

Conversation and Debate

— Transformation of Sociability in Late Eighteenth-Century France —

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In the 1830s, his later years, Pierre-Louis Roederer actively worked like many others on the sociability of the Old Regime France: “a society of the elite which grew, in the midst of the capital, with the coming of the seventeenth century. It united the two sexes by new connections and new affections; it mixed distinguished men from the court and from the city, persons from the world of polite society and men of letters; [...] it reformed and enriched language, prepared the development of a new literature, and elevated the mind.”¹ In addition to his great knowledge of salons in late eighteenth century, which he probably obtained through André Morellet, Roederer had a career as a new aristocrat of the Empire, which was a time when many French began to feel nostalgia for the polite society before the Revolution. Yet, if this passage from Roederer retains our attention more than similar statements by other authors writing about this same subject, it is because we know that he was first and foremost an active revolutionary particularly interested in problems of public opinion and of political associations.

Roederer, who in this was exceptional in the nineteenth century as Tocqueville, insists on a certain continuity between the Old Regime and the Revolution. According to him, the latter was versed in the ideas and the mores of the eighteenth century and these were gradually extended through the public opinion mainly as a result of conversation and free speech in the salons held by noble or bourgeois families since the precedent century.² As is often said, the French Revolution was in a sense a consequence of the Enlightenment. Here we may even see an anticipation of the argument by Habermas

¹ *Mémoire pour servir à l'histoire de la société polie en France* (Paris, 1835), pp. 5-6.
All translations are my own, except otherwise indicated.

² *L'Esprit de la Révolution de 1789* (Paris, 1831), pp. 4 and 24-25.

on the public space. But unlike this optimistic modern philosopher, Roederer also finds an obvious discontinuity with the Enlightenment. According to him, the Revolution did not inherit from the Old Regime the public space which had been a vehicle for the revolutionary ideas, and it tried in vain to reconstruct it. After the experience of the Terror and the Thermidor, Roederer had to claim in a pamphlet that “the particular societies” such as clubs and popular societies, where debates seemed to replace the conversations of salons as a means to nourish public opinions, turned into “a serious disease of the Republic” and, in his mind, the public opinion should be formed by ways other than political associations.³

It is his bitter experience through the Revolution, rather than a mere yearning for the lost world, that led Roederer to admire the polite society of the Old Regime. If he insists on the role of the salons in guiding the Revolution, he also reminds us that they were rejected by the very revolution they prepared. We need to read, in his later work, his embarrassment at the sight of this strange conjunction of continuity and rupture. Such coexistence of what seems at first incompatible constitutes a great enigma of the French Revolution itself. It is clear that at any rate a certain type of sociability came to an end here and another suffered a setback, or, at least, it is clear that the form of sociability changed at the moment of the Revolution. How was this change brought about? In order to answer this question, I would like to compare two kinds of public space, the conversation in the salons on one hand and the debate in clubs or popular societies on the other. Both of these seem to play a similar role in forming opinion, but, as we shall see, they are so different in their way of communicating that Roederer could not but find between them rupture as well as continuity. This comparison will shed light not only on the transformation of the sociability in the latter half of the century, but also on question of the possibility of communication in the modern political culture.

³ *Des sociétés particulières, telles que clubs, réunions etc.* (Paris, an VII), p. 18; see also his *De la majorité nationale, de la manière dont elle se forme, et des moyens auxquels on peut la reconnaître, ou théorie de l'opinion publique* (Paris, 1797). For Roederer's idea on the public opinion, see Lucien Jaume, *Echec au libéralisme* (Paris: KIMÉ, 1990), especially chap. III.

1. The nightmare of debate

The attempt to establish a new type of public space for citizens in the midst of the French Revolution encountered enough obstacles to be finally abandoned in spite of the important role which it should have played in regenerating the nation. This failure is decisive in two or even three ways.

At the end of September 1791, clubs and popular societies, modern political associations, among which the Jacobins Club in Paris was known as the most active, were denied legal existence, or at least forbidden from participating in many political activities by a decree proposed by Le Chapelier, the same deputy who, three months before, had passed another bill prohibiting the labors unions. Needless to say, this measure reflected the conflict which then became clear between two political factions, the Jacobins and Feuillants (of which Le Chapelier was one of the spokesmen). But at that time, it was conceived mainly as a means of realizing one of the fundamental ideas commonly shared by revolutionaries concerning the new national representative system. For the French Nation, regenerated after long years of the absolute monarchy, the law was to be considered no longer as the result of the monarch's arbitrary will but as "the expression of the general will" (*Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen*, article 6). Therefore the task entrusted to the National Assembly is that of representing the whole nation and to make the laws through their debates. In consequence, *délibération* (political debate) within popular societies, along with collective petition and *filiation* (affiliation with other societies), it was argued, must be forbidden as an unlawful appropriation of the authority of the Assembly. For the word "deliberation" meant, according to Le Chapelier and his colleagues, debates about the laws to be composed.⁴

Shortly before Le Chapelier proposed his decree, Jacques-Pierre Brissot had made a statement, at the Jacobins Club in defense of the existence of political associations: "They [Le Chapelier and his colleagues] claim that, in a representative regime, only the representative organization can deliberate over the laws. — Yes, if we understand this word to refer to the composition of the law. [...] But is it in this sense that the patriotic societies intend to deliberate? These societies limit themselves to emitting not a law, but their

⁴ *Archives parlementaires*, vol. 31, p. 617. For the details of this law, see Shigeki Tomi-naga, "L'impossible groupement intermédiaire : été-automne 1791," *Zinbun: Annals of the Institute for Research in Humanities*, 28 (Kyoto, 1993), pp. 1-22.

own opinion on the law; and certainly it is their right to do so.”⁵ Preliminary debates on laws both by independent citizens and by deputies cannot be identified with discussion to make laws in the National Assembly. Furthermore, such debates are all the more important because it is through them that public opinion is formed or discovered before it is transmitted to the legislative assembly and transformed into the general will, hence laws. This was in fact one of the goals of the Jacobins Club at its origin (“The object of the Society of friends of the constitution is: 1° to discuss in advance the questions which must be decided in the National Assembly [...]”).⁶

It was from the same viewpoint that in May François Buzot objected to Le Chapelier who had proposed yet another decree this time prohibiting collective petitions by popular societies. “Isolated vows formed by obscure citizens will be despised,” said he. “If the general vow is instead expressed by corporations, by cities [...] by societies of citizens, the legislative body and the king, whose duty is to consult public opinion, cannot but take into consideration these imposing petitions.”⁷ For Buzot as well as for Brissot popular societies were the matrix of public opinion as the salons had been during the Old Regime. It can be said that both of them, future Girondins, well understood the intermediary role of political association, which, as was to be pointed out 40 years later by the precursor of the modern political sociology, Alexis de Tocqueville, is the transmission of the opinions voiced by powerless individuals towards larger social groups and finally to the entire society itself.⁸

Misunderstanding, or rejecting this claim in favor of debate and petition by secondary groups, Le Chapelier had answered to Buzot in advance by drawing a very negative image of public space: “As the streets and the parks [*les places publiques*] are common property, they therefore belong to no one, but belong to all [the members of the nation]. It is not on the street corner that education is acquired. Education occurs in quiet gatherings where people discuss without deliberating and enlighten each other without passion and without a partisan spirit; education is achieved through books, and lastly by

⁵ *Discours sur l'utilité des sociétés patriotiques et populaires, sur la nécessité de les maintenir et de les multiplier par-tout* (Paris, 1791), p. 4.

⁶ “Règlement de la société des amis de la constitution,” in F.-A. Aulard, *La Société des Jacobins* (Paris, 1889), vol. 1, p. xxx.

⁷ *Archives parlementaires*, vol. 25, p. 690.

⁸ *Democracy in America*, trans. H. Reeve (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), vol. 2, p. 129.

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laws dictated by a healthy philosophy.”⁹ It is significant that, over and above the existence and activities of the political association, what Le Chapelier denied to citizens was the right to encounters and communication in public space. If, as Philippe Meyer explains following Philippe Ariès, the decline of sociability in the open space of towns had already been under way since the seventeenth century,¹⁰ the general tendency among deputies of the early revolutionary Assembly to encourage complete national integration made it difficult for them to admit any particular forms of civil sociability. Even if citizens were allowed to gather in open spaces, they could not deliberate there, but only discuss quietly and “without passion.”

In relation with what will be argued later, we must also turn our attention to “books” which Le Chapelier recommends as ordinary means of communication. In support of that conception of the role of books, one deputy praised the printing press for its use in developing public opinion everywhere in France, saying that “in a country which is as densely populated as France, and where it is difficult to add the sum of individual vows whatever relation they may entertain to the majority of the nation, it is clear that a good book [...] propagates more knowledge, says better what the public wishes, and consequently determines administrators and legislators who must not ignore public opinion, more powerfully than can a petition with a signature by any number of citizens.”¹¹ As a matter of fact, Le Chapelier and his colleagues were simply repeating a rather widely diffused idea at that time. According to Kant, for example, “the public use of reason” can be represented by the figure of “*a man of learning addressing the entire reading public.*”¹²

In France, it was Condorcet who, on various occasions, emphasized the usefulness of printing materials as important tools for forming public opinion. According to him, this medium is useful first in spreading the range of the public opinion: “the art of printing has circulated it [knowledge] over a large area and guaranteed its duration,” he says. But reading printed matters is all the more effective in examining and justifying public opinion because it enables “a cool and severe examination where only reason should be listened

⁹ *Archives parlementaires*, vol. 25, p. 681.

¹⁰ *L'Enfant et la raison d'Etat* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), pp. 10-12.

¹¹ *Archives parlementaires*, vol. 25, p. 689.

¹² “An Answer to the Question: ‘What is Enlightenment?’,” in *Kant's Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 55. Italic in the original text.

to and prevents the irruption of enthusiasm." Printing is for Condorcet an "art of conserving the human reason" and when it can successfully pass this examination by reason, public opinion says the truth about what it is called upon to deliberate. In contrast with reading, oral communication leads men to the errors under the influence of passions which are contrary to reason. Modern education must therefore allot more time for reading and writing than to eloquence as was typically the case in the Greek or Roman Antiquity.¹³ Condorcet thus seems to completely eliminate debate from public space and replace it with printed books. Le Chapelier and his colleagues probably shared these viewpoints when they recommended writing and reading in order to abolish political associations.

Clubs and societies, far from losing their political influence at that moment, managed to survive the attack and even gained more power than before, as is shown by the Jacobins Club's accession to power one year after the adoption of Le Chapelier's decrees. However, as the political situation became harder, revolutionary clubs gradually began to metamorphose into noisy, aggressive gathering where infinitely repeated invectives and purges replaced calm and rational debates. What, moreover, was fatal for these societies was that even among their active leaders very few understood their social and political significance as secondary groups. When Le Chapelier attacked the societies pointing out that members were slandering and abusing established authorities, as well as the individual citizens who appeared to oppose them, Robespierre launched a counter-offensive only with the following ironic reply: "Is it then such a great misfortune that, in our current situation, public opinion and the public spirit develop at the expense of the reputation of some men who, after having seemed to serve their country, went on to betray it all the more audaciously!"¹⁴ Though he did succeed in preserving, for a while at least, the influence of the Jacobins Club, it turned out that Robespierre viewed his club as an instrument to accuse his political opponents and to purge them.

After the proclamation of the Republic in September 1792, Brissot himself who was then accused and excluded from the Jacobins Club, finally acknowledged the transformation and degradation of the club he enthusias-

¹³ "Vie de Turgot [1786]," in *Œuvres complètes*. (Paris, 1847, hereafter abbreviated as *O.C.*), vol. 5, p. 14; "Rapport et projet de décret sur l'organisation générale de l'instruction publique [1792]," in *O.C.*, vol. 7, p. 475; "Discours de réception à l'Académie française [1782]," in *O.C.*, vol. 1, p. 393.

¹⁴ *Œuvres de Maximilien Robespierre* (Paris: P.U.F, 1952), vol. 7, p. 748.

tically defended one year earlier. His own response to the accusation shows us how impossible calm debate had become in the face of the exaltation of partisan spirit; the Club of Paris is now “a perpetual theater of deceitful denunciation, a center of fermentation, an arena where gladiators wearing the mask of patriotism tear each other apart,” a place “where freedom of speech is proscribed” and where “a small but boisterous minority enchains a sound but weak majority.”¹⁵ Through the scenes presented by Brissot, we can see an escalation of reciprocal violence caused by the mimetic rivalry in a Girardian sense,¹⁶ and after several tumultuous months, he and his comrades (including Buzot) were finally put to death. It seems that violent denunciation had become a way of life for these societies. In the end, after the Revolutionary government was established in October 1793, it was the club members themselves who rejected their original mission. It was denounced by Jacobins leaders such as Saint-Just who were then at the height of their power, and debate and discussion were finally replaced by a centralized system of control exercised by the government. Paradoxically, the groups which had always sustained the extension of popular sovereignty ceased to be a forum for democratic debates at the very moment their power reached its peak. After Thermidor, when Jacobins leaders lost their influence and were executed, the Constitution of 1795 designated popular societies as objects of the legal prohibition (articles 360-362). Thus the first attempt to introduce a public space of deliberation into modern French political culture failed, both from the outside and from the inside.

2. The pleasure of conversation

In contrast with the difficult development of public space through political association during the revolutionary period, there was in Old Regime a different kind of space which guaranteed, or at least was believed to guarantee, existence of public opinion: salons. These were held by noble and bourgeois families for persons to gather regularly and to exchange ideas informally in a harmonious setting. As the notion and importance of public

¹⁵ *Sur la société des Jacobins à Paris* (Paris, 1792), pp. 30 and 34.

¹⁶ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. P. Gregory (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977). As for the escalation of violence in the popular societies, see Shigeki Tominaga, “Voice and Silence in the Public Space: the French Revolution and the Problem of Secondary Groups,” *Cahier d'épistémologie*, no. 9607 (Montréal, 1996), pp. 3-22.

opinion became more and more prevalent throughout the eighteenth century, salons went on to form the center of the so called Republic of Letters, where common opinion about political or economic matters were shared by a wide range of intellectuals. As Kant once said, "among all nations, the French is characterized by its taste for the conversation; it is, from this point of view, a model for the others."¹⁷ Conversation was one of the favorite things for both men and women during the century of Enlightenment, and if debates inside popular societies failed in forming public opinion, conversation within salons successfully fulfilled that function, at least if we are to believe what various authors described in their memoirs or other writings. It was precisely this contrast that, after bitter years of the Revolution, urged Roederer to begin his work on polite society.

"I want to be happy, but I live with the others who, just like me, also want to be happy side by side; so let us look for the means of getting my happiness while giving them theirs, or at least without injuring theirs."¹⁸ This passage shows us how the concern for sociability appeared at the beginning of the eighteenth century alongside with the pursuit of happiness which, according to Robert Mauzi, especially characterizes that same century.¹⁹ Sociability gradually gained great value and it was principally salons which embodied this harmonious communication among men and women. Originating in the court life under the reign of Louis XIV during the seventeenth century, polite societies were passed on from court to noble and then to the bourgeois families as time went by. By the mid-eighteenth century, Jean-François Marmontel, one of the most famous guests of salons, triumphantly describes the development and the accomplishments of this form of sociability: "the intercourse, the agreement of spirits, this mutual taste which attracts them [men of letters], this need to communicate with each other, this delicate pleasure that they experience to enlighten and to animate each other; this union, I would say, has always made the happiness and glory of the Letters. The last century saw it reign among the most celebrated writers. It is the same union, and even more peaceful one which exists between the talents of our days."²⁰

¹⁷ *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht abgefat*, in *Werke* (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1923), vol. 8, p. 207.

¹⁸ Claude Buffier, *Traité de la société civile et du moyen de se rendre heureux, en contribuant au bonheur des personnes avec qui l'on vit* (Paris, 1726), p. 108.

¹⁹ *L'Idée du bonheur au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1969).

²⁰ "Discours à l'Académie française [22 décembre 1763]," *Œuvres complètes* (Paris, 1819), vol. 10, p. 8.

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Regularly invited to the salons, men of letters such as Marmontel or André Morellet, to whom I will refer later, discussed there with each other or recited their writings in front of their host or hostess and other guests. Starting from these lively salons, which formed a public space but were naturally intimate and limited both in space and in time, a public sphere seems to have grown as the contents of the conversations and readings were transmitted to the exterior world first by private and then public epistolary form (among which Grimm's *Literary Correspondence* was the best known) and by the publication of works by men of letters themselves. This wider society where a certain number of opinions were commonly shared was called the Republic of Letters.²¹ As a matter of fact, "public opinion" is a contradictory term in a double way, for opinion had been what an individual held personally, hence without any public attribute, while *doxa*, which constitutes the Greek origin of the word, should be contrasted to *episteme*, which means right knowledge. In the Republic of Letters however, the word was accepted as equivalent to truth, thus inverting the original meaning, and public opinion was believed to be correct because it was composed bringing together enlightened intellectuals. As Louis-Sébastien Mercier said, men of letters "have made the rights of reason evaluated, and [...] at important crises they decided public opinion. It had, according to them, the largest influence on the events. They seemed to form at last the national spirit."²²

It is entirely uncertain where public opinion can really be found and, if it can be found in any way, whether it tells truth or not, because, as suggested by Condorcet and more precisely noticed later by Jules Barni, it is "the scattered public [*le public dispersé*]" that accepts it.²³ Yet, for the Republic of Letters it was nonetheless related, or believed to be related, to a

²¹ For the details on the salons and the Republic of Letters, see D. Gordon, *Citizens without Sovereignty* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) and D. Goodman, *The Republic of Letters* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); unfortunately both of "apolitical" character, as P.N. Miller suggests in "Citizenship and Culture in Early Modern Europe," *Journal of History of Ideas*, vol. 57, no. 4 (1996), p. 740.

²² *Tableau de Paris* (Paris, 1782), vol. 8, p. 289. For the notion of the public opinion and its change through the eighteenth century, see K.M. Baker, "Politique et opinion publique sous l'Ancien Régime," *Annales E.S.C.*, jan.-fév. 1987, pp. 41-71; M. Ozouf, "L'Opinion publique," *L'Homme régénéré* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), pp. 21-53; T. Sakagami, "Yoron no kannen ni tuite [On the ideas of the public opinion]," *Keizai-Ronso*, 141-6 (Kyoto, 1988), pp. 1-18.

²³ *Histoire des idées morales et politiques en France au XVIII^e siècle* (Genève: Slatkine, 1865), vol. 1, p. 48.

concrete place, the salons. Moreover, it was dependant on a certain form of oral communication, the conversation which was entertained there. In a pamphlet written in 1764 against the King's declaration concerning restriction of freedom of the press, but published only eleven years later, Morellet refers to the use of the conversation in making public opinion. Arguing that the statesman, who needs knowledge in order to govern the state, must not ignore public opinion, much less restrain the freedom of the press on matter concerning the administration, he claimed that written works and conversation constitute the two major "sources of instruction for the Public and for the Government" from which "Society can draw the greatest advantage."²⁴ It is significant that writing and discussing are put side by side, because in view of the revolutionary discourses which we have just read, discussion was substituted with printing matters as an instrument of public opinion.

Of these two communication media, Morellet is likely to prefer conversation to writing. "The way, often different from your own, in which another person views an object makes you observe it from the new perspectives. [...] Conversation gives us a vivacious, quick attention which is often more useful for us than the meditation." In contrast, the effect of public written materials is "to turn the conversation to the subject of political economy. Then talks by educated persons run on these interesting objects; one examines, one discusses, one attacks, one defends and knowledge is seen to be born from the shock of ideas and opinions."²⁵ The conversation is, in his mind, the center from which public opinion emanates and printed matters are supplementary to this process. The case of Joseph-Dominique Garat may be still more interesting; even after the Revolution, and though he probably knew Condorcet's *Esquisse* where printed material is highly praised, he contrasts the boredom produced by books with the pleasure of the conversation. "There is neither surprise nor trouble in books, and even their angers are meditated. Books, which are always artificially composed, are more hypocrite still than men." For him too, it is lively speech rather than reading that is most useful in the communication process. "The great advantage of the speech [...] is to be able to rectify ideas and expressions at the very instant they get out, to leave no time to reign the mind and to increase more to the prolific seed of errors."²⁶

Interestingly enough, according to other parts of his *Mémoires*, Garat,

²⁴ *Réflexions sur les avantages de la liberté d'écrire et d'imprimer sur les matières de l'administration* (London, 1775), p. 24.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

²⁶ *Mémoires historiques sur le XVIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1820), vol. 1, pp. 173 and 244.

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who admires the conversation in salons, also turns out to be extremely severe of deliberations during the revolutionary period. Describing a scene which should remind us of the nightmare of debate seen through Brissot's text, he says: "In their [the National Convention, namely the Assembly under the First Republic] deliberations where debates are quarrels, the swords of combat are in the canes beside the deputies, while the sword of truth, or that of error, is in their speeches."²⁷ Just like Roederer, Garat managed to survive the critical years and kept memories of the happy days in the Old Regime where free conversation was possible at each salon. Even if it is, perhaps, an invented memory of the past, conversation was undoubtedly one of the favorite occupations of that time, especially in France. The question therefore is, how could the salons develop such a delightful form of conversation that it was believed to produce true opinion.

Georg Simmel, who takes the problem of sociability as "an example of pure or formal sociology," distinguishes the content from the form of human society, the latter of which finds its purest expression in arts, plays and sociability. In spite of the fact that the form means a determination and restriction of life, which is the content or material of the *sociation* (*Vergesellschaftung*), sociability, paradoxically, produces a maximum of freedom, given that the "actual, life-conditioned motivation of sociation are of no significance to sociability." The conversation without any other social purpose, talking for its own sake in a social gathering, produces this freedom which is realized through sociability. Here form draws its significance "from the fascinating play of relations which they create among the participants, joining and loosening, winning and succumbing, giving and taking."²⁸ This is the very pleasure of conversation. Precisely the same subject can be found in a chapter of Madame de Staël's *De l'Allemagne* [On Germany], titled "On the spirit of the conversation." According to her, it is not the subject or content of a conversation that brings about pleasure; ideas and knowledge exchanged through the conversation are not so significant as the manner of conversation, "a certain way one behaves to the other, how they can make their own pleasure reciprocally and rapidly, [...] how they show their spirit with all the nuances through accent, gesture and glance."²⁹ The daughter of Necker must have learned from the salon which her parents had in Paris that

²⁷ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 338.

²⁸ *Fundamental Problems of Sociology*, in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. and ed. Kurt H. Wolff (New York: Free Press, 1950), pp. 44 and 52.

²⁹ *Œuvres* (Paris, 1868), vol. 2, p. 22.

the pleasure of conversation is the result of the pursuit for a form of social life to the detriment of its content.

As long as sociability aims at the purification of form, its "character is determined by such personal qualities as amiability, refinement, cordiality, and many other sources of attraction," says Simmel. But precisely because "everything depends on their personalities, the participants are not permitted to stress them too conspicuously."³⁰ It is again Morellet, following what Jonathan Swift had written, who argues in favor of this kind of self-regulation: in conversation which is the "source of much pleasure and happiness," it is important, he says, to avoid "the principal vices which spoil the conversation," among which one can count "inattention," "egoism," "despotism or spirit of domination," "pedantry", etc.³¹ Self-regulation as well as exclusion of any concrete purpose, renders conversation comfortable and delightful, and it is this comfort, even if it is almost fictional or limited in the small world, which assures the harmony and agreement among the members of the salons. Rene Girard might have described it "a pact of metaphysical non-aggression with the Other" which "has nothing to do with veritable love,"³² but for most of men and women in that century, it was plausible to believe that their happiness derived from that sociability and communication.

3. Analogies and differences / continuity and rupture

Before comparing these two types of sociability, both of which were expected to form public opinion by means of free oral communication, it is important to point out that this refinement of conversation is not so easily attained, nor realized in such a simple way, for sociability of human kind has in effect a strange and contradictory character, as Kant names it "the unsociable sociability (*ungesellig Geselligkeit*).³³ According to the philosopher of Königsberg, who maintained his interest in the problem of communication throughout his life, it is not simple sociability but an unsociability, or an antagonism, which creates the true social order.³³ Morellet seems to under-

³⁰ Simmel, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

³¹ "Essai sur la conversation," in *Mélanges de littérature et philosophie* (Paris, 1818); vol. 4, pp. 82-83.

³² *Critique dans un souterrain* (Lausanne: L'Age d'homme, 1976), p. 80.

³³ "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose," in *Political Writing*, *op. cit.*, p. 44. In the English translation is employed not the word "unsociable" but "unsocial." For Kant's interest in the problem of communication and his idea about

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stand this paradox well enough when he suggests that, as quoted before, the advantage of the conversation is to encounter the viewpoint which is different from one's own and that opinion is born from "the shock of ideas" brought through conversation. He insists moreover on the importance of "the spirit of contradiction," which constitutes the "character of the most civilized society" as opposed to credulity and imitation, arguing that it is these different and contradictory ideas that become the pivotal point of conversation.³⁴ Discussion is channeled into a concordant conclusion, not in spite of existence of contradiction or the conflict, but precisely because of them. Such was the vision of conversation held in salons of the eighteenth century.

While conflicts between members of popular societies kept increasing until they erupted in reciprocal violence, sometimes even collective violence, the antagonism found in salon conversation was of itself a resource for harmonious communication. What is the difference between these two groups? Needless to say, Morellet gave us only some psychological insights into the spirit of contradiction, rather than the sociological explanation which is required for a complete understanding of the problem. One hint, nonetheless, will be easily gathered from his or other visitors' description of salons. Since conversation, unlike the reading, rests on physical participation and since agents often become excited from the sound of their own voice as well as from their opponents' aggressive words, such excitement will need to be attenuated by someone who participates in the conversation. This person was generally none other than the hostess who presides the salon (*les salonnières*). "She [Madame Geoffrin] tempered the opinions as well as the characters," says Garat. "Often in the heat of the discussions, she prevented voices from rising, because the movements of soul nearly always follow those of the voice and come up, so to speak, with the voice."³⁵ Of that same person, Marmon-
tel tells us that she was "still more adroit at presiding, watching, keeping under her hand these two naturally free societies [which respectively took place every Monday and Wednesday], at marking the limits to their freedom, and at bringing it back there by a word, by a gesture, as if by an invisible string."³⁶

the social order as result of man's unsociability or the conversion of the hostility into the hospitality, see Pierre Saint-Amand, *Les Lois de l'hostilité* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), p. 195.

³⁴ "De l'esprit de la contradiction," in *Mélanges*, *op. cit.*, vol. 4, pp. 140-141.

³⁵ *Mémoires historiques...*, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 113.

³⁶ *Mémoires*, in *Œuvres complètes*, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 340.

If sociability, the purest pursuit of the form of sociation, affords the entire freedom to all the members of a salon, this freedom is in fact produced by the skillful hand of the hostess. The equality among the participants, which assures freedom of speech, is not a simple equality but it is, to the contrary, sustained by a instance which is superior to anyone of them. This is why, according to Morellet, "a woman known for many virtues and for a great knowledge of men", once again Madame Geoffrin, held as a rule to "praise rarely her friends," or if it were necessary to do so, to "praise them only generally and never for this or that fact."³⁷ It is this attitude of distance from any particular situation which allows equality between participants, hence their free discussion. In the event that her concerns or her intention to impose the equality and to restrain participants turns out to be too evident, however, the essence of the sociability will be somewhat disturbed. Morellet tells of a salon which was held in a style rather different from that of Madame Geoffrin and where the atmosphere was mingled with comfort and awkwardness: "The conversation there was nice, though a little constrained by the severity of Madame Necker, with whom many subjects could not be touched, and who suffered above all from freedom of religious opinions. But concerning literature, we talked agreeably and she herself talked well about it."³⁸ Charles Duclos also observes that "uniformity of the character in the society causes so much disgust that we begin to seek the singularity, and we want to tease with abruptness, and become only exuberant and absent-minded."³⁹ According to Benedetta Craveri,⁴⁰ this was the case in the salon of Madame du Deffend. These passages show us, in the other way, how much delightful conversation depends on the presence of the hostess as center or heart of the salon.

If we now return to the debate during the revolutionary period, one can find leaders to conduct the groups but, as we have seen above, they considered popular societies merely as instruments to enlarge their political influence. Though participants in such societies were equal to each other, their equality was not sustained by any instance, so that debates could not attain concordant conclusion. Nonetheless, this idea of guide who was able to bring debates to satisfactory result was not totally neglected even in the

³⁷ "De l'esprit de la contradiction," *op. cit.*, p. 134.

³⁸ *Mémoires sur le dix-huitième siècle et sur la Révolution* (Paris, 1822), vol. 1, p. 154.

³⁹ *Considérations sur les mœurs de ce siècle* (Lausanne: Rencontre, 1970), p. 293.

⁴⁰ *Madame du Deffend et son monde* (Paris: Seuil, 1987), p. 88.

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popular societies. François Lanthenas, who pleaded the cause of the societies in 1792, describes in the following way the scene of the session which he considered ideal. "It is desirable that large, convenient and salubrious places, where one can hold readings and lectures, be constructed; [...] that the citizens who come to listen to them [lectures] form an association for the propagation of the good, the search of the truth and the sense of duty [...]; that attention and respect be recommended and prescribed in this place of gathering; that one carefully refrain from the denunciation, a form of discussion which appeals to passions and drives away the reason [...]; that the wisest men, if necessary, maintain there the silence through a rigorous censorship."⁴¹ It is remarkable that he considers public reading as a form of oral communication contrary to what was recommended by Condorcet or Le Chapelier in favor of the public opinion. Even more important is the fact that "the wisest men" are requested to maintain order and prevent passionate and irrational utterances during meetings, an image which cannot but reminds us of the *salonnière* praised by Garat.

Anticipating the possibility of turmoil created by the oral communication process, Lanthenas did not overlook setting up a mechanism that would prevent the disorder from irrupting during meetings of citizens. To use the expression which he adopts in a different context (in the defense of the freedom of press for which he proposes to establish, in stead of legal censorship, a civil group as a means to keep the public opinion and the mores in line), this preventive mechanism could be called "the moderator of public opinion."⁴² The presence of this moderator or coordinator makes popular societies more similar to salons over which hostesses preside, at least in Lanthenas' imagination. Together with Brissot and Buzot, he thought of a system where public disturbances were to be carefully avoided through the action of an instance superior to any member of the group. The analogy or continuity between these two types group can also be confirmed through Brissot's career before the Revolution. In addition to his enthusiasm for the United States where he might have learned about the significance of the political and civil associations, something which would become public knowledge nearly fifty

⁴¹ *Des sociétés populaires considérées comme une branche essentielle de l'instruction publique* (Paris, 1792), pp. 2-3.

⁴² *De la liberté indéfinie de la presse et de l'importance de ne soumettre la communication des pensées qu'à l'opinion publique* (Paris, 1791), p. 33. For the notion of moderator of public opinion, see M. Gauchet, *La Révolution des pouvoirs* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), pp. 91-92.

years later in the work of Tocqueville, this clandestine author once dreamed of establishing at London a society for sciences and arts “where the scholars and the philosophers of the world would get together on certain days of the week,” with a journal “which would serve as passport for philosophical and political truth.”⁴³ Furthermore, it was on the model of salon, or by democratizing the salon, that he envisaged his own society. Brissot thus can be situated as an intermediary between two kinds of sociability and it seems highly plausible that there is some affiliation between him and Lanthenas, who worked very closely with the chief of Girondins during almost a year.

In the concluding chapter of her book on “The Republic of Letters,” Dena Goodman, retracing the activities of Brissot both before and after 1789, defines him as a “link” between the Enlightenment and the Revolution, between salons and popular societies. This continuity however soon reverts into the discontinuity, for his attempt to open a new form of public space was doomed to fail for several reasons. As we have already seen, the Republic of Letters and the Republic in a political sense to be born were incompatible. What, moreover, is fundamental for Brissot, according to Goodman, is that he inherited and practiced “the fantasy of masculine self-governance,” rather than the real spirit of the salons presided by talented women. That is to say the solution he adopted constituted a pure and simple deviation from that spirit. The Revolution had already been underway for more than 10 years when, without the supervision of women, men solely attempted to establish the form of meeting which Brissot took as a model.⁴⁴ Obvious as the failure of the revolutionary debates is, why is it that Brissot and his colleagues entirely lacked the ability to bring about the same result as the salonnières? Is it really a capacity relating to a unique gender that determined the success of conversation in the salons? Goodman’s explanation on the discontinuity in the eighteenth-century sociability is not very convincing.

Neither can we end without a word about Daniel Gordon’s work treating the same subject. Gordon enthusiastically praises the refinement of sociability and conversation in the eighteenth-century civil public space, but without any other explanation of their sudden disappearance at the end of the century, than the coming of the Revolution or of a “democracy” where “humans were

⁴³ *Mémoires* (Paris, n.d.), vol. 1, p. 239. For the life and thought of Brissot, see Patrice Gueniffey’s brief but penetrating article “Brissot” in *Dictionnaire critique de la Révolution française : Acteurs* (Paris: Flammarion, 1992), pp. 77-99.

⁴⁴ Goodman, *op. cit.*, p. 297.

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mere 'numerical units.'"⁴⁵ Though this conclusion may not be so far off the mark as Goodman's, the simple word "democracy" can hardly be taken to constitute a sufficient explanation, and this at least in two ways. If Gordon means by this word a political system in contrast with the salons or with the public sphere in eighteenth-century France which, according to him, would have less of political character, it becomes impossible to understand the role salons played in preparing the Revolution in the political sphere. During the century salons embodied democracy, at least in a miniature form, and there public opinion was believed to gain a remarkable political influence. If, on the other hand, the word is employed to refer to a social condition where all are equal to each other, we can once again find that equality in the salons, as Simmel made it clear. It will be necessary to ask why the equality which engendered the harmony in the salon conversation led to a different situations in deliberating groups plagued by the repeated nightmare of denunciation and calumnies. Neither Gordon nor Goodman, or even Habermas it seems, can do anything but imitate Roederer's nostalgic praise of polite society, and even that in a simplified way.

Certainly the popular society that Brissot and Lanthenas conceived could not survive the vicissitude of the French Revolution, but its failure was brought about neither by a lack of skillful women to conduct the group, nor by the abrupt coming of democracy, an event which was already taking place, at least to some extent, in Old Regime salons. It seems important to distinguish two kinds of equality: one which existed in salons and facilitated such a harmonious conversation that public opinion could be taken to express the truth, and the other, found in the revolutionary clubs which, far from promoting the fruitful debates, rendered interactions between the members of those groups worse and worse until it led to the destruction of the social group harboring it. The first one emerged as the equality of various participants, belonging to different social conditions outside of the salon, an equality which existed in relation to someone who presided the gathering. The second one, which is merely guaranteed to individuals by law or by some other abstract instance, before the formation of the assembly, can not find any center precisely because the members are equal to each other. The equality existing prior to the group itself is to lay increasing importance on each participant's self-interest without overcoming the problem of "the unsociable sociability" of human kind and cause in consequence more and

⁴⁵ Gordon, *op. cit.*, p. 238.

more conflicts. We may call this second type an “acquisitive equality,” while the other type which is realized through the self-regulative effort of members in the presence of the hostess can be named a “responsive equality,” for it is based on the free response of the participants.

Thus the pursuit of sociability which had been going on throughout the century reached an end when one type of equality was substituted for another at the moment of the French Revolution. From then on, conversation lost the vivacity which had been experienced by Morellet and other intellectuals, while debates faced great obstacles in the attempt to develop a new public space. This transformation or disappearance of the sociability, which forced Roederer to confess his attachment to the polite society of the Old Regime, also suggests the limits of rational deliberation as well as of the formation of opinion in democratic political culture. Though in a somewhat different context, Emmanuel Sieyès admits that even debates in the National Assembly, which should monopolize political deliberation to the detriment of popular societies, cannot attain unanimous conclusion and must be satisfied with a majority decision. “When we get together, it is for deliberating, it is for knowing the views of each other, for taking advantage of our mutual knowledge, in order to confront the particular wills, to modify them, to conciliate them, and finally to obtain a common result by *plurality*.”⁴⁶ According to Bernard Manin, “plurality” means here the majority which replaces unanimity with the aim of legitimating the conclusion of the discussion.⁴⁷ This difficulty of reaching unanimity in deliberation has something to do with the impossible debates among equal individuals in clubs, or in other words, the destiny which they had to follow seems to anticipate the future of representative democracy.

Or have we already reached that time when the printed medium prevails in the world instead of oral communication, as was recommended by Condorcet or Le Chapelier? Though their proposal for making public opinion by calm solitary reading is sufficiently convincing to suggest the coming of such an age, it is necessary to recall that this new form of debate, namely

⁴⁶ “Dire sur la question du veto royal,” in *Ecrits politiques*, ed. R. Zapperi (Paris and Montreux: Archives contemporaines, 1985), p. 238. My italics.

⁴⁷ *Principes du gouvernement représentatif*. (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1995), pp. 242-243. Manin coins, for this process, a new word “transsubstantation.”

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Kant's "public use of reason" embodied in the "man of learning addressing the entire reading public" was, if not always encouraged, at least tolerated by a somewhat particular political instance, the enlightened despot. We should remember that Kant writes "the age of enlightenment" is also "the century of Frederick," who only can utter "Argue as much as you like and about whatever you like, but obey!"⁴⁸ It is no longer a concrete human being with its body and voice, but the Reason of State named Frederick II who occupies the very place of the hostess in her salon. This is what Michel Foucault would call "the contract of rational despotism with free reason."⁴⁹ The new type of communication which must arrive after the decline of the conversation and the difficulty of debates is developed in too wide a range for the human beings to meet directly ("the scattered public") and totally sustained by the Reason of State which demands the obedience to every subject. The transformation of the sociability in the late eighteenth century, the disappearance of the polite society and the failure of the invention of the new public space ultimately teach us much about our modern political culture.

⁴⁸ "An Answer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment?'," *op. cit.*, pp. 58-59.

⁴⁹ "Qu'est-ce que les Lumières?," in *Dits et écrits* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), vol. 4, p. 567.