

"IT PLACES" (CAFES, ACADEMIES AND SALONS)

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Part 1 – The remits of debating ideas

Let's talk about an important aspect, ideas don't live in a vacuum. They need space to spread out as well as support. They are transmitted and circulated in a very practical way. They are the subject of learning and exchanges. All this invites us to explore places of debate in a world under surveillance, the Ancient Regime. One could not speak out in public as one intended at the time. Incidentally, one could rarely get together to exchange ideas and compare them, and even more rarely express one's opinions freely. Therefore, there were a few regulated "it places" where opinions could be made and changed.

Part 2 - Cafés

And let's start our visit at a place which, in all appearances, was the most liberal, the café. They were intimately linked with the development of yet relatively luxurious items from the New World, like chocolate and tobacco, to which we ascribe stimulating virtues for brain function. Meetings were not as constrained as in a salon where one could attend by invitation only and on a fixed date. But it was more distinguished than a hostel where one would go to be entertained. It was an excellent place for free discussion and without political stakes, in contrast to the academy.

In short, meetings here were undeniably less ritualised and ceremonious. Essentially, one discussed literature and theatre, the great cultural subjects in short. Montesquieu depicted these places in the 36th *Persian Letter*, which became the echo chamber of literary quarrels of the day. One would have to wait decades before discussions became more philosophical, and until the end of the century for politics to be discussed, since these places were under surveillance. We know that there were informers who were susceptible to repeating the liberal remarks of certain frequent visitors.

Incidentally, a story for you; we know that Nicolas Boindin, one of the more iconoclastic, liberal figures at the turn of the century, an atheist, who hardly hid it, and a great amateur of the theatre of which he was an uncompromising and feared critic, Nicolas Boindin was also an informer. Some names remained famous like the café Laurent in the 1690s or the café Gradot or again the café Procope, which still exists in Paris and which was located at the time near the Comédie Française. They were frequented by Dumarsais and Fontenelle. In his work *Rameau's Nephew*, Diderot immortalised the café Régent where one played chequers. The café was a real success. We can count more than 3000 of them in the capital at the end of the Ancient Regime.

Part 3 – Academic effervescence

Let's continue our visit. Next stop, the academies. They enjoyed a quite ambiguous and complex ideal. They essentially tried to predominate the sole merit of ideas, irregardless of rank or status, which was an often badly managed but officially upheld challenge. It was the embodiment of a republic of letters

where only ideas count. And that, manifestly, contributed to the progressive promotion of the man of letters.

But one did as if these ideas could not support any cause of opposition themselves since the academies were official institutions, which were under surveillance of those in power and which should pledge allegiance. So much so that academies were both a hothouse of free speech, because, in theory, reason single-handedly exercised its rights there, as well as places of great conformity. This contradiction will be harshly criticised at the end of the century by those with a more radical point of view in line with Rousseau.

Part 4 - Salons

The last place we're going to explore, but which may be the most symbolic of the century, is the literary salon. Salons were often, incidentally, the antechambers of academies. They are still a legacy of the previous century, with its aristocratic and precious salons, but the social dynamic of the circles was diversifying. By the bye, I deliberately use the term "circle" so as to refer to it in competition with the term "society". The word "salon" is late and retrospective. It introduces a form of mundaneness, often to denigrate its superficiality and hypocrisy. But this black vision, inherited by Rousseau, who was never at ease with society, was in competition with an idealised vision which established itself in a nostalgic light, after the Revolution, in this supposed golden age of conversation.

In fact, there's no need to side with either a black or rose vision. A salon was simply a private gathering, hosted by a woman who was in charge of kicking off the discussion. There was a wide variety. There were salons from all social standings, both aristocratic or bourgeois, and in all ideologies, whether they be favourable to Enlightenment or conservative. The principle activity was enlightened conversation, often enlivened with refined diversions. Theatre and poetry readings, but also games were common.

Let's stop off at the most well-known of them. There were lineages which were succeeded over the century starting, even before the Regency, at the court at Sceaux with the Duchess of Maine. Her salon was frequented by the marquise of Lambert and Madame du Deffand who would each manage a reputed salon until 1733 for the first and until 1780 for the latter, which had exceptional longevity. She would be in competition with a friend of D'Alembert, Mademoiselle de Lespinasse, who would leave to start her own salon in the 1760s. One could also cite the example of Madame de Tencin or Madame Geoffrin, the latter being of a bourgeois background.

In all these circles, coexistence and the mix of various statuses added quality to the meetings, subtle dosage and balance between people with various interests, men of the world, men of administration, men of letters. Marivaux left famous notations in *The Life of Marianne*, which were the fruit of his frequent visits to the salons of Madame Lambert and Madame de Tencin. But behind the homage made to this type of informal school where each one taught without knowing it, there was also, according to other witnesses, an awareness of the constraints on conversation necessitating this mixing of statuses, which incited consensus more than an in-depth study of knowledge.

To conclude, whether it be in the salons, academies or cafés, in all these places, the circulation of speech was subject to compromise and certain usages, since ideas could not be developed without constraint in this very hierarchical and codified world where freedom of expression had not yet been acquired.