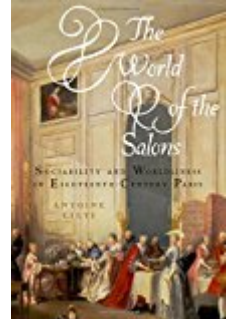


Antoine Lilti. *The World of the Salons: Sociability and Worldliness in Eighteenth-Century Paris.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. 344 pp. \$74.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-977234-6.



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Antoine Lilti's *The World of the Salons. Sociability and Worldliness in Eighteenth-Century Paris* is an abbreviated English translation of his doctoral dissertation-based book *Le monde de salons. Sociabilité et mondanité à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* published by Fayard in 2005. It deals with eighteenth-century French sociability referred to as *salons*, which has become a major area of study within the last twenty years and the subject of conflicting historiographical interpretations. The vast majority of scholarship on salons, produced in North America, is based on Jürgen Habermas's conception of the public sphere and interprets salons as important institutions of sociability that allowed women to function within the public sphere as salon hostesses and participants of the Enlightenment Republic of Letters.[1] Other scholars have questioned this predominant interpretation, however, by pointing out that Habermas's conception is untenable when confronted with contemporary sources, and that women's social and intellectual activities were

limited in practice by the precepts of feminine propriety.[2]

Lilti places himself in opposition to the scholarship based on Habermas's conception of the public sphere, and much of the impetus of his book is directed against the interpretations of this scholarship, especially Dena Goodman's. He is much less clear, however, about what he owes to the existing scholarship on salons that had refuted Habermas-based interpretations well before his own dissertation-based book was first published in French in 2005. His sketchy and superficial account of this scholarship, which appears briefly in the introduction, creates a false impression that he is breaking entirely new ground in the scholarship on salons. The lack of acknowledgement of other scholars' contributions, despite borrowing from them, is apparent to well-informed students of French sociability, an issue to which I will return later. The gap of ten years between the 2005 French book and its present abbreviated English translation further weakens Lilti's claims to originality and adds to the sense

that he is storming a door that has already been opened.

The World of the Salons deals with the sociability that prevailed in eighteenth-century “high society,” referred to at the time as *le monde* or the world; salons, according to Lilti, were the most distinctive and important forms of this sociability. The notion of “worldliness” (*mondanité*) is essential to Lilti’s conceptualization of eighteenth-century sociability. He refers to “worldliness” as “the dynamics of the worldly sociability of the elites and ... representations that reinforced its effects”; “a complex social mechanism and an ensemble of signs that one had to learn to interpret”; “the specific form taken in France by the fascination that the polite elites and the people of letters (*gens de lettres*) had for each other”; “both a social arrangement that assured the pre-eminence of certain elites connected with the court and with cultural spheres and a group of discourses aimed at celebrating the merits of those elites” (p. 7). Worldliness permeated all forms of the sociability of groups Lilti variably refers to as elites, urban elite, high society, polite society, *la bonne société*, or *le monde*.

According to Lilti, it is worldliness, not Habermas’s public sphere, that is central to the proper understanding of salon sociability. Salons encompassed a variety of forms of sociability that prevailed in the eighteenth-century high society/urban elite but they did not belong to the public sphere; they had no ideological coherence, were not a predominantly women’s domain, and were not the places where critical Enlightenment discourse took place. Instead, salons were worldly circles grounded in norms of worldly sociability that was concerned with entertainment rather than the advancement of knowledge, and with the novelty of news and ideas rather than their veracity or importance. Thus, in Lilti’s interpretation, the public sphere and the worldly sociability epitomized by salons were two different worlds. The inseparability of salons and worldliness explains

their survival beyond the French Revolution and their “durable persistence ... from the reign of Louis XIII to the Belle Epoque” (p. 5).

The subject of the book is formulated as “not so much the ‘salons’ themselves as worldliness [that] concentrates on the complex mechanisms that guaranteed the social and cultural distinction of *le monde*” (p. 7), and the book’s objective as “a contribution to the history of worldliness” (p. 8) accomplished by “[looking] at the way in which eighteenth-century social elites redefined themselves through their practices of worldly sociability and at the way some men of letters of the Enlightenment participated in that same sociability, by attending the salons” (pp. 8-9).

The book consists of two parts, each organized into three chapters that focus on the salon as defined by the practice of sociability (chapter 1); the social dynamics of the worldly sphere considered as “an interface between the court, the city of Paris and the literary world” (chapter 2); men of letters in worldly sociability (chapter 3); salon conversation, literature, and literary games (chapter 4); the dynamics of reputation in high society and the public sphere (chapter 5), and the political and diplomatic role of the salons (chapter 6).

Lilti’s attempt to loosen the grip of Habermas’s conception of the public sphere on the study of eighteenth-century French sociability is both healthy and useful, albeit not novel, as noted earlier. Similarly, the perspective of *mondanité* allows one to diffuse the alleged ideological effect of the practices of conviviality present in some interpretations of eighteenth-century salons, and makes it possible to explain the persistence of the salon in the nineteenth century, as other authors have already demonstrated.[3] The focus on “sociability” including the “practices of conviviality among urban elite ... from the apparently most insignificant ... to the most visible” (p. 5), allows us to view the salons as an inclusive and amorphous category—an appropriate approach, considering

that the term “salon” was not used as a collective term for the practices of sociability in the eighteenth century.

To his credit, Lilti unearthed some archival sources that were not used before by scholars writing on salons, such as the *Contrôle des étrangers*--police records of surveillance of the practices of sociability, which included the control of foreign diplomats in Paris from 1774 to the Revolution. These records indicate a significant presence of those diplomats in Parisian high society, and provide interesting details. Police records are also valuable as more reliable type of sources than those produced within the worldly sphere.

Further to his credit, Lilti tries to demystify certain aspects of salon activity that are sometimes misrepresented in popular accounts, such as the depth and substance of conversations that took place in salons. In mapping the network of *mondaine* sociability in Paris, he traces the family ties among salons, emphasizes the continuity between salons from one generation to another, and includes in his account less known salons, such as that of the duchesse de Praslin.

At the same time, however, Lilti's effort to redirect the reader's attention from the beaten track of the salon historiography based on Habermas's conception of the public sphere, and from the popular clichés, is undermined by his assumption that the salons did exist as a distinctive phenomenon within eighteenth-century sociability that can be defined in familiar terms as regular meetings of a group of habitués hosted by the same host or hostess over a period of time. On the one hand Lilti admits that *mondaine* sociability was characterized by a variety of forms and practices, that the term “salon” did not exist at that time, and that it should be used with care. On the other hand, however, he lumps those varied forms and practices together into one collective category of “salons” which he immediately defines (as early as chapter 1) using criteria retroactively applied to Old-Regime sociability in the nineteenth century.

The term “salon” is ubiquitous throughout the book, beginning with the title, and used as a matter of course, as though a referent to this term actually existed in the eighteenth century.

Lumping together a variety of forms of sociability into a retroactively created term (salons) that was meant to give a sense of coherence to these varied forms as part of the post-Revolutionary process of mythologization of the Old Regime, seems counterproductive to any effort to understand eighteenth-century French sociability. It makes the sections on terminology which appear in the introduction of his book and in chapter 1 appear irrelevant, and one may question the purpose of these sections.[4]

Instead of considering the contemporary diverse terminology of sociability as sources of information about this sociability, Lilti falls into the nineteenth-century classificatory mania that has been haunting the scholarship of salons ever since, and he ends up perpetuating the myth of Old-Regime French salons created in nineteenth-century France. Eventually, the book becomes a familiar account of utterances and activities of the “usual suspects”--the same handful of salon hosts and hostesses and their habitués, with Mme Geoffrin heading the pack, as the index demonstrates.

Although worldly status did not correspond to social status, there were limits to an upward movement of a commoner. Lilti admits that there were conflicts between the old nobility and the newly enriched salon hosts and hostesses, but tries to make the case by exploiting one example of such tensions (between Laurent Grimond de La Reynière and Louis Narbonne, pp. 73-77) beyond what it warrants. More complicated were the cases when class disadvantage was compounded by gender, as with commoners Mme Geoffrin, Mlle de Lespinasse, and Mme Necker. Mme Geoffrin occupies a prominent place in Lilti's book but he plays down the sources that present her worldly pretensions in a negative light. Instead, Lilti presents the salon of Mme Geoffrin as an incarna-

tion of *mondanité*; her own list of guests serves as the basis for his conclusion (“corroborated” by an equally problematic journal by Horace Walpole that most of her guests were aristocratic, and by extension the aristocratic character of her salon, pp. 70-71).

Conflating salons with worldliness leads Lilti to conclude that “worldly conversation was very different from rational communication” (p. 163); only novelty mattered and “the pleasure of all required an indifference to the veracity of information” (p. 165). By equating the salons with worldliness, and worldliness primarily with entertainment and fascination with novelty, Lilti denies that the salons had any role as places for meaningful communication, let alone critical discussions. Perhaps the most unexpected contribution of Lilti’s book is that it presents the salons as unattractive, vain, gossipy, and boring, if not utterly silly, places. This may vindicate the “unsociable” Jean-Jacques Rousseau—one of very few eighteenth-century figures who made it clear that he had no use for them. As for our understanding of salons, Lilti may have just replaced the straight-jacket of Habermasian public sphere with an equally problematic, all-encompassing, and leveling “worldliness” that persisted as the basis of salon sociability from Louis XII through the Belle Époque.

Recent scholarship has convincingly identified a more complex development: a new valorization of qualities such as artifice, politeness, and *mondanité*, and the quest for individualism, authenticity, naturalness, and perfect communication, included in the process of the reformulation of the parameters of sociability. The quest for perfect communication became a distinctive theme in the eighteenth century and expressed itself in the works of fiction, especially fictitious travel accounts, in the interest in gestural language, and in speculation on the origins of language.[5] In the fragmented and factionalized social world of post-Revolutionary France no clear norm or undisput-

ed image of *le monde* with claims to absolute authority would govern the public consciousness.[6]

In the end, Lilti embraces some of the interpretations he rejected or dismissed in the introduction, and presents them as his own. So, in the conclusion we read that “[salons] were places of mixed sociability, whose unique qualities were largely due to the role of women and their conversation” (p. 236), which is the theme of Dena Goodman’s 1994 influential book *The Republic of Letters*; he also admits that “the mechanisms of worldly reputation assured a conservative control of the norms of female *hônneteté* and were incompatible with a claim to intellectual or literary ambitions,” which is the theme of my 1999 book *Conservative Tradition in Pre-Revolutionary France*. Neither Goodman’s nor my own work is acknowledged.

For all its claims of explaining the phenomenon of salons in the proper way for the first time, and its useful contribution to redirecting the historiographical orthodoxy on salon sociability, Lilti’s *The World of the Salons* is unlikely to be the last word on the topic.

Notes

[1]. For example, Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994); and Daniel Gordon, *Citizens without Sovereignty: Equality and Sociability in French Thought, 1670–1789* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton, 1994).

[2]. For example, Jolanta T. Pekacz, *Conservative Tradition in Pre-Revolutionary France: Parisian Salon Women* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999).

[3]. The idea that the salon persisted in the nineteenth century, along with other remnants of the Old Regime, because it represented a sociability of *le monde* was proposed, for example, by Steven D. Kale, “Women, the Public Sphere, and the Persistence of Salons,” *French Historical Stud-*

ies 25, no. 1 (2002): 115–148, and his *French Salons: High Society and Political Sociability from the Old Regime to the Revolution of 1848* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).

[4]. The discussion on terminology in the introduction and chapter 1 of Lilti's *The World of the Salons* contains material identical with the content of my paper "The Invention of Salons in Nineteenth-Century France," which I presented at the 2004 Annual Meeting of the Society for French Historical Studies in Paris, including the analysis of the changing terminology pertaining to sociability in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, and the analysis of Anicet Lemonnier's painting *Une lecture chez Mme Geoffrin*. The author of *The World of the Salons* was present at the session at which I read my paper. (N.B.: The French version of Lilti's book goes as far as to "borrow" specific examples I gave in my paper, such as Lemonnier's painting being reproduced on the H-France website.)

[5]. For example, Sophia Rosenfeld, *A Revolution in Language: The Problem of Signs in Late Eighteenth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

[6]. Jolanta T. Pekacz, "The French Salon of the Old Regime as a Spectacle," *Lumen: Selected Proceedings from the Canadian Society of Eighteenth-Century Studies* 22 (2003): 83-102.

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