practices? To his credit, Lilti is the first to make an accurate inventory of the police reports addressed weekly to the *Secrétariat d'État aux Affaires étrangères (Contrôle des Étrangers)* which documented the comings and goings of the vast number of foreign diplomats who criss-crossed indefatigably the Parisian high sites of sociability. A total of sixty-two salons are reported between 1774 and 1789. We are now able to know that the Neckers welcomed diplomats 640 times, and that Mme Geoffrin, her daughter Mme de la Ferté-Imbault, Mme du Deffand, and the baron d'Holbach were among the houses most frequented by foreigners. Neglected by historians, but extremely well-attended salons emerge from those files, like that of the banker François Tourton and that of the duchesse de Praslin: the latter sets the record for the highest number of diplomats received over half a century; it also boasts, Lilti tells us, the record for best-attended salon which historians have ignored (p. 53).

It's not clear what we should we make of this: is the Praslin salon a precious untapped source, which historians have failed to pay attention to, distracted as they were by the various Geoffrins and Lespinasses and Neckers and d'Holbachs? Or is its high volume of guests ultimately insignificant? The question is worth asking, for it may help us to understand what, if anything, stands to be gained by following these sources. The police informants' extensive lists of guests lets us know which salons were more active, when they waxed and waned, the extent of overlap among the guests of the various houses, the nebulae of affiliations, clientelism, and family ties. As Lilti notes, the Parisian space of sociability was both supple and porous, the same guests circulated among the various houses of the upper echelons of *le monde*. Networks of conviviality intersected, rendered homogeneous by a whole range of practices that might have differed marginally but which all included: a good dinner (that was paramount); gambling; listening to music; private theatrical performances; the occasional reading of poetry, or other such literary novelty; much schmoozing,

courting and exchange of gossip.

We also learn that the Russian ladies visiting the capital went every evening to the Praslins's, but also frequented the marquise de la Ferté-Imbault; that Prince Auguste Casimir Sulkowski, an intimate of king Stanislaw Poniatowski, attended during his visit in 1765 the salon of Mme Geoffrin (a close friend of the king); and that when he moved permanently to Paris he visited assiduously the duchesse de Praslin (a must), and the prince de Soubise, making sure not to neglect the dinners of the maréchal de Biron and the receptions of the duchesse de La Vallière, and that eventually he started his own salon... and so on, and so forth. While this information might certainly be valuable to someone, it's hard to see what its payoff might be here, aside from the fact that it allows Lilti to muddy the waters and drown the proverbial *poisson* of the salons worth studying within the larger sea of conviviality, where fish of all shapes and sizes swam together.

But, wait, isn't that exactly the point of this book? Isn't the author telling us that he is refocusing the picture away from the anecdotal, individual salons, toward the larger sociological issues involved in the practices and politics of conviviality and worldliness? We can hardly blame him for doing exactly what he has promised to do, can we?

Sure, but is he really doing what he has promised? Let us look more closely at the method that is being used here to reframe the salon as a historiographical object. As we have seen, the subject of this book is not the *salon* but *worldliness*: in French, *mondanité*, a word also translatable as 'society life'.⁽²⁾ As it turns out, however, Lilti devotes much more space to discussing the use and abuse of the word he is *not* using (*salon*) than to discussing the meaning of one he is using: *mondain*; *mondanité*. Of course, anyone familiar with early-modern novels knows that '*le monde, le grand monde, les gens de qualité, les gens du monde, aller dans le monde, usages du monde, etc.*', were all standard expressions that denoted not the 'world' at large, but the far narrower, elite world of urban, polite society (p. 83). The irony was not lost on the people who used that word and played with its connotations. 'Vous avez actuellement besoin d'une femme qui vous mette dans le monde', a young man is told by his mentor in a novel by Crébillon. It's a play between *mettre au monde* – to give birth – and *mettre dans le monde* – to turn someone into a prominent, brilliant member of polite society (the word being used by Crébillon is *célèbre*). Making a young man *célèbre* is something only a *célèbre*, older woman can do, by making him her lover (the same goes for young, ambitious women: they need to get an experienced male lover with a brilliant reputation for sex and wit).⁽³⁾

But in the 18th century, the meaning of *mondain* or *mondanité* did not quite overlap with that of *le monde*; nor did it have the meaning it has today. In the dictionaries of the time, including as late as the sixth edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie* of 1835, we read the following: '*Plaisirs, honneurs mondains. Spectacle mondain. Habit mondain. Parure, vie mondaine. Dans l'une et l'autre acception, il ne s'emploie guère hors des sermons et des livres de dévotion*'.⁽⁴⁾ *Mondain* was heavily inflected by a theological discourse that set it in strict opposition to the spiritual realm. As a consequence, *mondain* did not evoke primarily the pleasures of an elegant company, embroidered sofas and refined cuisine: rather, it evoked the sinful attachment to the vain and ephemeral affairs of the mortal world; not powdered ladies in décolleté dancing in a ballroom, but penance and deathbed confession. Lilti does acknowledge that the term had negative theological connotations, but he claims that they were lost in the 18th century, especially after the publication of Voltaire's poem *Le Mondain*, when 'apologetics for profane pleasures also applied to the way of life of an urban, polite and civilized elite.' In the *Encyclopédie*, Lilti affirms, 'the term *mondain* was stripped of its theological meaning' (p. 83).

But that is not true. *Mondain* never lost its primary theological connotations until well into the 19th century. As for Voltaire's *Le mondain*, the poem was meant as a paean to a moderate form of epicureanism and to the economic advantages of commercial society: the picture Voltaire paints is a broad one which includes, but is not limited to, the mores of aristocratic society. What's more, we would be hard pressed to find in the ARTFL database, before the 1820s, the adjective 'mondain' being used to denote the ways of life specific to aristocratic, urban society. In the *Encyclopédie*, *mondain* scarcely ever appears, and when it does, it's used in an embattled sense, as a rebuttal to a religiously-driven critique of the pleasures of this world. Which is to

say that its connotation is not *sociological* but *moral*. ‘Qu'est-ce que l'air *mondain*, un plaisir *mondain*, un homme *mondain*, une femme *mondaine*, un vêtement *mondain*, un spectacle *mondain*, un esprit *mondain*? Rien de sensé, ou la conformité de toutes ces choses entre les usages, les moeurs, les coutumes, le cours ordinaire de la multitude.’ (5) What the (anonymous) author of this article suggests is that this term's range of application is so broad as to be meaningless: everything we do in society is ‘mondain’, therefore, unless we want to be derogatory towards all the things ‘la multitude’ does, we should avoid using it. The key term here is *multitude*, which most certainly does not refer to elite society. For Pierre Nicole, the Jansenist author of the popular *Essais de morale*, which ran to many editions during the 17th century and beyond, a ‘femme *mondaine*’ was a prostitute. In the 18th century, the police inspector Meunier, who regularly informed Louis XV on the vices of the capital, drew an alphabetical list of prostitutes whom he called ironically ‘femmes du monde’. (6) The question to ask is therefore the following: did the concept of *mondanité*, as this book frames it, exist in the 18th century? And if not, what is Lilti talking about?

The answer is readily given. The Parisian salons, Lilti says in the conclusion to the book, were a peak in the history of high society within the *longue durée* of a history of *mondanité* that stretched back ‘at least to the late 16th century and continued on through the Belle Époque, to say nothing of the heritage of medieval and Renaissance courtesy or the mores of the contemporary jet-set’ (p. 239). The phenomenon of *mondanité*, Lilti opines, transcends periodization and is central to French culture. Over its long history it has been subject to intense aesthetization and has become intimately bound with literature, in particular with the novel. ‘We have a great literature of worldliness in France, from Molière to Proust’, Lilti observes, quoting Roland Barthes. But it is Proust who holds the key to the interpretation of *mondanité* in this book. Lilti writes: ‘Worldliness is indeed an essential part of Proust's work. *À la Recherche du temps perdu* offers general lessons on the evolution of social groups, on their languages, their practices and their positions, illustrated by the crossed destinies of Madame Verdurin and the duchesse de Guermantes. The novel also displays the micocosm of worldliness and its laws’ (p. 241). In the French version he goes a little further, crediting Proust with the skills of a true sociologist: ‘Les longues et minutieuses descriptions de réceptions mondaines et de conversation de salon sont d'implacables leçons de sociologie’. (7) Lilti is thus being very straightforward about his method: there exists such a system as ‘mondanité’ which displays a remarkable uniformity across time and political circumstance. Thus Proust's fictional portrait determines how we should approach early-modern sociability. Proust's fictional characters are ideal-types, hermeneutic models for understanding the behavior of historical salonnières: ‘L'oeuvre de Proust détermine profondément le regard que l'on porte sur la mondanité. Toute réception aristocratique évoque pour nous la duchesse de Guermantes, tout cénacle littéraire a des échos Verdurin’ (pp. 21–2). (8)

Inspired by Proust, Roland Barthes saw *mondanité* as a formal, closed, ritualized system. His reading of La Bruyère describes a ‘social imaginary of enclosure’ which allows the writer to analyze reality as if it were already formalized as a system of signs, thus bypassing the problem of realism (*Essais critiques*, 1964, quoted in *The world of the Salons*, p. 241). *Mondanité* is both a poetic and a sociological object; it's both fictional and real. In *Proust et les signes* (1964), Deleuze saw *mondanité* as an artificial world made of esoteric and trivial rules impenetrable to outsiders. As Proust's narrator learns to decipher those signs and painfully conquers critical insight, he undergoes a slow process of disenchantment. The signs of *mondanité* however do not refer to anything: their emptiness reflects their purely ritual function.

A self-sufficient, closed world of esoteric rules intended to exclude those who do not belong; a system of signs that refers to the cohesiveness of a group aware of its own superiority, but constantly looking for new ways to validate it; a hierarchical society in which hospitality produces nothing but a sense of its own distinction and ‘even the slight nuances of civility [are] the essential elements of social life’ (p. 83); a conversation whose aim ‘[is] not to deepen understanding of a question or to exchange ideas, but rather to reinforce the feeling of belonging among those who have mastered the virtuosity of the conversational form’ (p. 164); a world hungry for news, but ultimately indifferent to anything other than its own narcissistic self-mirroring, for ‘the most interesting news items – those that most attracted the attention of the salons – [concern] members of Paris 'good society,' their successes and failures, their advancement at court and their love affairs’ (p. 165). Such is the ‘world of the salons’: it emerges from the pages of Proust and is distilled

and processed in the crucible of the structural formalism of mid-sixties literary criticism.

Despite the pledge to introduce a 'new social history' based on anthropological and sociological analysis, supported by precise data concerning the material conditions of the object studied, *The World of the Salons* remains methodologically a very old-fashioned book. The bulk of its argument is supported by the same anecdotal sources that the author had warned us against: memoirs, correspondences, diaries, treatises on civility, literary journalism and fiction. Indeed, Lilti's startling trust in the possibility of using fiction (especially fiction with a satirical bent) as a transparent window on historical reality would be touching, if it wasn't so misguided.⁽⁹⁾

His sources teem with anecdotes, which, as Lilti appropriately warns (but all too often forgets, especially when the sources seem to confirm his own views), are a genre whose transmission must be questioned critically, contextualized, compared with competing versions and adjusted for retrospective distortion (pp. 9-10). These texts enlist a large cast of characters and, as narratives, they function as powerful rhetorical tools. Prominent among these characters is Mme Geoffrin, one of the heroines of Goodman's Enlightenment salon, whom Lilti turns inside out like a skinned rabbit. A real-life embodiment of the *bourgeois gentilhomme*, Lilti's Geoffrin is deeply snobbish, astute, calculating, and relentlessly self-promoting. Despite her efforts, however, 'her reputation remained fragile and was subject to satire' (p. 235). The main piece of evidence lies in an article published in the *Gazette d'Utrecht* by the abbé Guasco, a close friend of Montesquieu, who called her 'the fishwife of the fashionable world' (p. 220).⁽¹⁰⁾ The story behind this is worth examining because it touches on the issue of publicity and privacy in the salon.

Edward Gibbon, who during his first visit to Paris, armed simply with the reputation of a first book and some letters of introduction, had had all doors opened to him, including Mme Geoffrin's, was astonished at how easy it had been: 'À Londres il faut faire son chemin dans les maisons qui ne s'ouvrent qu'avec peine. Là on croit vous faire plaisir en vous recevant: ici on croit s'en faire à soi-même. Aussi je connois plus de maisons à Paris qu'à Londres: le fait n'est pas vraisemblable, mais il est vrai'.⁽¹¹⁾ Such testimony notwithstanding, the Parisian salons, Lilti says, were private, restricted and elite spaces, 'access to which was not gained by a simple demonstration of one's talents' (p. 38). Mme Geoffrin, who lorded over her guests like a sovereign, is meant to be an example, indeed a case study, of those courtly, exclusionary dynamics. Since a great deal of Lilti's sociological claims about the salon are hitched on to her, let us take a closer look at the woman who best embodied the figure of the 18th-century salonnière, both to her contemporaries and to subsequent historians.

2. Mme Geoffrin: from the Salon to the World

Why did Mme Geoffrin decide, towards the end of 1754, to ban the Abbé Guasco, who had been introduced to her salon several years earlier by Montesquieu? The abbé claimed that he had asked a little too loud, in front of her guests, to be excused on account of his *colique*. Others however reported that Mme Geoffrin had suspected Guasco of being a foreign 'spy' of sorts, which was not so far-fetched, given that several men of letters in Paris were being paid by a foreign patron to provide them with exclusive reports of the 'literary' news and the rumors of the court and the town (Suard was the literary correspondent for the margrave of Bayreuth, La Harpe for the Count Shuvaloff, and Morellet for Lord Shelburne).⁽¹²⁾ Now that we know more, thanks to Lilti, concerning the French Foreign Ministry's cohort of salon spies, Mme Geoffrin's fears seem even less far-fetched. At any rate, Guasco would not be convinced by the *suissse's* assurances that 'his mistress was not at home,' and after he had managed a few times too many to force his way through, he was one day pushed back onto the street. 'Le vilain prêtre, suivant l'esprit de l'église, ne lui a point pardonné,' wrote Charles Collé in his journal, despite being no fan of Geoffrin. 'Il avoit à Paris une assez mauvaise réputation, et la noirceur avec laquelle il vient de se venger suffit elle seule pour faire voir sa vilaine âme. Ses talents littéraires sont très obscurs'.⁽¹³⁾ In 1767 Guasco published in Florence a collection of Montesquieu's *Lettres familières* that included a few scurrilous expressions concerning Mme Geoffrin, which scholars think were likely the product of the abbé's own pen.⁽¹⁴⁾ Mme Geoffrin, leveraging discreetly the influence of Choiseul, had the edition confiscated and the offending pages covered (*cartonnées*); the

Gazette d'Utrecht published a retraction of Guasco's offensive article.

The tale of the misadventure of General Clerk follows immediately the report of the Guasco affair, to further drive home the point that there was nothing Mme Geoffrin liked more, apart from bowing down to grantees, than discard the humbler people. That is perhaps why General Clerk is shorn here of his martial title and called instead *Mr. Clerk*. He is 'a Scot who had served in the English army and was much appreciated for his curiosity and his wit.' Mr. Clerk, Lilti says, was 'a victim of his lack of small talk and failure to grasp custom' (p. 37). In reality, General Clerk was, by Diderot's account, an unstoppable bloviator. 'C'est un homme d'esprit, mais grand parleur, et même fatigant par le tic qu'il a d'ajouter à chaque phrase qu'il prononce un *Hem?* de sorte qu'il a l'air de vous interroger continuellement, quoiqu'il n'attende jamais votre réponse'.⁽¹⁵⁾ That may have been no problem to Diderot, who could outtalk anybody, but it was one to Mme Geoffrin. Lilti paints Clerk as a Scot unschooled in Parisian customs, but Clerk had been in Paris for a long while and knew the lay of the land. Having been introduced by d'Holbach, rather than leave with him, as was customary for a first visit, he settled himself down comfortably and wouldn't budge. 'What do you normally do with your time?' Mme Geoffrin asked, in hopes of tempting him to go somewhere else. 'When I am comfortable at someone's house, I sit down to chat and I stay', Clerk replied. Mme Geoffrin blanched. Obviously too comfortable, Clerk stayed through the evening. He invited himself to dinner (*souper*), while her other guest came and went, and did not leave until late at night, deaf to the lady's discreet, but increasingly desperate, attempts to get rid of him. She did not go to bed until she had given instructions never to let him in again.

Mme Geoffrin had a busy schedule and she would arrange her guest list carefully, according to the affinities and interests people were likely to share with each other. A stubborn guest like Clerk disrupted all her plans.⁽¹⁶⁾ But what these anecdotes, as presented by Lilti, are meant to suggest is that the back door of Mme Geoffrin's residence, like that of Mme Verdurin, was littered with the cadavers of the guests she had humiliated and discarded: those of Charles Swann, of the timid Saniette, of the baron de Charlus... But what is there in common between Mme Geoffrin and the phony, brazen, tyrannical Mme Verdurin, the opulent patroness of 'le petit clan des fidèles' in Proust's *À la Recherche du temps perdu*, who governs her guests like a tyrant, dispenses favors and humiliations, exacts devotion of body and mind, and excommunicates them on a whim?

One thing: both women are wealthy bourgeois. That's all it takes for the literary scholar Laurent Versini to call Geoffrin 'la Verdurin du XVIIIe siècle'.⁽¹⁷⁾ Snobbery, as we know, is *la chose du monde la mieux partagée* (academics are no exception). But what can Mme Geoffrin reveal to us about the intimate, bewildering, messy interface between the semi-private realm of sociable elites and the sphere of political power in prerevolutionary France?

Marie-Thérèse Rodet, orphaned of both parents by the age of six, was married at 14 to François Geoffrin, a widower of 48. The bride brought him a dowry of 185.000 livres; his fortune was nearly twice as much. It grew over the years, thanks to some excellent investments in the manufacture of mirrors and to Mme Geoffrin's business acumen.⁽¹⁸⁾ At 16 she gave birth to a daughter (the future Marquise de la Ferté-Imbault). Mother and daughter lived together for most of their lives (after the latter became a widow at 22), but their relationship was a peculiar mixture of intimacy and wariness. Mme Geoffrin would address her daughter in her letters as 'Belle Marquise'.⁽¹⁹⁾ An awkward mother to her only child, Mme Geoffrin devoted herself with energy, some would say with vehemence, to mothering her guests. In that, she excelled. Reading about it, one is reminded of the classic stereotype of the Jewish mother: nurturing, meddling, quick-tempered and hypersensitive. Even the dry, mordant Walpole, the lifelong correspondent of her 'rival' Mme du Deffand, was disarmed. When he was laid up in bed with a gout attack, she came to visit: 'Madame Geoffrin came and sat two hours last night by my bedside. I could have sworn it had been my Lady Hervey, she was so good to me. It was with so much sense, information, instruction and correction! The manner of the latter charms me. I never saw anybody in my days that catches one's faults and vanities and impositions so quick, that explains them to one so clearly, and convinces one so easily. I never liked to be set right before! You cannot imagine how I taste it! I make her both my confessor and director, and begin to think I

shall be a reasonable creature at last, which I had never intended to be. [...] If it was worth her while, I assure your Ladyship she might govern me like a child'.[\(20\)](#)

As Lilti tells us, the peak of Mme Geoffrin's European celebrity (though, being committed to keeping the Geoffrin phenomenon strictly under private, *mondain* wraps, he does not use that word), came when she undertook a much-publicized trip to Poland to visit the man she had been calling her 'son' for the previous ten years: the king of Poland, Stanislaw August Poniatowski, who had been introduced to her circle 'comme l'enfant de la maison,' during his stay in Paris in 1754.[\(21\)](#) Although the trip turned out to be 'ruined' by political conflicts at the court of Warsaw, 'which Mme Geoffrin could not or would not keep away from,' she managed to 'fool' everybody into thinking it had been a great success, thanks to an 'intense campaign' of letter writing which peddled a highly self-serving version of the events.[\(22\)](#)

However, Lilti's rigid divide between private and public spheres, between personal experience and public persona, is ill-suited for understanding the complexity of early-modern communication. He does not see, on the one hand, that Geoffrin's sustained, semi-private chronicle of her triumphant tour of the Austrian and Polish courts grew, with all due distinctions, from the tradition of such sociable *divertissements*, destined to circulate within a circle of friends, as the *Voyage de Chapelle and Bachaumont* (1663), with its mock-heroic tone and nonchalant display of self-awareness. And on the other, he is unwilling to consider that there is more to Mme Geoffrin's personage than the delusions of a celebrity-obsessed bourgeois parvenue. Why did busy autocrat Catherine of Russia start a correspondence with Geoffrin, at about the same time that she started one with Voltaire [\(23\)](#), and a couple of years before she started writing to Diderot? Catherine went through the considerable trouble of writing long letters herself, unlike Louis XIV, who had his love letters written by Dangeau. What was in it for her? And what led Stanislas-Auguste to put up with Mme Geoffrin and her fits of temper? Lilti's desire to portray Geoffrin as a ridiculous personage blinds him to the complexities of the relationship between a private citizen and a sovereign, and to the peculiarities of the emerging 'public sphere'. Habermas's model may be less than crystal-clear in its range of applications, yet his fundamental intuition that a new understanding of 'the public use of reason was guided specifically by such private experiences as grew out of the audience-oriented (*publikumsbezogen*) subjectivity of the conjugal family's intimate domain (*Intimsphäre*)', gives us some tools for grasping the unprecedented phenomenon of the autocratic sovereign of a large state making the effort to 'explain' herself both as a political actor and a private individual, lifting, ever so slightly, the curtain on her carefully staged 'private' life, all for the benefit of the private citizen of a foreign country.[\(24\)](#)

As for Stanislas-Auguste, he was both touched and flattered by Geoffrin's unexpected visit, and prepared carefully for it. William Cole, an intimate of Walpole, wrote in his Paris journal that the king went to the trouble of surprising her with a replica of her Parisian rooms, in the apartment he gave her in his palace.[\(25\)](#) The account Stanislas gives in his memoirs (which he started in 1771 and left unpublished at the time of his death in 1798) is the one source Lilti gives as evidence for the troubles that emerged. But Stanislas's report is not remotely as dismissive of Mme Geoffrin as Lilti would have us believe, and it's worth quoting it at some length. 'Cette madame Geoffrin, dont il a été parlé dans la première partie de ces mémoires, vint de Paris jusqu'à Varsovie en 1766 uniquement pour voir le roi. La vogue singulière de cette personne dans le public de Paris l'avait rendue si remarquable que non seulement les coryphées de la littérature française, les Voltaires, les Montesquieu, non seulement les étrangers de toutes les nations de l'Europe, les plus distingués, briguaient d'être admis dans sa maison et d'être en relations de correspondance avec elle, mais jusqu'à l'impératrice de Russie, lui avaient écrit de sa main plusieurs fois, d'un style de faveur et même de familiarité. Marie-Thérèse, elle-même, l'avait reçue avec distinction et caressée à Vienne à son passage. Or de ce qu'une telle personne, âgée de plus de soixante ans, se fût déplacée pour venir de si loin uniquement par affection pour le roi, parut être un événement trop flatteur pour le roi, pour qu'il ne mît en mouvement toute la jalousie du palatin de Russie. Aussi n'omit-il rien de ce qui pouvait convertir en déboires cette espèce de bonne fortune du roi'.[\(26\)](#) Indeed, the idyll sours a bit when the king's uncle tells her that Stanislas thinks she has no discerning taste for the arts (which is bound to hurt, given her longtime efforts as an art patron and broker). It's enough to send a person like Geoffrin, who has 'un naturel si impétueux' and is 'si peu maîtresse de sa langue quand elle s'irrit[e],' in a downward spiral of wounded pride and passion (ibid., p.

568). We are worlds away from courtly dynamics. There is little self-restraint here, no bourgeois primness and propriety. If Mme Geoffrin is just a courtier, as Lilti portrays her, she is certainly not behaving like one. Yet, she gets away with it. It's also worth noting that this is not a case of a woman meddling in court politics: whatever politics there are, it's about her personally: Mme Geoffrin does not meddle: she is the target of this little drama that revolves around her.

With Catherine, even more than with Stanislas-Auguste, we can't help but realize that Mme Geoffrin must have found herself without a road map in this strange new world in which a sovereign engaged a *particulier* in a personal correspondence that teetered on the razor-thin edge between private and public, and forced her to negotiate invisible and dangerous boundaries. Thus, when Catherine, with her habitual, flattering *bonhomie*, invited Mme Geoffrin to scold her, as she did with her other friends – for were they not good friends? – Mme Geoffrin took her at her word, and dared to offer her candid, unreserved advice. It concerned the ugly affair of the assassination of the young prince Ivan (a possible rival for Catherine's throne). The empress responded patiently at first. And when Mme Geoffrin came back with more, Catherine still took the trouble to explain her decision at length, though this time in a tone that ensured that her Parisian friend would not be tempted to revisit the subject.[\(27\)](#)

Mme Geoffrin was in good company. Diderot too was taken in, when he fancied himself to be Catherine's political advisor, and for the duration of his stay in Saint Petersburg (between October 1773 and March 1774) met daily with the empress to discuss a comprehensive program of political, economic and educational reforms for Russia. None of which ever stood a chance. When, after his death, Catherine found among the papers Diderot had bequeathed her his sharply critical *Observations sur le Nakaz*, a detailed commentary on her legislation, she lashed out at him in a letter to Grimm. The *Observations*, she wrote, were 'sheer drivel devoid of any knowledge, prudence, and foresight,' and their author was 'a madman' who 'ought to have been placed under guardianship long ago'.[\(28\)](#)

3. '*Il compilait, compilait, compilait ...*' [\(29\)](#) *The Appeal to Textual Evidence: Suasive but not Persuasive*

Public opinion and the public sphere are themes that keep popping up throughout the book, but their treatment appears confused, slippery and unsystematic. That is all the more puzzling as Lilti has expressed forcefully his desire to do away with the Habermasian model of public opinion, which he sees as flawed because it rests upon an 'idyllic vision of the public sphere' and tends to 'idealize the effects of sociability and to overestimate the latter's critical and public dimension'.[\(30\)](#) Things become clearer when we realize that Lilti's approach to achieving this goal is not to attack frontally the theoretical underpinnings of the various accounts of the public opinion and the public sphere, such as those of Keith Baker, Roger Chartier and Mona Ozouf. On the contrary, Lilti introduces his critique through a side door. He seems to think that undermining the 'idyllic' vision of salon sociability as a central institution of the republic of letters would be enough to send the whole house of cards of the Habermasian model tumbling down.

Habermas argued that the 18th-century urban salon made possible an alliance among cultured elites ('the heirs of humanistic-aristocratic society'), which included both bourgeois and aristocrats.[\(31\)](#) Their exchange, though initially apolitical, gradually developed into public criticism. In other words, Habermas claimed not only that aristocrats and bourgeois intellectuals largely shared their culture and their values; he also suggested that one did not need to plot a radical overhaul of monarchical politics in order to contribute to the creation of a discursive space for its critique, for it was precisely such a critique that turned out to be the precondition for the emergence of more radical forms of political consciousness. To Lilti, this is heresy. To him, the Achilles heel of the Habermasian model is to be found precisely in this notion that the French urban aristocracies participated to the Enlightenment critique and that their practices of conviviality were in any way compatible with sustained intellectual pursuit. Such a notion runs counter to too many prejudices inculcated by several decades of Marxist dogma, reframed and refurbished in Bourdieu's sociology of 'distinction' and Norbert Elias's skewed civilizing process, for it not to be portrayed as vulnerable to even the flimsy evidence laid out in this book. And yet, while the hodgepodge of quotes and anecdotes that Lilti has put together may seem at first sight to pose a real challenge (especially in the longer French version, for

compilations work best through bulk), much of its substance crumbles under a closer reading.

Lilti makes broad generalizations which he bolsters with examples gleaned from a variety of sources. Typically, in chapter two, we read that ‘The salons, far from rising above social differences, were ruled by customs that implied a strict attention to the social status of one's interlocutor.’ Follows an example: ‘The maréchal de Richelieu firmly reminded Madame Favart that “the first [talent] of everyone in a society is to be sociable, and when that society has superior members, not to depart from its laws of subordination.”’ These are harsh words indeed! What could have prompted this descendant of Cardinal Richelieu, a celebrated libertine, courtier, and highly capable soldier, to impart such a lesson to poor little Madame Favart? For Lilti has it right, these are the exact words that Richelieu put down in a letter to Favart, who was then at the peak of her career as a dancer and actress. There is only one problem: Richelieu is not talking about the salons, nor about society in a convivial sense. When he says ‘society,’ he means the *Société des Comédiens Italiens* (32), a company of professional actors sharing profits and expenses, authorized by royal privilege and subject to courtly hierarchy and supervision. In other words, this is a business letter! Since 1757, the *Société* was placed under the authority of the *Intendant des Menus Plaisirs*, who, at the time of this letter, was Papillon de la Ferté. The Intendant responded in turn to the Maréchal de Richelieu who, in his role as *Premier Gentilhomme de la Chambre*, was in charge of the royal theatres. What Richelieu is doing in this letter is calling Mme Favart to her duty towards La Ferté, following a conflict internal to the troupe.

‘Diderot said much the same,’ we read in the next sentence. The proof follows: ‘A knowledge of the regards attached to the various conditions forms an essential part of the seemliness and the customs of the world’ (p. 79). But a simple look at Diderot's text easily tells us not only that Diderot is not saying the same as Richelieu, but that we are squarely in the realm of free association, loose analogy and slipshod semantics. For Diderot's quote is immediately followed by this: ‘Ignorance or neglect of these regards would bring back the bearskin and the forest dwelling. It would mean claiming the rights of the savage while living in the midst of civilized society’.(33) Diderot is talking about organized, civil and political society (‘citizens distributed in different classes’) from a legal and anthropological standpoint: he is not talking about salon society, nor is he formulating a critique of social distinction (Diderot follows up with musings on what he would do if the king of Poland came to visit him in his garret to talk about ‘issues concerning the happiness of humans’, and with thoughts on the dignity of the man of letters.) Lilti is conflating the different meanings of ‘society’, which Gordon had carefully demarcated, mistaking *société* for *sociétés*, taking a critique of society as a whole and applying it narrowly to the society of the salons. He thus misrepresents Diderot's meaning in much the same way as he misrepresents Richelieu's.

The problem with compilations is that their value as proof rests upon the reader's willingness to ignore the original text and trust the oracular exemplarity of the segment cited. It's ultimately a question of faith. Much of the material put together in this book is similarly taken out of context and forced to say things it doesn't actually say. ‘The history of worldliness is also a history of amusement’, writes Lilti in the book's conclusion, and then he cites Mercier: ‘Among the people of the salon, the first pursuit, that of every day, is to amuse themselves’. Now, that seems clear enough. Lilti thinks so, and he tells us that ‘here the formula should be taken literally’ (p. 237). Let us do exactly that, then. The phrase comes from a piece entitled ‘Esprit public,’ in the collection *Le Nouveau Paris* (1799):

Ce n'est pas l'esprit public qui règne à Paris, c'est l'esprit de critique. Chez le peuple des salons la première affaire, celle de tous les jours, c'est de s'amuser. Rien de moins amusant que la louange. La satire est bien meilleure pour passer gaîment une heure ou deux; elle trempe ses petites flèches dans tous les acides; plaisante dans les cercles, mordante dans les cafés, boudeuse dans les coteries, grondeuse aux comptoirs, crieurde à la halle, rieuse ou plaignante partout, mais partout ayant pour base cet esprit de contradiction qui éloigne nécessairement cet intérêt commun qui prend sa part de l'intérêt de tous.

When given its context back, Mercier's phrase is transparent enough: only, it's not about worldly elites.

Mercier says *the people of the salon* as one would say *the people of the book*: it's a defining quality, a Parisian mode of existence which has now migrated from the salon to the café, the shop counter, the fishmarket. It's widespread among the elite, the bourgeoisie, and the lower classes. What Mercier does here is highlight the resilience of the Parisian people, regardless of their social rank and mode of expression. The drive toward *amusement* is not all good, however: it's a corollary of the 'esprit de critique' that Mercier opposes to 'esprit public', the patriotic ideal of cohesiveness and solidarity which other revolutionary writings of the time bitterly decried as illusory.(34)

Despite the lack of solid evidence, the principle that the salon provided amusement of a trivial, ephemeral and narcissistic kind is firmly established in this book. Conversation was primarily a game, an exercise in virtuosity, not an exchange of ideas; its aim 'was not to deepen understanding of a question or to exchange ideas, but rather to reinforce the feeling of belonging among those who had mastered the virtuosity of that conversational form' (p. 164). 'Even in d'Holbach's salon, worldly conversation did not provide an opportunity for philosophical discussion. [...] Conversation, even in d'Holbach's salon, was less focused on the diffusion of enlightened theories or the exercise of critical reason than on a mastery of news items and their circulation,' for mastering the freshest news was essential to establishing the 'prestige' of a salon (pp. 165–6). In a subsection section entitled 'Politeness and imitation', Lilti quotes at length La Harpe's 'sharp analysis' of the dynamics of public readings in the salon. Society readings, Lilti argues, could not yield real, informed judgment, because the participants were constrained by politeness and the 'spirit of society', which 'governed opinions' and 'generated imitation and emulation' (p. 172). 'Influential members of the circle might impose their own judgment [...] leaving it to social dynamics to amplify praise and declarations of enthusiasm [...] The very possibility of individual judgment was threatened by the mechanisms of worldly society' (p. 173). Lilti bases this assessment on the testimony of La Harpe, who, he says, 'distinguishes three forms of the reception of texts: public presentation [public theater], private judgment, and society reading' (p. 171). 'For La Harpe, politeness was not a simple relationship between two individuals, but a group relationship that had profound consequences for the conditions in which judgments are forged in society. Central to La Harpe's analysis was a 'spirit of society' that generated imitation and emulation' (p. 172).

But La Harpe did not single out 'society readings' as being more problematic than other forms of public reading, such as those that were being given at the French Academy. La Harpe's concern was with the material conditions in which aesthetic and intellectual judgment was being conducted: what mattered to him was whether one was alone at one's desk, reading a printed text, or facing a live author in a room full of people. The critique of group dynamics he formulated about readings in the salon is exactly the same he provided for readings at the Academy. What we don't find in La Harpe is an awareness that worldliness is a special sociological category distinct from other forms of public assembly. All La Harpe argues is that private reading in the cabinet is especially suited to yielding unconstrained, clear-minded judgment about poetry (for the discussion here is specifically about poetry).(35) If anybody in particular may be said to be responsible for the excessive praise given to bad poetry in society readings, La Harpe says in the very passage cited by Lilti, it is men of letters. They are the ones who shape the opinion of the 'gens du grand monde', and they are the ones with a tendency to exaggerate. 'Les gens de lettres, qui, depuis le milieu de ce siècle ont été véritablement les maîtres de l'opinion, avaient en ce genre un ascendant si reconnu, que la plupart des gens du monde n'avaient guère d'avis qui ne fût dicté. Ils avaient d'ordinaire la précaution de ne prononcer sur un ouvrage qu'après que les gens de lettres avaient parlé'.(36)

La Harpe is not alone in observing the increased influence of men of letters in the second half of the 18th century: d'Alembert, Duclos, Rulhières, to cite just a few (Rousseau too, of course, more than anyone, convinced as he was that the philosophical sect ruled France and reached down to the lowest rungs of the population). Reading Lilti, however, you would think that nothing had changed since the times of Vincent Voiture. Men of letters are mostly providers of entertainment to bored elites: 'The writer's ability to produce verse, narratives, and texts of other sorts was necessary to warding off boredom. For fashionable people who aspired to a reputation as enlightened amateurs, conversation with writers furnished judgments, comments and witty remarks that could be passed on' (pp. 100–1). The shallowness of the upper classes is matched only by the abject fawning of the cultured lower classes. One of the unshakeable convictions of this book is

that cultural competence must be reduced to one's own class interests, and that the social group people are born into determines every facet of their intellectual life. The anecdote of the Comte de Tilly and Rétif de la Bretonne is an attempt to bring home that point, and to demonstrate that men of letters are only tiny specks on the aristocrat's radar. As Lilti tells it, on the strength of a chance encounter in a salon, Rétif takes the unwise step of making a visit to Tilly. Unfortunately for him, Tilly does not remember having met him. 'For Tilly, that meeting had no importance; he judged that he was 'in no relationship' with Rétif. The social distance between them was too great for one or two meetings in a salon to be significant, and he could only be astonished by this inopportune visit.' The naive Rétif, on the other hand, unable or unwilling to understand these rules, must have thought himself 'authorized' to show up uninvited at Tilly's door. 'The anecdote', Lilti concludes, 'sheds light on the social dynamics of worldly society and the role men of letters played in it' (p. 49).

Does it? Once again, we are asked to trust the author with his interpretation of a text, but once again, the text says otherwise. Why did Rétif go to visit Tilly? And how did Tilly greet him? Very graciously, it turns out, considering that Rétif had come to him with a staggeringly impolite request:

Un matin, à ma grande surprise, arriva chez moi M. Rétif de la Bretonne, que je ne croyais pas connaître, et avec qui je ne me trouvais dans aucun rapport. Il me rappela m'avoir vu chez la comtesse de Beauharnais.

It's clear that Rétif may be guilty of impertinence, but not of self-delusion. He does not claim to know or be friends with Tilly, but rather only to have seen him, and he is not presuming mistakenly on a non-existent relationship.

L'auteur du *Paysan pervers* me dit avoir beaucoup entendu parler de moi, qu'il était venu me demander *quelques anecdotes érotiques de ma vie*, en un mot, *quelques aventures marquantes* qui pussent occuper une place avantageuse dans un ouvrage de longue haleine qu'il méditait depuis longtemps, qu'il voulait écrire pour la postérité. Il fallait rire de l'objet d'une telle visite; il eût été absurde de s'en fâcher; mais je l'assurai que ma vie avait été d'une stérilité effrayante, et que je le remerciais de son attention. Je le priai de me supposer assez de goût pour sentir que je manquais une occasion précieuse de percer chez nos neveux [...]. Mes compliments le charmèrent: il était encore plus enchanté de ses ouvrages.

Let us doff our hat to Tilly for the way he handles both his eccentric visitor and how he comes across to his reader: how skillfully he balances the ironic self-deprecation of the amateur writer and memoirist with the all-too-clear suggestion that his amorous life is anything but 'sterile' (indeed, Tilly was very much a libertine). True, Tilly has no social relations with Rétif: but he knows perfectly well who his visitor is. Indeed, he has read much of his work, which is saying a lot. Not only that: he is a fan, though he confesses that rather sheepishly, for Rétif is not exactly a respectable author (in fact, Tilly goes on discussing Rétif's manner and style for the next five pages, telling us how he defended his work with La Harpe, who didn't like it):

Dussé-je faire sourire quelques esprits délicats et trop difficiles, j'ai eu le courage de lire à peu près tout ce qu'il a composé et de traverser tout le fatras et quelquefois toutes les ordures qui le séparent d'un lecteur difficile, et je confesse que si j'ai souvent haussé les épaules de pitié, il m'a fait aussi rire, frémir et pleurer.(37)

Tilly's tale of the encounter shows a kind of mirroring game between the aristocratic memoirist and the controversial professional author. To be sure, Rétif cannot be a model, for he is a writer for the people, and rather on the vulgar side (38), but Tilly finds him intriguing and transgressive because of his energetic, explicit portrayal of sexual themes. Indeed, reading Tilly's memoirs, one realizes that Rétif's mixture of

sexuality and sentimentality must have felt very congenial to him. Lilti wants us to see Tilly as a rigid aristocrat pickled in etiquette, draping himself in dignity before his unconventional visitor. The truth is that Tilly is culturally informed and perfectly capable of navigating worlds other than his own. He is moreover delighted to inform the reader that someone like Rétif thinks his amorous life is worth a story.

These are just a few examples of the skewed handling of sources in this book, but there are many more which lack of space prevents me from delving into, though it would be fun and enlightening. Texts are cut and pasted to fit the needs of the argument; at times, novels, satires and polemical travelogues are said to reflect empirical reality and cultural phenomena, regardless of the mediations of genre, rhetoric and the author's ideology; at others we are told to beware of the text's bias and reliance on stereotype. Thus, the anti-French, polemical *Lettres de France*, by the Russian traveller Denis Ivanovich Fonvizin (1777–8), are quoted in support of the fact that ‘foreigners were often struck by the importance of ridicule’ (p. 167). Yet, as scholars have pointed out, these letters are indebted to French authors for their critique of French society: ‘Fonvizin's letters [...] are literary artefacts of a highly polemical nature perhaps conceived even before the author's departure from Russia as part of an attempt that was already under way to assert Russia's cultural autonomy’.(39) On the other hand, all representations of good hostesses by their former guests (from Tencin to Lespinasse) are said to be ‘topical’ and stereotypical, and all descriptions of the best practices and methods that make a salon successful are dismissed on the grounds that they are heavily tainted by flattery (pp. 41–2).

4. Is the Public Sphere Passé? Or the Invention of the Social

The reality is that French culture of the 17th and 18th centuries, from La Rochefoucauld to Mercier, produced in equal measure, sometimes by the same author (as is the case for Mercier), positive conceptions of civility and politeness and critical deconstructions of it. Normativity and self-criticism were two sides of the same coin. With the exception of the theorizations that flourished in Renaissance Italy, France was the country in Europe that devoted the most energy and inventiveness to shaping and understanding what was called back then *sociabilité* or *moral sentiment*, and would fall today under the disciplinary headings of ethics, psychology, sociology, anthropology and political science. All that is perfectly well-known and largely misconstrued.(40) (An interesting subset of this literature – one that Rousseau scholars, who tend to overestimate the first-person rawness of his critique, ought not to ignore – is the satire of the French national character formulated by Swiss writers: from B éat-Louis de Muralt's fiercely anti-French *Lettres sur les anglais et les français*, 1725, to Helvétius, to Mme de Staël.) Can we derive from those texts an accurate account of how social practices really and truly were carried out in ‘worldly’ society? Lilti tackles this by baldly begging the question: ‘The salons were not egalitarian gatherings animated uniquely by a search for conviviality. [...] Nevertheless, the existence of an ideal of reciprocal relations in polite conversation is undeniable. What accounts for the gap between practices and representations?’ (p. 91).

Circularity notwithstanding, there is much at stake here. Is there a method for distinguishing between discursive and nondiscursive phenomena, between representations and practices? The issue was raised, not so long ago, most succinctly and lucidly by Keith Baker:

Le «social» peut servir, par exemple, à désigner le collectif contre l'individuel, l'objectif contre le subjectif, le déterminé contre le volontaire ou le contingent, le matériel contre l'idéal. Il semble souvent devenir notre terme pour définir le «réellement réel». [...]. J'ai souligné l'aspect discursif du social, parce que lorsque j'ai commencé à travailler il était alors habituel de considérer le social comme un fait préalable, ayant quelque chose d'objectif, une sorte d'extériorité à la conscience. [...] En disant que dans chaque effort pour faire dériver un fait discursif d'un fait social, cet autre fait social est, lui aussi, constitué dans un champ discursif, il ne s'agit pas de dénier que le discursif est social mais d'insister sur le fait que l'on ne peut pas prendre le social comme quelque chose d'extérieur au discursif.(41)

To be sure, the polarization between the ‘social’ and the discursive, or between the ‘really real,’ the ‘truly objective’ and the representational (the subjective, the idealized, the ideological, etc.) is the ultimate

philosophical problem. More relevant to us, however, is that it's also a historiographical and political one. Today, the *social* of bygone days is cautiously attempting a comeback, though it does it by playing it safe. *Plus ça change...* When Lilti posits a gap between practices and representations in salon sociability, what he is really doing is attempting to drive a wedge into a certain kind of cultural and intellectual history. “The gradual transformation of aristocratic thought into Enlightenment philosophy” cannot be explained through intellectual history alone. It demands looking at the place of men of letters in worldly society, for they were the principal theoreticians of *honnêteté* in the 18th century’ (p. 91). The words he puts into quotation marks come from Daniel Gordon's *Citizens Without Sovereignty*, a book that occupies a special place in Lilti's own work. More about that soon. What merits our attention, right now, is understanding the pivoting role that the figure of the man of letters plays in the historiographical game. Lilti is being careful about the way he frames the issue: we ought to compare, he says, ‘social conditions of worldly exchange’ with the ‘differing discourses by which writers constructed their identity. [...] This chapter begins with the most material practices in order to move gradually toward more theoretical discourses, *without assuming a unilateral causality*’ (pp. 91-92, emphasis added).

What follows constitutes the core of the book and contains the sections that lay out its argument most clearly. Starting from the material conditions of the status-challenged author (‘the condition of author did not define a social status in the society of the ancien régime’, p. 92), Lilti proceeds to dissect the vocabulary of beneficence and gratitude, amity and nobility of sentiment, that figured in the interaction between writers and their aristocratic hostesses, which ‘presented’ the benefits and largesse lavished by the latter on the former as mere manifestations of love and friendship. This ‘worldly economy of the gift’ was distinct, he explains, from the ‘traditional forms of clientelism and patronage that had prevailed in the 17th century’ (p. 94), because ‘the gift was not to reward a specific work or service and did not call for public praise’ (such as the traditional dedicatory epistle), but was presented as ‘friendly generosity inscribed within relations of sociability’ (p. 95).⁽⁴²⁾ Lilti wants us to understand that he is not trying to make the crude argument that the language of amity and politeness was a ‘pure lie’ which concealed material interests (p. 106). But then, what was it? Did men of letters ‘misunderstand the relations of power and interest in which they were enmeshed’ as Bourdieu might have suggested (p. 106)? Were they, on the contrary, ‘perfectly aware of the asymmetrical dimension of the relation’ of power, and not the least duped by it, as Lilti seems to prefer it (p. 107)? Was the egalitarian language of politeness ‘a fiction’? Was it moreover ‘a fiction not to be taken for granted,’ for it permitted ‘the creation and expression of personal identities’ (p. 108)?; etc. None of this hedging matters much in the end, for Lilti's conclusion is that sociability was, indeed, a lie: that its language ‘permitted the production of social domination, but also its denial. [...] Worldly sociability encouraged domination by covering it with the language of amity and sociability’ (p. 131). Sociability was thus an ideological system that masked the reality of economic interests, for ‘[it] gave men of letters access to the protection and gratification of the social elites,’ while allowing them to feel good about themselves and to ‘elaborate new representations of the writer and its place in ancien régime society (p. 131). Lilti's decidedly materialist interpretation of ancien régime culture is hardly tempered by a few touches à la Bourdieu.

Very soon, however, these ‘new representations’ by society writers were swept away. Rousseau came, and he inaugurated the modern era by audaciously refusing to play the man of letters embedded in aristocratic circles. ‘[Rousseau] represented a totally new conception of the public, one quite different from that of the principal stars of the Parisian Enlightenment, for whom only the enlightened opinion of a small number mattered’ (p. 119), Lilti affirms. Rousseau's ‘refusal of protections and protectors,’ he adds, ‘reinforced his rupture with the aristocratic milieus that had been favorable to him: Madame d'Épinay, Conti, Madame de Luxembourg’ (p. 118).

5. Unmasking Society with Rousseau

Rousseau himself could not have said it any better. As a matter of fact, Rousseau pretty much said it. It was the substance of his ‘posture’ as a writer.⁽⁴³⁾ Only, it wasn't quite true. To be sure, many of his relationships with his patrons, protectors and friends came to a bitter end. But Rousseau would ditch one patron only to move on to the next. The reality was that Rousseau could never afford to cast off aristocratic patronage, for

he had few other sources of income: he could not make a fair living off the sale of his books, and he adamantly refused to accept royal pensions. For much of his life Rousseau was housed and fed by private patrons who became increasingly more adept at playing the patronage game Rousseau's way: they learned how to shield his pride from the visible symbols of dependence and made only minimal demands on his time; they humored him and ceased sending him gifts of coffee, butter, and partridges; but they looked after his safety and provided him discreetly with music to copy, without letting him know they were behind it. Rousseau played them all brilliantly by using the very same language of friendship and affection that other men of letters used with their patrons: but he set his own terms and gave those relationships his own original, passionate spin.(44)

And what about the claim that Rousseau 'represented a totally new conception of the public'? This claim is at the core of Lilti's critique of sociability (*critique* is indeed a more accurate term than *history*, for at this point it's clear that there is little daylight between Lilti's account of sociability and Rousseau's). Indeed, if deconstructing the man of letters, the inventor and peddler of politesse (45), is the pivotal move in dismantling our image of the salon and showing that the enlightened public sphere in the private realm did not exist, Rousseau is the tool for carrying that out. For Rousseau did not simply criticize the sphere of sociability; he 'attacked the very foundation of classical morality by opposing it to a radically different morality of disinterest and the heart's transparency' (p. 119); he inspired the new figure of the patriotic writer, whom Mercier and others embraced in the 1770s, who rejected 'the effects of distinction and reputation typical of high society' and chose instead to 'set up their own judgment, identifying with the public of their readers,' not with the upper classes (p. 119). Rousseau and the patriotic writers issued 'sweeping denunciations of worldliness, wit and despotism' (the accursed trinity), and denounced '*politesse* as social violence' (p. 120).

Central to Lilti's analysis is the claim that, in the wake of Rousseau, the patriotic writers proposed 'a stricter separation between the private and the public spheres' (p. 119). The way he sees it, Rousseau was a crucial actor in the disappearance of the semi-private public sphere, that hybrid interface between public and private constituted by the men and women who met in the salons and were bound together by networks of friendship, newsletters and epistolary exchange.(46) And good riddance it was, for these groups were no training ground for the free exchange of ideas, but conspiratorial cliques bent on 'making and unmaking reputations' (p. 179) and perpetuating forms of social violence intimately linked to the absolutist court. That is the message conveyed by Lilti's retelling of the Hume-Rousseau affair in chapter five of his book. Dena Goodman has been the first to highlight the affair as an exemplary case illustrating the new dynamics of public opinion, one which involved illuminating ironies. But while her account traces 'the process by which a private matter became a public affair, readers became writers, and the reading public played its role as the tribunal of public opinion,' Lilti's focuses instead on 'the intermediate phase,' that is the phase in which the documents of the quarrel had not yet been published by Hume (in the *Exposé succinct*) but were still circulating within salon circles in the form of correspondences and rumors (p. 181).(47) I cannot do them full justice here, so I'll limit my remarks to a few.

First, it is regrettable that Lilti's reading should omit some essential information, both historical and scholarly. Specifically, Goodman is only mentioned in a bibliographical footnote, while the body of the chapter refers vaguely to 'historians,' despite its many, obvious echoes of Goodman's article. An opportunity is thus missed to tackle head-on the fact that these pages are meant as a rejoinder to her approach. Had Lilti engaged with her article directly, he would have been able to explain the reasons that led him to narrow the scope of the quarrel to its 'intermediate phase,' and to omit some crucial aspects of the quarrel (such as, for instance, the fact that Rousseau's letter of 10 July 1766 was cast in the form of a judicial memoir, and that this was what prompted Hume to go public). Moreover, speaking of an 'intermediate phase' suggests that the events came in ready-made separate pieces, when the reality is that we cannot understand the quarrel without getting a comprehensive view of its multi-media modes of transmission (from privately circulated correspondence, to pamphlets, to journals, culminating in the vibrant responses penned by readers). Goodman's account shows that readers were empowered to debate publicly about the affair, and, what's more, were invited to do so by Hume and his friends. Lilti, for his part, narrows his focus on the sheltered

enclave of 'worldly authorities' who had been 'imposing judgment' through 'mechanisms of imitation and intimidation' (p. 191). But if those mechanism were as effective as he says, we would have a hard time understanding why most readers, presented with the evidence provided by Hume, chose to side with Rousseau and not with the worldly authorities. Also, it is strange that, given his emphasis on the innovativeness of Rousseau's direct appeal to the reader and on the emotional experience of identification that his writings solicited, Lilti would show no interest at all in the manner in which readers responded to Rousseau's 'direct appeal to the heart.' All the more so as their heartfelt response had been prompted by none other than the conniving 'worldly authorities'.[\(48\)](#)

But Lilti is not interested in such ironies, nor in any possible convergence between the mechanisms of publicity created within the public sphere of sociability and the private experience of readers: there is no semi-private or semi-public sphere, there are no continuities, no hybridizations: public and private must stand in stark opposition to one another. The public sphere, a vestige of the ancien regime, is destined to disappear altogether and make way for the private, Rousseauian experience of reading, which is the only legitimate way to consume literature in the modern age.[\(49\)](#)

6. Misrepresenting Intellectual History

A similar reluctance to engage openly with his intellectual opponents informs Lilti's peculiar treatment of the work of Daniel Gordon. Is Lilti uncomfortable discussing intellectual history? That might explain why his preferred method consists less in presenting sustained arguments than in making broad claims buttressed by compilations of documents cut and pasted from the same sources that intellectual historians have been able to analyze more effectively. The accumulated mass of documentary material is thus meant to mimic the effect of overwhelming, crushing 'evidence'. At the same time, Lilti tends to assimilate intellectual history to 'idealized,' as in 'ideal:' which is to say, conceptual, bookish, on the one hand; chimerical, starry-eyed, naïve on the other.[\(50\)](#) In *Le Monde des salons*, Lilti sees Daniel Gordon's work as one more example of the 'idealized,' nostalgic history of French conversation that he identifies with the work of Marc Fumaroli.[\(51\)](#)

Despite such brush-off, the last section of chapter three of *The World of the Salons* – which is devoted to the 'theoretical discourses' that men of letters allegedly crafted in the attempt to mask the reality of their 'material practices' – is heavily indebted to Gordon's original analysis in *Citizens Without Sovereignty*. In that book Gordon uncovered, in the *Encyclopédie* and in the work of various late Enlightenment authors, a convergence between the languages of civility, natural law, commerce, and the progress of civilization. He showed that 'the idea of sociability migrated from 17th-century natural law and courtesy to 18th-century historiography [...]. With the unrigorous blending of meanings taken from the courtesy literature and natural-law theory [...] a variety of activities, some verbal and some not, came to stand together as the constituent activities of "civil society"'.[\(52\)](#) Writers like Suard, d'Holbach, and Morellet appropriated ideas from Scottish liberalism in order to promote a vision of growing civility and consensus within the framework of universal history. Suard's belief that a consensus-driven public opinion would emerge in civil society as the inevitable outcome of the growing civility in private life was typical of the trend. His conviction that France was the most civilized nation, a nation marked by 'an agreement of opinions', was so profound that it survived unscathed the violence of the Revolution, which Suard lived to witness.[\(53\)](#)

What was the impact of the philosophy of sociability on the reality of the French society of orders? A limited one, Gordon says. That's because, despite the optimistic belief in the human capacity for self-government, the discourse of sociability was inherently utopian and apolitical: people like d'Holbach believed that they could subsume the political by the sociable and solve political problems through the spirit of cooperation generated by civility. In the *Morale universelle*, d'Holbach 'tried to extend [the art of conversation's] field of application beyond the scope of the salons and into the whole sphere of human interdependence'.[\(54\)](#) However, Gordon, says, d'Holbach was no advocate of egalitarianism outside the sphere of the salons: 'The purpose of this language was to define a sphere of practice that was based on the egalitarian premises of natural law, yet was compatible with the hierarchical legal foundation of the French regime. [...] Holbach's *Morale universelle* shows that the language of sociability was congenial for those

seeking an alternative both to the hierarchical regime of estates and orders and to the idea of a purely democratic polity'.[\(55\)](#)

Lilti's reading of d'Holbach follows Gordon's closely (though you would never know it, for if he mentions the work of his predecessor at all, it's to allude vaguely, in a footnote, to the error of his ways): 'The theory of sociability developed by d'Holbach, far from defending the autonomy of a particular and egalitarian social space, attempted to base the whole of social order, with its distinctions of rank and estate, on the principle of sociability and social utility. [...] Worldly politesse [...] offered d'Holbach a springboard for thinking about social virtues and a basis on which to build an order of practice based on a natural sociability within the inegalitarian society of the ancien regime' (p. 128).

But the really funny thing is that Lilti seems not to realize that Gordon is quite critical of the role given to sociability within the Habermasian public sphere. First, Gordon says, because in talking about sociability and the public sphere Habermas is subordinating an original and localized cultural form to a teleologically-driven story about the emergence of modern democracy: 'Habermas used the concept of an apolitical public sphere to explain how democracy could begin to develop within an absolutist regime based on hierarchical principles. His interpretation is open to the criticism that it prematurely politicizes the content of private life, making every mode of nonhierarchical interaction meaningful only as a foreshadowing of democratic politics, instead of a self-sufficient cultural form'.[\(56\)](#) In other words, Habermas is subjecting history to political theory (or perhaps to a kind of universal history). Second, because rather than seeing the 'public sphere in apolitical form' as protodemocratic, Gordon sustains that it would be better to see it as a postdemocratic ideal: 'The authors who advocated it, instead of seeking to pave the way toward political action, were in fact repudiating political action by investing the concept of a nonpolitical public with value'.[\(57\)](#) 'The territory of *société* became a refuge that allowed authors to avoid a series of stark choices [...] between the absolutist idea of sovereignty and the democratic idea of freedom, between the model of selfish Economic Man and the model of the selfless hero'.[\(58\)](#) When it comes to historical memorializing, Gordon's diagnosis about the culture of sociability comes close to that of Lilti. In its embodiment as a political illusion, the ideal of sociability disappeared after the Revolution, Gordon argues, though it continued to endure 'only in the topography of memory. It ceased to be a living philosophy and became a heritage, an idealized site of nostalgia for liberals and conservatives alike'.[\(59\)](#)

It is thus absurd to claim any methodological continuity between the work of Marc Fumaroli and Gordon's. The former sees conversation and salon culture as a rhetorical form and a timeless French ideal-type; the latter argues keenly that sociability was 'a self-sufficient cultural form' which emerged at a specific time and place, evolved into a complex, articulate system by pulling to itself a constellation of arguments, came to be seen as the solution to the intractable problems of the French society of orders, and was ultimately swept away by the revolution and by its inability to conceptualize the facts of state violence.

If anybody may be said to practice history in the Fumaroli mode, inventing timeless ideal-types and disregarding particularity and circumstance, it is Lilti himself, with his portrayal of an enduring *mondanité* stretching from 'the late 16th century [...] to the mores of the contemporary jet-set' (p. 239). I have discussed Gordon's approach at some length because I want to make clear where Lilti's method falls short. Lilti practices a mode of explanation based on the unmasking of the agents' false consciousness and illusion. Behind his approach there is the implicit expectation that writers of the 18th century ought to have been able to articulate a critique of their own practices compatible with the ideas that count as critical today. Accordingly, textual material is carved, pressed, leveled, and made to serve a kind of criticism that is more prosecutorial than explanatory. The notion that the cultural forms he identifies may have been indigenous to a specific time and place, that they may have been a creative response to particular, localized, political and cultural circumstances, is lost to him.

There is in this book a kind of monotony that drones on like a *basse continue*, which is due, I believe, to a lack of historical imagination and perhaps of generosity. From the first page to the last, it's a danse macabre of 'social distinction and conformity' (p. 173), of humiliations inflicted and received, of mutual imitation

and passive obedience, which people play in the salon, mindlessly amusing themselves at the expense of others all the way to the guillotine, or better still, all the way to the last, ghostly soirée at the Guermantes.[\(60\)](#)

Notes

1. Antoine Lilti, 'The Kingdom of Politesse: Salons and the Republic of Letters in 18th-Century Paris', *Republics of Letters: A Journal for the Study of Knowledge, Politics, and the Arts*, 1, 1 (1 May 2009) <<http://rofl.stanford.edu/node/38> [2]> [accessed 17 June 2016]. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (*Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, 1962), trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA, 1989).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See Steven Kale's review of *Le Monde des salons*.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Claude-Prosper Jolyot de Crébillon, *Les Égaréments du coeur et de l'esprit*, 1736.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* (4th ed., 1762).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. *Mondain*, author unknown, vol. 10, p. 640.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. In his 'Introduction' to Boyer d'Argens's *Thérèse Philosophe*, François Moureau refers to the alphabetical list of 'femmes du monde' drawn by inspector Meunier, (Ars., ms. 10243-10244). Société Française d'Études du XVIIIe siècle, Presses de l'Université de Saint-Etienne, 2002, p. 28.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. *Le Monde des salons*, p. 23.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. *Le Monde des salons*, pp. 21–2.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. From Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* (1721) to Laclos's *Dangerous Liaisons* (1782), the French epistolary novel was especially well equipped to reveal the underlying stakes of a frivolous and cruel Enlightenment sociability', Antoine Lilti, 'Private lives, public space: a new social history of the Enlightenment', in *The Cambridge Companion to the French Enlightenment*, ed. Daniel Brewer, (Cambridge, 2014), p. 23.[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. Geoffrin and her guests had indeed been satirized in a comedy by Jean-Jacques Rutledge entitled *Le Bureau d'Esprit* (1776), a work derivative of the much more successful *Les Philosophes* by Palissot de Montenois (1760) and on the mold of *Les Femmes savantes*. It was published a few months before Mme Geoffrin's death, but never performed on the stage. See Jean-Jacques Rutledge, *Les Comédiens, ou, Le Foyer: Le Bureau d'esprit ; Le train de Paris, ou, Les bourgeois du temps*, édition critique par Pierre Peyronnet (Paris, 1999).[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. Journal entry, May 1763, in Edward Gibbon, *Memoirs and Letters*, 1796, vol. 1, p. 116. Shortly after his arrival, Gibbon wrote to his stepmother that 'we may say what we please of the frivolity of the French, but I do assure you, that in a fortnight passed at Paris, I have heard more conversation worth remembering, and seen more men of letters among the people of fashion, than I had done in two or three winters in London'. *Memoirs and Letters*, 12 February, 1763.[Back to \(11\)](#)
12. On the layered process of 'making public' (that is, the interface between conversation, epistolary correspondence, *nouvelles à la main*, literary correspondences, and more), see ch. 4 of *The Republic of Letters*.[Back to \(12\)](#)
13. *Journal et Mémoires de Charles Collé, 1748–1772* (Paris, 1868), 3 vol., vol. 3, pp. 171–2.[Back to \(13\)](#)
14. See André Masson, *Oeuvres complètes de Montesquieu* (Paris, 1950–5), 3 vol.; Montesquieu, *Œuvres complètes*, 1998, tome 18, *Correspondance I*, ed. Louis Desgraves, Edgar Mass and others; Geneviève Haroche-Bouzinac, "Les Lettres Familières du président de Montesquieu," *Revue Montesquieu*, 6 (2002), 17–31.[Back to \(14\)](#)
15. *Correspondance littéraire*, 1 May 1770. Grimm prefaces it by saying that 'L'article suivant est de M. Diderot'.[Back to \(15\)](#)
16. Mme Geoffrin, méthodique et compassée en tout ce qu'elle faisait, l'était aussi dans la distribution des heures de sa journée. Elle avait des heures fixes dans l'après-dînée, pour faire rencontrer ensemble les différentes classes de personnes, qui pouvaient se convenir, et souvent c'était des rendez-vous d'affaires, qui se tenaient chez elle et dont elle était la médiatrice. C'était une grande contrariété pour elle quand une visite indiscrete venait troubler ses arrangements', *Souvenirs de Charles-Henri, Baron de Gleichen* (Paris, 1868), pp. 98–9.[Back to \(16\)](#)

17. *Baroque Montesquieu* (Genève, 2004), p. 31.[Back to \(17\)](#)
18. See Maurice Hamon, *Madame Geoffrin, femme d'influence, femme d'affaires au temps des Lumières* (Paris, 2010).[Back to \(18\)](#)
19. See Geoffrin's letters from Warsaw, quoted in chapter 13 of Pierre de Ségur, *Le Royaume de la rue Saint-Honoré. Madame Geoffrin et sa fille* (Paris, 1897). For an insightful analysis of their idiosyncratic relationship, see Dena Goodman, 'Filial rebellion in the salon: Madame Geoffrin and her daughter', *French Historical Studies*, 16, 1 (Spring 1989), 28–47.[Back to \(19\)](#)
20. Horace Walpole to Lady Hervey, 13 October 1765, in *Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, Yale edition.[Back to \(20\)](#)
21. *Mémoires du roi Stanislas-Auguste Poniatowski*, 2 vols. (Saint-Pétersbourg, 1914), vol. 1, p. 117.[Back to \(21\)](#)
22. *The World of the Salons*, pp. 86–7.[Back to \(22\)](#)
23. Catherine sent her first letter to Geoffrin in 1763. She had gingerly started corresponding with Voltaire in 1762, very shortly after the coup d'état, but only through an intermediary, her secretary François-Pierre Pictet. See Bestermann D 10650 and D10817.[Back to \(23\)](#)
24. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, pp. 28–31.[Back to \(24\)](#)
25. As Madame Geoffrin is peculiarly curious with regard to her Furniture, & much attached to her own Apartment, his Polish Majesty carried his Gallantry so far, as to procure, unknown to her, an exact Account of her Furniture, in Order to surprize her with an Apartment in his Palace, perfectly resembling that she had here'. William Cole, *Journal of my Journey to Paris in the year 1765* (London, 1931), pp. 153–4.[Back to \(25\)](#)
26. *Mémoires du Roi Stanislas-Auguste Poniatowski*, vol. 1, p. 567.[Back to \(26\)](#)
27. The exchange is quoted in Ségur, *Le Royaume de la rue Saint-Honoré*, pp. 203–25.[Back to \(27\)](#)
28. See Georges Dulac, 'Le discours politique de Pétersbourg', *Recherches sur Diderot et sur l'Encyclopédie*, 1 October 1986, pp. 32–58.[Back to \(28\)](#)
29. Voltaire on the abbé Trublet. See *Le Pauvre diable*, 1760.[Back to \(29\)](#)
30. 'Private lives, public space', 23.[Back to \(30\)](#)
31. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, p. 30.[Back to \(31\)](#)
32. Or more likely the Opéra Comique which replaced the Italiens in 1762, but we don't know because the date on the letter is incomplete (176*). "Les sociétés qui se contractent entre marchands, ou entre particuliers, sont une convention entre deux ou plusieurs personnes, par laquelle ils mettent en commun entre eux tous leurs biens ou une partie, ou quelque commerce, ouvrage, ou autre affaire, pour en partager les profits, & en supporter la perte en commun. Diderot, *Encyclopédie*, art. *Société*, [Jurisprudence] Boucher d'Argis, 15, 258. For more details see the *Journal de Papillon de la Ferté* (1756–80), ed. Ernest Boyssse (Paris, 1887).[Back to \(32\)](#)
33. 'L'ignorance ou l'oubli de ces égards ramène sous la peau d'ours et dans le fond de la forêt. C'est réclamer la prérogative du sauvage au centre d'une société civilisée.' 'Résultat d'une conversation sur les égards que l'on doit aux rangs et aux dignités de la société'. The text was published in Grimm's *Correspondance Littéraire* of 1776. Denis Diderot, *Correspondance*, ed. Georges Roth and Jean Varloot (Paris, 1955–1970), vol. 14, 1968 (May 1774 – October 1776), pp. 223–8.[Back to \(33\)](#)
34. Mona Ozouf, "Public Opinion at the End of the Old Regime", *The Journal of Modern History*, 60, Supplement: Rethinking French Politics in 1788 (Sep. 1988), S1–S21.[Back to \(34\)](#)
35. 'Mais il y a aussi, dans tous les rassemblements de ce genre [at the French Academy], trop de mélange inévitable, pour qu'on ne s'y laisse pas aller souvent à ce qui est plus éblouissant que solide. Si ces méprises ont eu lieu de tout temps, même au théâtre et dans ses plus beaux jours, quoique le jugement du coeur soit là pour rectifier celui de l'esprit, à combien de plus forte raison doit-on se défier du premier effet d'une lecture académique, qui n'a guère pour juge que l'esprit! Le prestige de la lecture est là dans toute sa force [...]. Aucun de ses traits n'est perdu: chaque auditeur se pique de n'en laisser tomber aucun, et semble être jaloux d'être le premier à dire: j'ai compris.' Jean-François de La Harpe, *Philosophie du dix-huitième siècle* (1824), 2 vol., vol. 1, pp. 107–8.[Back to \(35\)](#)
36. *Le Lycée ou cours de littérature ancienne et moderne* (1799), tome 8, partie 2, livre 2, pp. 3696–7, in *La Critique littéraire de Laharpe à Proust* (Paris, 1998).[Back to \(36\)](#)
37. Alexandre de Tilly, *Mémoires du comte Alexandre de Tilly, pour servir à l'histoire des moeurs de la fin du dix-huitième siècle*

- (Paris, 1830), 3 vols., vol. 2, pp. 264–5. Emphasis in the text.[Back to \(37\)](#)
38. ‘Certes *Le Paysan perverti* est l'ouvrage d'un homme fort! Toute la vigueur d'un génie mâle, mais désordonné y domine; toute la fertilité d'une imagination démesurée mais riche vit dans ces tableaux. [...] C'est le Teniers du roman, son livre est *Les Liaisons dangereuses* du peuple’, *Mémoires du comte Alexandre de Tilly*, vol. 2, pp. 267–8.[Back to \(38\)](#)
 39. It has been established that the picture of French morals painted by Fonvizin was to a considerable extent affected by the opinions of French writers themselves, namely: Duclos, from whose *Considerations sur les mœurs* he borrows, translates and paraphrases without acknowledgement; Moliere, Voltaire, Antoine Thomas and Marmontel, to whom he refers; Destouches and Crébillon père, whom he cites; Montesquieu, whose pose of naive observer he occasionally adopts; and Rousseau, who is his sister's favourite author’, Derek Offord, ‘Beware the Garden of Earthly Delights: Fonvizin and Dostoevski on life in France’, *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 78, 4 (Oct. 2000), 625–42. Of course, Lilti is aware of the fact, but he tries to have it both ways: the text is *both* an accurate report and a satire: ‘The satirical intent is undeniable here, but Fonvizin accurately portrays ridicule... etc’ (p. 168).[Back to \(39\)](#)
 40. Alain Viala's many articles on the practice and the theories of *galanterie*, and his excellent book *La France galante: essai historique sur une catégorie culturelle, de ses origines jusqu'à la Révolution* (Paris, 2008) are an exception.[Back to \(40\)](#)
 41. Keith Baker and Roger Chartier, “Dialogue sur l'espace public,” *Politix*, 7, 26 (1994), 5–22, 7.[Back to \(41\)](#)
 42. We might quibble with this distinction, for both traditional patronage and salon sociability displayed similar vocabularies of personal affection, as Roland Mousnier and Sharon Kettering have shown. But this is not central to the present argument.[Back to \(42\)](#)
 43. Jérôme Meizoz, ‘Recherches sur la “posture”: Rousseau’, *Littérature*, 126 (2002), 3–17.[Back to \(43\)](#)
 44. See Rousseau's letters to Charles François Frédéric de Montmorency-Luxembourg, duc de Luxembourg (for instance: 30 April 1759; 27 May 1759; 13 August 1759) and those to his wife, Madeleine Angélique de Neufville-Villeroy, duchesse de Luxembourg (for instance: 6 October 1760; 16 February 1761; 18 and 19 February 1762; 19 May 1762). See also Marie Charlotte Hippolyte Boufflers-Rouverel, comtesse de Boufflers-Rouverel to Rousseau, 4 June 1761.[Back to \(44\)](#)
 45. ‘How was the paradigm of politeness appropriated by Enlightenment thought? [...] [Understanding this] demands looking at the place of men of letters in worldly society, for they were the principal theoreticians of *honnêteté* in the 18th century’, p. 91.[Back to \(45\)](#)
 46. Dena Goodman, ‘The Hume-Rousseau Affair: From Private Querelle to Public Procès’, *18th-Century Studies*, 25, 2 (Winter 1991–92), 171–201, p. 177.[Back to \(46\)](#)
 47. ‘The Hume-Rousseau Affair’, 172.[Back to \(47\)](#)
 48. ‘The Hume-Rousseau Affair’, 186.[Back to \(48\)](#)
 49. See ‘Private lives, public space’, art. cit. In *The world of the Salons*, Lilti limits the use of ‘public reason’ to a narrow reading of Kant's ‘What is Enlightenment?’ (1784): ‘For Kant, only that universal use tied to the written word could be qualified as a “public” use. [...] Circles of sociability founded on orality and profoundly inscribed in the practices of elites of the ancien regime had no part in that rational debate’ (p. 173).[Back to \(49\)](#)
 50. See Stéphane Van Damme, whose article Lilti references in ‘Private lives, public space’ as proof of the general demise of Habermas's influence. However, Van Damme's evidence for such demise is... none other than Lilti's work. ‘Contre la vision normative d'un Daniel Gordon dans son livre *Citizens without Sovereignty* qui associe le salon à la conversation égalitaire, Antoine Lilti propose une véritable archéologie des pratiques de sociabilité, etc’, ‘Farewell Habermas: Deux décennies d'études sur l'espace public’, in *L'espace public des historiens*, ed. Patrick Boucheron and Nicolas Offenstadt (Paris, 2011), pp. 43–61.[Back to \(50\)](#)
 51. ‘Cette idéalisation, ostensiblement nostalgique, d'un modèle civilisateur, s'appuie sur l'éloge de la langue française et revendique la connivence culturelle et sociale des francophones contre la culture de masse et la démocratisation scolaire. [...] À certains égards, les travaux de Daniel Gordon sur les théories de la sociabilité s'inscrivent dans une perspective semblable. Leur parti pris méthodologique, qui consiste à étudier les salons à la lumière de ce qu'en ont dit les écrivains est le même’, *Le Monde des salons*

- , p. 52.[Back to \(51\)](#)
52. *Citizens Without Sovereignty: Equality and sociability in French Thought, 1670–1789* (Princeton, NJ, 1994), p. 130.[Back to \(52\)](#)
53. *Ibid.*, pp. 174–5.[Back to \(53\)](#)
54. *Ibid.*, p. 68.[Back to \(54\)](#)
55. *Ibid.*, pp. 69–70.[Back to \(55\)](#)
56. *Ibid.*, p. 111.[Back to \(56\)](#)
57. *Ibid.*, p. 112.[Back to \(57\)](#)
58. *Ibid.*, p. 242.[Back to \(58\)](#)
59. *Ibid.*, p. 240.[Back to \(59\)](#)
60. Marcel Proust, *Time Regained*.[Back to \(60\)](#)
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