Newspapers and Networks

ROBERT A. SCHNEIDER

I must confess that these papers[1] struck me (given the kind of historian I am) as both familiar and strange: familiar in their focus on connections, sociability, and a broadly cultural approach to this thing called the Enlightenment (and the specifically French Enlightenment at that); but strange in the way they exhibit an intellectual caution, a wariness of large claims, and even a sort of silence with regards to historiographical or theoretical orientations that once might have equipped one with a scholarly compass. These are, to be sure, works in progress; and I'm sure in the full-dress versions more will be made of their hard-won material. But here at least I am struck at how close they stick to their evidence, which is probably a good thing—itself a cautionary example for someone like me who is always looking for those "drivers" of change Jonathan mentioned yesterday. So I'm properly chastened.

Elizabeth Bond begins her account with assertions that conform to a familiar, general depiction of the eighteenth century: more books, more households with books, increased literacy, more readers, an information overload and the like. But she cuts across these familiar trends by looking into a peep-hole of this culture—the *Annonces, Affiches et Avis Divers*, in three years (1778, 1782, 1788)—for nine provincial cities and Paris; and specifically the 365 letters published in these advertisement sheets/newspapers in those years. In my work on Toulouse many years ago, I also looked at the *Affiches*—primarily as evidence (and here's an example of the sort of "big shift" I was surely unwarranted to be confident about finding—but like many of my generation, I was all about big transitions) of the growing interest in and awareness of the national context at the expense of local concerns. In another words, I came to the *Affiches* with a preset agenda very much underwritten by a dreaded Tonnës-like binary. Elizabeth uses these publications with greater care: she traces the contours of reading practices in all their variety. On balance, she confirms the shift from intensive to extensive reading patterns in this period. One of her most interesting findings regards the use of these newspapers by authors themselves to advertise their own books; but readers too commented on texts that touched them, perhaps adding to the celebrity stature of some authors she notes as a consequence of the material vehicle of the newspaper, perhaps too demonstrating a communion between reader and author that sounds very much like the relationship between Rousseau and his besotted readers that Darnton exposed many years ago.[2] As important as what readers read in the newspapers was where they read them—in reading rooms, *cabinets de lecture*, cafes, gambling halls—suggesting an ethnography of reading that surely was crucial to Enlightenment culture. On balance, however, her most compelling conclusion might strike one as a non-finding (though I think it's more interesting than that). Because references to the same books were rare, she concludes that the Enlightenment was not a matter of shared books—not a development based on a canon—but rather a matter of shared practices.

So my major question is a rather simple one: What are we to make of this conclusion—shared practices over a shared canon? Is it to forsake content in favor of form? And if so, what is it

[1] Elizabeth Andrews Bond, "Responding to Print in Ages of 'Information Overload'" and Melanie Conroy, "Networks of the Enlightenment: French Salons and Academies as Networks."

[2] Robert Darnton, "Readers Respond to Rousseau," chapter six of his *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

about these practices that suggests anything meaningfully called the Enlightenment? There were legions of readers of the *Affiches*, devout Catholics and defenders of the status quo top to bottom, haters of Voltaire and everything he espoused, who also engaged in these same reading practices. In short, these common practices hardly yielded common results. Are they, rather, cultural technologies that could be harnessed for various ends; and, if so, what "drove" France in these decades to a particular set of ends?

Finally, could we endow this snap shot of three years of newspapers with a more dramatic sense of change or at least advent? How did readers reflect on the novelty of the *Affiches*? Was there no comment on its coming into being, and thus a reflection on a reading culture before its emergence—a sense, then, of shared pleasure and enrichment with this novel institution and what "lumières" it could add to the emerging (or evolving) culture coming to be seen in these years as, indeed, Enlightened. For with a better sense of this sort of change—the advent of an institution that, after all, generically is emblematic of a revolution in the circulation and reading of "news"—we then would be able to place more visible markers in the long trajectory of the evolving, almost seamless, largely quantitative line of development (increase in books, more readers, greater literacy) with which Elizabeth begins her paper.

Melanie Conroy's paper provides a methodologically and technologically impressive reconstruction of what she and her colleagues have called the French Enlightenment Network: the multiple ties established in the various academies and salons that proliferated in the period, and which were further affirmed in correspondences. Her analysis reveals interesting differences in the intellectual valences of salons and academies—with the salon habitués exhibiting less interest in science than their academic counterparts. Much of this is interesting but not necessarily surprising; just as it is not terribly surprising that a smaller proportion of Rousseau's correspondents were members of academies as compared to Voltaire and D'Alembert; or, more generally, as Denis Richet told us long ago, that the Enlightenment found a very hospitable home in the confines of a tidy society of the urban elite.[3] Not surprising, however, does not mean unimportant. And like the work of her colleagues of the "Mapping the Republic of Letters" project[4] her analysis makes it possible to assert with greater confidence generalizations about Enlightenment culture that we had heretofore simply inferred with much less evidence.

I have two fairly different questions, or rather suggestions, for Melanie. One is to use her hard-won data to confront what has emerged as a provocative challenge to our understanding of the cultural (and historiographic) prestige of the salon. In the view of Antoine Lilti and Nicolas Schapira, it hardly deserves the credit for mobilizing the critical energies of the Enlightenment. To be sure, their critique of Dena Goodman and Dan Gordon is in many ways well-placed; but this has unfortunately led them to cast the salon as merely another embodiment of aristocratic or even courtly hierarchies, divested of its creative potential.[5] It seems to me that Melanie has the goods to enter this fray over an important institution with an impressive array of evidence.

[3] Denis Richet, "Autour des origines idéologiques lointaines de la Révolution française," *Annales ESC* 1969.

[4] http://republicofletters.stanford.edu

[5] Antoine Lilti, *The World of the Salons: Sociability and Worldliness in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, trans. Lydia Cochrane (2005; Oxford University Press, 2016); Nicolas Schapira, *Un professionnel des lettres au XVIIe siècle: Valentin Conrart-Une histoire sociale* (Champ Vallon, 2003); Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Salon* (Cornell University Press, 1996); Daniel Gordon,

Second question: in two passages, Melanie asserts that the French Enlightenment Network was "one network—regardless of whether eighteenth-century academicians were aware of the complex relations between academies." It gave rise to a national network, "even if its members may not have been aware of its national character." In our pre-workshop discussion we brought up the distinction between "emic" and "etic" approaches: between the historical actors' awareness of what they were doing, on the one hand, and posterity or the historians' insight into what they did, on the other. Here, it seems, we have a rather bald assertion of the etic view, without any qualms. Simply put: Are qualms in order? Should we care if salon habitués and academicians largely unconsciously circulated in dense networks ultimately creating bundles of ties that had a "national character?" And if they did so without appreciating what they were doing—what did it really mean?

Citizens Without Sovereignty: Equality and sociability in French Thought, 1670–1789 (Princeton University Press, 1994).