

Introduction: The Persistence of Salons

“If an author wants to depict the *grand monde*,” wrote Stendhal, “he will have to have first seen it and lived there.” As literary correspondent for the *New Monthly Magazine* in London, he warned his readers that their probable lack of prior knowledge of “the social mechanism of France” would make what he had to say unintelligible.¹ For historians, who under such strictures ought not even try to write about the salons of French high society, that seemed to be the good news. According to Count Rudolf Apponyi, a longtime attaché at the Austro-Hungarian embassy in Paris, one could spend years living among and talking to French *mondains* without ever being able to understand or predict their behavior. In order to formulate reasonable, sane judgments of the state of French politics in the 1830s, Prince Schönburg, an Austrian envoy to the government of Louis-Philippe, went into society often, spoke with as many people as possible, read everything, listened attentively to conversations, and could still not figure out why this one supported the government, why that one belonged to the opposition, or why everyone seemed always to be changing their opinions. For Apponyi, the French were inscrutable because they were all actors playing to the crowd, always looking for an adroit phase with which to please society, and

therefore incapable of believing anything for a precise reason.² The aphorist Nicolas Chamfort (1740–1794) surmised that the French could not even explain their own behavior, commenting that they knew nothing of *le monde*, in the same way that a maybug knew nothing about natural history.³ Perhaps French novelists wrote so extensively about high society because they were aware of a significant audience hungering for commentary on itself.

Salon sociability was a well-regulated practice embedded in a larger social formation, usually referred to as high society, or simply as *le monde*, which itself was governed by rules and conventions. Both salons and *mondanité* (society life) existed in close proximity to the worlds of politics, literature, art, fashion, and business, all of which preoccupied French elites. Anyone attempting to study this complex reality, or even the connection between salons and politics, which is the principal focus of this book, must ignore Stendhal's advice and be a better anthropologist than Prince Schönburg in showing how the system worked. Historians could better live in nineteenth-century French high society by knowing more about what was said in salons. Unfortunately, there are no extensive records of salon conversations and no regular administrative inquiries examining the precise number, location, and composition of salons. What we do have in relative abundance are the memoirs of salonnières and the testimony of their habitués, which do not report the content of salon conversations so much as offer a wealth of information about what was taken for granted, about the salon's centrality in French upper-class life, and about the intricate links between politics and traditional mondaine sociability. These sources are familiar but have not been used systematically to address the latter.⁴

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, salons encouraged socializing between the sexes, brought nobles and bourgeois together, and afforded opportunities for intellectual speculation. During the reign of Louis XIII and the ministry of Cardinal Mazarin (1610–1661), they helped transform and homogenize the mores of the upper classes and provided a setting for feminine literary expression; in the Age of Reason, they focused and reflected enlightened public opinion by facilitating the exchange of news and ideas and by permitting the philosophes to display themselves to the “the world.”⁵ With the outbreak of the French Revolution and the emergence of parliamentary government, salons acquired a political vocation, becoming institutions of political sociability for French aristocratic and intellectual elites. The present study is an examination of this latter transformation.

The persistence of salons in the nineteenth century shows their remarkable

ability to adapt to changing historical circumstances. During the French Revolution, salons were largely eclipsed in France, although they were partially reconstituted abroad by aristocratic émigrés. They revived in Paris shortly after the Terror ended, however, and Napoléon welcomed and encouraged renewed salon sociability in order to win the support of the traditional aristocracy and elevate the social prestige of his regime in monarchical Europe. After Waterloo, salons flourished, their interior life no longer being circumscribed by the imperatives of an authoritarian regime. During the Bourbon Restoration (1815–1830) and the July Monarchy (1830–1848), salons became the principal centers of elite political networking and discussion, structured by the conventions of mondaine sociability and managed by salonnières, whose traditional mediating function seemed all the more necessary in the face of growing political partisanship. The political role of salons grew alongside those of competing institutions such as political parties, voluntary associations, and mass-circulation newspapers. These institutions of modern political life eventually marginalized the political role of salons, made salon sociability more private and more specialized, and pushed women outside the mainstream of political life.

Salon sociability was resilient because it was simultaneously a sociability of leisure, a form of communication, and an arena for social encounters, providing opportunities for conviviality, intellectual exchange, and unconventional social relationships.⁶ The basic features it acquired in the seventeenth century (a luxurious space, feminine governance, a select company, polite conversation) changed very little in subsequent years. Salons persisted because they were anchored to stable cultural norms defined by feminine attributes that were taking shape in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Linked in the public mind to widely accepted “feminine” characteristics, they came to be idealized by generations of male writers, artists, intellectuals, and politicians as protected spaces for the reconciliation of differences whose neutrality was guaranteed by the self-effacement and devotion to propriety of the salonnière. At the same time, as a particular type of gathering place for the upper classes, the salon had an extraordinary flexibility; its size could be altered and its functions adjusted to fit a variety of circumstances, so that salons themselves changed less than the realities to which they managed to adapt. This adaptive capacity gave the salon a certain utility over the course of a series of social, cultural, and political transitions from the seventeenth to the twentieth century; it made possible both the persistence of the salon’s premodern function as a medium of social fusion and cultural exchange, and its transformation into a political institution during and after the revolutionary era. Originally

conceived by the marquise de Rambouillet (1588–1665) as an architectural framework for a new kind of sociability, the salon managed to survive the most turbulent circumstances, including its own dissolution and reconstitution.

This contrast between a stable form and a changing content makes salons easy to define but terribly difficult to characterize. As a flexible vehicle for the accomplishment of goals constrained by social and gender norms, but existing on the margins of public life, the salon was able to accommodate activities and anticipate forms of interaction that were being created by protracted historical pressures but had yet to be sanctioned by convention or law. This is why most attempts to move beyond definitions of the salon or descriptions of ideal types of sociability slip into analogy: the salon was like a royal court, a university, an academy, a republic, a monarchy, a publishing house, a medium of communication, or some other institution or practice whose function was ambiguous and to which contemporary society had yet to attach a name. Salons could be either marginal or mainstream, bourgeois or aristocratic, courtly or enlightened, hierarchical or democratic, mixed or exclusive, public or private, feminist or masculinist, leisurely or “work-like,” frivolous or serious, literary or political, or both. In all this confusion, one thing seems clear: in the French context at least, salons always filled some sort of institutional vacuum at the intersection between public and private life left by the decline of certain cultural, social, or civic institutions and the rise of others that had not yet taken root. Salons did not replace things that had disappeared but invented some of the attributes and functions of things yet to be born. In that sense, they were less transitional institutions than expressions of an era of transitions.

I

A variety of French novelists have tried to depict life in a nineteenth-century Parisian salon. Some of these portraits are insightful, illuminating, and deftly drawn; others, however, are pure fantasy, managing to offer the historian vivid and credible anthropological evidence on matters of attitude and comportment only by dint of the author’s probing cynicism, revealing social resentment, or talent for plausible exaggeration. Balzac’s keen sense of custom and *usage* in French society was colored by his conviction that women were hopelessly frivolous and could find pleasure only in scheming. The gloom and hypocrisy of Musset’s salons owe something to his skepticism regarding love and the opposite sex.⁷ On the question of politics in salons, the literary evidence is absolutely

inconclusive. Proust insisted that politics was scrupulously avoided in salon conversation, commenting in *La Prisonnière* that aristocrats wanted to keep it from invading le monde just as soldiers wanted to prevent it from penetrating the army. Stendhal explained the “drawing room constitution” as follows: “Provided you did not treat God, the clergy, the King, or anyone holding public office as a matter for jest; provided you did not speak in praise of Beranger, the newspapers of the opposition party, Voltaire, Rousseau, or anyone allowing himself any freedom of speech; provided, above all, that you never mentioned politics — then you were free to discuss anything you pleased.”⁸ Of course, writers will take literary license and cannot be expected merely to provide documentation. But the contrast between fiction and reality in the case of political salons seems remarkably stark. Other novelists not only contradicted Proust and Stendhal, they took matters to the opposite extreme, suggesting darkly that salons determined the march of events and controlled political life from behind the scenes. Lamartine went so far as to represent the salons of the Restoration as governing institutions, with Madame de Boigne’s salon as the Chamber of Peers, Madame de Sainte-Aulaire’s as the Chamber of Deputies, and Madame Récamier’s as the monarchy itself.⁹

The connection between salons and politics was obscured by the fact that few salons in the nineteenth century were seen by members of high society as distinctively political. Virginie Ancelot, playwright and salonnière for more than four decades, labeled as *femmes politiques* only three women of the July Monarchy (the comtesse de Castellane, the princesse de Lieven, and the duchesse de Broglie) and questioned whether political salons were free enough or cheerful enough to be considered “true salons.”¹⁰ In fact, very few salons focused exclusively on politics, very few salonnières dedicated themselves solely to the political fortunes of a male associate, and many of the most prominent *femmes politiques* of Paris were foreigners, like the princesse de Belgiojoso and the princesse de Lieven. High society was slightly more open-minded than society at large about gender roles, but politics was still a man’s business and women who appeared to take it too seriously were considered to be harboring nefarious motives or acting out of some illegitimate purpose.

There were many kinds of salons in nineteenth-century France. Some sought to continue the legacy of the eighteenth century by preoccupying themselves with philosophical matters; other salons, purely mondains, deliberately avoided matters of the spirit. In addition to various official or ministerial salons, there were literary salons, musical salons, and those identified with particular celebri-

ties. Salons were primarily for conversation, but they were also places of distraction and amusement, where people went to gamble, sing, dance, play charades, listen to poetry, view art, or participate in a theatrical representation.¹¹ Among political salons, there was a good deal of variety as well — in the 1840s, Victor de Balabine, an employee at the Russian embassy, was astonished to find an assortment of opportunities for political chat in Paris: “Here we have political salons, literary salons, legitimist salons, salons of the *juste milieu*, diplomatic salons, and finally, neutral salons.” The vicomte de Beaumont-Vassy divided the political salons of the July Monarchy into ministerial salons (“veritable branches of the Palais Bourbon”) and those directed by former *hommes d’état* or *femmes politiques*.¹²

The problem with this sort of taxonomy is that virtually all salons were used for a variety of purposes. More often than not, the intimate conversations of the afternoon gave way to larger gatherings for dinner, or to some planned activity for the evening.¹³ Indeed, the ideal established for salons during the Revolution by Madame de Staël envisioned the fusion of *la politique* and *les lumières*, so that constitutional debates would be informed by the most educated minds and the most rigorous philosophical considerations. At the same time, salons often considered uniquely literary were almost never immune to other preoccupations: writers often attended salons as celebrities rather than artists; in some cases, a writer was also an *homme politique*, lending the salons he frequented “a politico-literary character.” Such was the case with the salon of Sophie Gay, whose guests included political figures, musicians, and men of letters (among them Lamartine, Balzac, the marquis de Custine, and Eugène Sue).¹⁴ According to the comtesse de Bassanville, the salon of Princesse Catherine de Bagration simply defied characterization:

With all the diverse personalities who came in and out of the salon of Madame Bagration like shadows, one could not find a particular physiognomy there. The princesse loved noise, commotion, and newcomers; hence the innumerable transformations that her house underwent. One day, it was a political salon; the entire diplomatic corps could be seen there, distinguished foreigners, men of state, indeed even princes and ministers, and, according to a rumor circulating quietly, the soul of Metternich, although absent, animated this lavish residence. Then, all of a sudden, one heard only laughter, song, joyous outbursts to the accompaniment of a grand orchestra; and charming young women, smiles on their lips and brightness in their eyes, crowded in to replace the grave and serious men, brilliant in their attire,

dripping with diamonds, in order to seek out the pleasures of a ball. . . . Later, another complete change occurred: the orchestra went silent, the echoes of the *hôtel* ceased to reverberate with bursts of joy, and one heard only verse more or less well rhymed, prose more or less well written; literature had replaced pleasure, the blue-stockings, the fashionable women.¹⁵

Such changes of scenery took place every night throughout *le monde*, or slowly, over the life of a salon. As Maurice Agulhon has pointed out, multifunctionality was a general and long-standing feature of French institutions of sociability, and politics was often at the heart of associations ostensibly established for another purpose.¹⁶ In a climate that was both repressive and highly politicized, where the rules governing political association were shifting and unclear, salons could be political either by design or simply by default. In the flush of novelty and excitement that accompanied the advent of parliamentary government in the 1790s and during the first half of the nineteenth century, politics was fashionable in fashionable society and politicians were celebrities. As Balzac wryly commented, “The politician of 1840 is in some way like the abbé of the eighteenth century. No salon would be complete without its *homme politique*.”¹⁷

No clear barrier separated politics and high society.¹⁸ The political personnel of most of the regimes that succeeded 1789 overlapped with the clientele of the salons, where politicians, diplomats, artists, and journalists frequented the same salons and participated in the same system of social networks. Salons inhabited a sphere of unofficial politics from which women were never fully excluded, where gender constraints made “private” the political conversations that occurred prior to official political conduct, and where the ambiguities of gender and privacy among the rich belied the efforts of authorities to separate politics from the customary institutions of associational life. In the fashionable Paris of the early nineteenth century, the public statements and actions of princes, ministers, and deputies were “also the object of private commentary”; they were among the most popular topics of conversation, speculation, mockery, and jest for the elite. Upon becoming “members of the governmental majority” in 1830, wrote Charles de Rémusat, “we became gluttons. We led the elegant life of the times, inferior in good taste to that of the past, but agreeable and amusing.” Everyone, he declared, was tempted by “this alliance of the preoccupation with weighty matters, ambition, and political activity with the careless pleasures of a brilliant and dissipated world.”¹⁹

It is one thing to establish that salons were political; it is another to discover

why, and to account for their role in French politics. Contrary to the testimony of contemporaries and the opinion of many historians, *salonnières* did not normally exercise an influence in affairs of state and the choice of ministers, determine the march of events, prepare electoral lists, or even procure theater boxes from powerful relatives. If salons and *salonnières* did take a hand in such matters, there is very little evidence to verify activity that would intentionally have been secretive and naturally the subject of less than disinterested conjecture. In fact, the assertion that salons and *salonnières* had an influence on political decisions and events, as opposed to a less tangible and ill-defined role, is almost always based not on direct historical testimony but on the assumption that the presence of women in places where important matters were discussed implies that they played an integral part in the decision-making process. Adeline Daumard characterizes as “legend” the notion that “women held the key to power and imposed their tastes, preferences, and ideas, notably in political matters.” She concluded that the “women of the highest society and the best circles at court did not have . . . the power either to make the careers of a man they honored or to determine public affairs by friends interposed.”²⁰

Salons were crucial to the politics of early nineteenth-century France because they structured the political sociability of elites. After 1789, salons became increasingly politicized; they took on clearer partisan identities, gave a measure of coherence to the proliferation of political factions, and performed a number of social and communicative functions that came to be viewed as politically useful. French salons originated in the seventeenth century, and they have persisted into the twenty-first, but their political role was greatest during the Restoration and the July Monarchy, when French politics was open enough to allow for a certain degree of free debate and association, but closed enough to restrict active participation to a narrow elite. It was also a time when a more or less stable parliamentary regime operated in an atmosphere of bitter partisanship, requiring a complexity of political organization that could still be accomplished by the customary institutions of elite sociability.

II

The salon is best understood as an aspect of what Arno Mayer calls “the persistence of the Old Regime,” which corresponded to the protracted decline of aristocratic predominance within the French elite. By “persistence” Mayer does not mean mere survival, as in Charles Morazé’s characterization of the salon as

the “last vestige of the Old Regime.” Rather, he has in mind an active process of “ingesting, adapting, and assimilating” on the part of a slowly declining aristocracy trapped in “the relentless tragedy of historical perseverance,” engaged in elaborate and “cunning” strategies of resistance and containment instead of fatalistic nostalgia, so that salon culture became a tool of survival in a time of adversity. Like the codes of honor studied by William Reddy, nineteenth-century salon culture demonstrates how the “values, attitudes, and . . . feelings of an earlier age” persisted as a means of stabilizing identities and establishing social rules at a time when social and cultural coordinates were unsettled, a phenomenon that gave enormous symbolic capital to older elites. Otto Dann sees the lack of formality in French forms of aristocratic sociability as a sign of profound habituation that explains their legitimacy, resiliency, and broad attraction. German associations, he observes, always needed formal rules and procedures for orientation and purpose. “In France,” however, “forms of social organization appear marked to a much greater extent by informal arrangements, habits, and customs [so that] new forms of communication and association take root more within tradition and the dominant impression is that of a much greater continuity between traditional forms and new forms of sociability.”²¹ A whole world of social arrangements and attitudes supported the existence of French salons: an idle aristocracy, an ambitious middle class, an active intellectual life, the social density of a major urban center, sociable traditions, and a certain aristocratic feminism. This world did not disappear in 1789.

Salons were a historically specific expression of the aristocracy’s determination to regulate and control the transition from a hereditary to an open elite. They emerged at a time when the justification of noble privilege in terms of a traditional military function was under attack, when circumstances promoted a more modern view of nobility based on a combination of birth, education, manners, and sociability, and when an increasingly wealthy bourgeoisie was gaining entry into an expanding service nobility and aspired to “live nobly.” Carolyn Lougee has shown that salons appeared along with the need to regulate this transition in order to provide a space for social fusion and cultural homogenization among the diverse elements of an aristocracy in the process of domestication and restructuration.²² The genius of salons, and of *salonnières*, lay in their ability to maintain a delicate balance between exclusivity and openness, between “inclusions and exclusions,” so that the aristocracy could have both a means of producing social cohesion and a vehicle for the dissemination of traits meant to characterize a wider society of elites undergoing redefinition. As the French elite

became larger and more diverse, the importance of salons grew, because the ability of the aristocratic element to manage social change came to depend more and more on its control over the criteria of elite status. Outside of marriage, such control was exerted primarily by making high society more distinctive and more attractive as a cultural model. The Revolution therefore temporarily strengthened rather than weakened the social utility of salons: nobles, who had already acquired a means to “determine nobility independently of the king’s designation,” emerged from the adversity of exile and repression with a greater sense of cohesion than the monarchy had ever provided; in these circumstances, the cultural authority acquired by salons was complemented by a level of social and political predominance that gave nobles a preponderance within the larger society of notables and accorded them more control over access to social prestige than they had had in the eighteenth century.²³

The association of noble manners with high status was a *longue durée* feature of the French social landscape. Since the seventeenth century, those aspiring to elite status had “to go to the school of the ladies” in order to acquire that “*parfum de l’aristocratie*” to avoid being “a ludicrous figure.”²⁴ The salon’s success in helping to regulate the multiple transformations experienced by the French elite from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century can be seen in the homogenization of elite comportment in the eighteenth century and in the Revolution’s failure to destroy the allure of courtly manners, despite the boost it gave to the social and political fortunes of the middle classes. According to Elizabeth Goldsmith, defining a noble class by its “cultural sophistication . . . probably helped to prolong rather than weaken the dominance of noble culture” because institutions such as the salon made non-nobles participants in an ongoing conversation about “what it meant to be naturally ‘superior.’” Consequently, the popularization of the cultural values of the nobility disseminated respect for traditional forms of elite status, while allowing nobles to maintain a sense of distinction.²⁵ Marx might have scoffed at the spectacle of the nineteenth-century European nobility posing as “the dancing masters of Europe,” but “the prebourgeois cachet of the French ruling class,” as Mayer puts it, remained a powerful instrument of aristocratic social power well after 1789. Throughout the better part of the nineteenth century, aristocratic life fascinated the established bourgeoisie, for which the salon remained the supreme model of social elegance, making it a crucial form of “symbolic capital,” embodying what Christophe Charle calls the “indirect power of domination over other factions seeking social legitimacy by imitation.” In his study of French elites across the revolutionary era, Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret

was struck by two things: the slowness of change from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century and

the perpetuation of very old models, often put in place in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the fascination that they still exercised in the nineteenth. There is no secret whatsoever to this permanence. As factors of longevity for traditional elites, they would lend additional legitimacy to ascendant elites and give to all a moral benefit that would sustain their credit and assure their prestige: the prestige of knowledge over the ignorant, of luxury over the poor, of elegance and refinement over the boorish. Pure artifice, perhaps, but they carried a heavy load: they reinforced their own seductive power in public opinion and consolidated their mastery. Proof, if need be, that neither birth, nor money, nor power were in themselves enough to define elites who for the sake of their own indispensability demanded a combination of conditions that had no objective character whatsoever, and where the role played by imagination and symbolism was sometimes decisive. Elites nourish themselves on symbolism and exist only by virtue of an ensemble of semiotic representations that distinguish them from the masses, or, rather, the public, because they are above all a spectacle, and this spectacle creates a relationship that explains, better than the other attributes of power, the bonds of subordination.²⁶

The Revolution increased the salon's importance to the old aristocracy because it had become the institution principally responsible for cultivating and maintaining what Norbert Elias calls the "social argument . . . that something is better because it is the usage of the upper class, or even only an elite within the upper class."²⁷ Consensus on this matter was a critical political asset for the nobility in the early nineteenth century because it sustained the idea that a ruling class required an aristocratic element, a sentiment that supported postrevolutionary hopes for a reconciliation at the top of the social hierarchy and that gave salons an important role in the social politics of the Napoleonic, Bourbon, and Orleanist phases of France's social and political restoration.

The fact that salons did not disappear despite the Revolution's assault on the nobility and women in the public sphere suggests that its role in the restructuring and redefinition of the elite had not ended. By dispersing the aristocracy, the Revolution had only interrupted *la vie mondaine*; during the Directory, and especially during the Consulate, conditions for the rebirth of salons congealed: émigrés returned and Napoléon and Josephine, anxious to win the support of the old aristocracy, founded a new court at the Tuileries and encouraged the reconciliation of royalists and republicans. The aristocratic salons of Faubourg Saint-

Germain and Faubourg Saint-Honoré acquired the status of established institutions under the Empire and remained central features of Parisian high society at least until the Revolution of 1848, despite the collapse of political consensus within the expanding and increasingly diverse world of the notables. Salons lasted as long as their social functions continued to be historically relevant, which is perhaps the best evidence of their aristocratic nature. They arose when hereditary hierarchies began to give way before the dominant criteria of social status in the modern world—money, talent, education, and *capacité*—and moved to the margins of social and political life as the process ran its course. The salon was unique neither to the early modern period nor to the world of letters. Its existence was conterminous with Jürgen Habermas’s “bourgeois public sphere,” from the time when the “social” could be “constituted as its own sphere to the degree that . . . the reproduction of life took on private form [and] the private realm as a whole assumed public relevance” to the advent of democracy “about the middle of the nineteenth century,” when “an enlarged public . . . came to the fore as the subject of the public sphere” and traditional elites lost control over their own internal restructuring and turned their attention to matters of survival. The two centuries roughly from 1650 to 1850—from the Fronde to the waning years of the July Monarchy and the shock of 1848—saw the rise and consolidation of bourgeois society in France, and this was also an era when aristocratic women seem to have had a great deal of influence.²⁸

Public and private spheres overlapped in aristocratic salons, where feudal traditions placed women at the center of a family’s public responsibilities and status concerns. In this respect, today’s scholarship generally reflects Elias’s view that the separate spheres of the Victorian era are not applicable to early modern French aristocrats, because noblemen did not work, and noble households were not so much domestic spaces as public ones, dedicated to “the preservation of status through [the] public display of rank and wealth.” The reputation, honor, and continuation of the family led nobles to eschew individualism and the norms of bourgeois marriage in favor of a collective effort to maintain prestige and connections, so that private decisions were routinely made for public purposes and public actions were readily influenced by private considerations.²⁹ Based in the private domicile and maintained by unspoken rituals rooted in the practices of an aristocratic milieu, the salon was a powerful tool for linking private interests to political power and public influence prior to the rise of professional specialization and the bureaucratization of public life. Networks and relationships formed by marriage and liaisons that were contracted for public purposes made each

salon at once familial and mondain, where consanguinity and friendship produced publicly significant alliances.

The position of aristocratic women at the intersection between public and private concerns made the French aristocracy particularly resistant to the notion that women were an element of social disorder. Noble attitudes to women reflected the courtly traditions of the Renaissance and the codes of gallantry elaborated before and during the decline of feudal institutions, in which civilized attention to the ladies required magnanimity between the sexes, ascribing to women the role of teaching men how to act toward “the fairer sex.” Pleasing women therefore became not only the font of mondain civility but an ethical cornerstone that complemented the importance of patrimony and lineage in noble society. The counterpart of *la galanterie* was the notion of women as civilizers. The salon eventually became the principal depository of this legacy of noble civility and sexual “commerce,” embodying standards of refinement and *politesse* that contrasted with the coarseness of male society and made France uniquely sociable. By the nineteenth century, this legacy had become central to aristocratic identity, an identity that, according to the comtesse d’Agoult, required that women with the power to render “the final opinion on delicate matters of propriety and honor” receive “fervent and constant homages.”³⁰

Nobles saw women’s ability to civilize not merely as a feminine attribute but as a social and political responsibility, which required noblewomen to perform the preeminently public task of guarding social conventions and maintaining the equilibrium, and consequently the advantages, of civilized life. Nobles in nineteenth-century France were convinced that times of upheaval were also times when women were most hidden from view, when violence replaced diplomacy, when demagoguery replaced private conversation, and when liberty gave way to the inordinate power of the state. Such sentiments resulted in a tenacious commitment to the notion of gender complementarity at a time when social trends, political ideas, and cultural attitudes were moving forcefully in another direction.³¹ The aristocratic counterideology of gender complementarity accorded with what Suzanne Fiette has called a “noble religion of honor,” characterized by “submission to the imperatives of lineage” and grounded in “a familio-centrism that above all privileges the renown and judgment of the group.” As a nexus of this larger social and cultural universe, the salon, according to Jolanta Pekacz, could have “nothing subversive about it,” because the values it was supposed to disseminate “did not violate the traditional social roles designated for women.” Intended to “prevent anarchy caused by transgression,” salons were “a

more powerful repressive tool for women than for men,” because they turned the salonnière into an enforcer of rules of propriety that limited her possibilities while being useful to the public activities of men.³²

The size and composition of the elite who voted under the *système censitaire*, the traditions and dimensions of Parisian *mondanité*, the proximity of the court, the Chambers, and the ministries, and the intimate nature of political communications in an era of limited suffrage allowed salons to structure political sociability in the absence of modern political parties. Anxiety among the postrevolutionary generation of French notables about the fractionalism that accompanied the development of parliamentary government, long-standing aristocratic assumptions about the civilizing function of women, and the salon’s ability to bring men with divergent personalities and opinions together in harmonious conversation encouraged French elites to look to salons to fortify social and ideological cohesion at the top of the social hierarchy. The harnessing of gender conventions to the interests of class had two important implications: it gave salonnières privileged access to politics, and it put women in the role of configuring the social world around aristocratic power.

As an institution of upper-class political sociability, the salon was not a target of France’s repressive laws on association, which, beginning with the Le Chapelier Law of 1791, were aimed primarily at the burgeoning democratic movement and not at *réunions* that could be considered private. Subsequent revolutionary legislation banning “les clubs des femmes” in October 1793 and “sociétés particulières s’occupant des questions politiques” in August 1795 was partly aimed at the clubs and associations of the Right—the Directory closed the liberal royalist Club de Clichy—but had limited impact on the salon’s traditional clientele, which had been dispersed by the emigration, imprisoned by the revolutionary tribunal, or killed by the Terror.³³ When the penal code was elaborated between 1808 and 1810, associations of twenty persons or fewer were exempted from the need for government authorization by *conseillers d’état* who, like Comte Berlier, wanted to protect “these small gatherings established by relations of friendship, family, and neighborhood.”³⁴ Most Napoleonic officials knew from experience that salons met in private domiciles and were therefore notoriously resistant to surveillance. In a memorandum to Napoleon on gambling in 1811, Chancellor Etienne-Denis de Pasquier noted that “[t]he rich have *salons* into which it is difficult to gain admittance; but supervision can always be exercised with ease over the poor, for their places of meeting are necessarily public resorts.”³⁵ The Napoleonic Code subjected women to a dependent legal status, but it did not exclude them from

political participation or deprive them of a public voice to a greater extent than had been the case under the Old Regime. The Constitution of 1791 relegated women to the status of nonvoting citizens, and the Jacobins had tried to sweep them from the public sphere. By contrast, the notables who crafted the civil code consolidating women's inferior legal status protected traditional institutions of elite sociability by failing to define them as overtly political, even though they could comprise considerably more than twenty guests.³⁶

The notables who governed France during the first half of the nineteenth century were hostile to the right of association, but they never deprived themselves of occasions to gather, eat, dance, and talk politics. The result was a paradox: a public sphere stamped by the patriarchy of the Napoleonic Code that nevertheless made room for salons and their influence in public affairs. Under the Restoration, the government often frustrated efforts by liberal elites to establish political associations but turned a blind eye when groups of deputies or officials gathered for political purposes in salons, creating a situation not unlike that of the Old Regime, when an ordinance making unauthorized assemblies of more than five people illegal was hardly ever enforced against salons and masonic lodges. French laws on association therefore embodied not only masculinist impulses but the privilege of class: while the former annihilated women's political rights, the latter granted women of wealth a certain exemption from the rigors of an otherwise gendered public sphere. That exemption excluded the rich from their own efforts to constrain political freedom and turned salons into informal political institutions.

III

The question of the relationship between salons and politics is important for two reasons: it offers an opportunity to examine the role of women in public life after a time when women are thought to have been excluded from the public sphere, and it allows us to rewrite the history of the salon from the perspective of the nineteenth century, thereby restoring continuities to the history of an institution that historians have for the most part failed to take into account in their interpretation of its nature and significance.³⁷ Shifting perspective involves a shift in analytical priorities: from women's seemingly abrupt exclusion from the public sphere by the Jacobins and the Civil Code to the persistence of salons during the emigration, their revival under the Directory, the Consulate, and the Empire, and their proliferation during the Bourbon Restoration; from the exceptional-

ity of the salonnière as a semi-public figure to the commonality of salons as an institution of aristocratic life; and from the intellectual sociability of the eighteenth-century Republic of Letters to the political sociability of elites during a period of protracted social transition that witnessed the consolidation of modern political institutions.

This study is an institutional history of French salons rather than a history of women in salons per se. The intention is not to marginalize salonnières but to place their ideas and actions in the historical, social, and political contexts that gave them meaning. The first chapter discusses the institutionalization of salons in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when they became an important feature of both polite society and the Republic of Letters. What follows is a chronological and analytical history of the rise and fall of the importance of salons in French politics from the Revolution of 1789 to the Revolution of 1848, in the course of which I examine the evolution of salons, the changing role of salonnières, and the functioning of salons as institutions of political sociability. I close with a consideration of the salon's decline, an account of its political marginalization, and an assessment of its status as a feminist institution.