

The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century



Explore the wide range of topics related to British sociability from 1650 to 1850 and discover how the circulation of models of sociability shaped European and colonial societies.

- **Theoretical framework**

-The hypothesis made by the German sociologist Georg Simmel in his 1908 work, *Soziologie*, and developed by the Chicago interactionist school, whereby sociability materialises when ‘a link of reciprocity floats more or less freely between individuals’, is a starting point for this project. Simmel’s contention has been tested together with his concomitant statement, according to which ‘sociability is a moving form that is never defined’. Nonetheless we do not intend to restrict the scope of our study to its sociological dimension, but will also take its philosophical dimension into consideration. The latter highlights the innate sociability of man, the capacity of mankind to live in society, ‘the character or quality of being sociable’ (*OED*).

-Natural law theorists (Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 1651; John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, 1690) have paid great attention to the state of nature and to the transition from it to the social state in exchange for the advantages or disadvantages that it provides (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur l’origine et les fondements de l’inégalité parmi les hommes*, 1755, *Du contrat social*, 1762). Others, like Adam Ferguson, nicknamed ‘the father of modern sociology’, have favoured a systemic vision of human society where the state of nature is the social state (Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, 1767).

-Aware like his Scottish counterparts, David Hume and Adam Smith, of the benefits of a modern commercial society, and partly sharing their belief in the idea of progress, Ferguson developed a specific view of sociability. To him, it was indispensable to man’s happiness but threatened by the division of labour, the refinement of manners and the love of luxury that were the distinctive features of ‘polished’ nations. True to the tradition of civic humanism, he saw conflict as a necessary component of life in society, fostering the birth of virtuous and free citizens able to fight against corruption and decline.

-Forming sociable and educated citizens was the project of Addison and Steele’s periodical, *The Spectator* (1711-12, 1714), whose conversational model contributed to shape sociability not only as a social value and a human ability but also as a social practice in itself.

- **Historiographical overview**

-The sociology of social interaction and group dynamics (G. Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. Transl. & Ed. By Kurt H. Wolff, 1950 ; Jean Maisonneuve, *La dynamique des groupes*, 1968) was considered as a starting point in the understanding of the group phenomenon.

-The socio-historical approach of Norbert Elias (*La dynamique de l'Occident*, 1939) introduced the idea of social interdependence, allowing for the linking of social practices to social forms. Then, the study of sociability was often associated with the birth of public opinion: Jürgen Habermas and his work on the public sphere and on social spaces, those new "institutions of the public sphere", have long been considered as references in that domain (*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* [1962] 1989). However, this attractive theory failed to apply to some social spaces, which were half-way between the private and public spheres (the club being a case in point).

-Ten years after his pioneering case study *La sociabilité méridionale: Confréries et associations en Provence orientale à la fin du XVIII^e siècle* (1966), Maurice Agulhon was the first to define sociability as a theoretical concept and a historiographical category. In a major study on 19th-century sociability, he pointed out a specific associational form developed in many French provinces: the circle (*Le Cercle dans la France bourgeoise, 1810-1848: Étude d'une mutation de sociabilité*, 1977). By highlighting the complexity of sociability phenomena and by associating individual, collective and institutional history, Agulhon significantly informed the history of mentalities, and influenced intellectual and cultural historians such as Roger Chartier.

-Another important step in the study of sociability was made in the 1970-80s with a new historiographical trend: the history of privacy and of the different forms of sociability. The notions of friendship, and of conviviality started to be explored (Maurice Aymard, "Amitié et convivialité" in Ariès & Duby, *Histoire de la vie privée*, tome 3, 1986).

-In the same years, French social and cultural historian Daniel Roche provided a major contribution to the field of cultural practices and circulations thanks to his publications on provincial academies (*Le siècle des Lumières en province. Académies et académiciens provinciaux, 1680-1789*, 1978) and on the Republic of Letters (1988). The analysis of sociability thus became an essential tool to study the institutional character of academic sociability, the material aspects of cultural and intellectual life and the role of libraries for example, of networks of correspondence.

-More recently, in the wake of D. Roche, Antoine Lilti's work on Parisian salons (*Le Monde des salons : sociabilité et mondanité à Paris au XVIII^e siècle*, 2005) has deeply renewed the study of 'urbane' and elite social practices. At the same moment, Canadian historian Brian Cowan has studied the history and social function of coffee (*The Social Life of Coffee: The Emergence of the British Coffeeshouse*, 2005) and his research on the public sphere in Great Britain and Europe has opened new transnational perspectives in the study of social institutions.

-Yet, until the decisive work of British historian Peter Clark was published, the study of British sociability still appeared as an under-explored field. If Clark's main interest was urban sociability, his work deployed an essential dynamics to understand the constitution of a national political community and to measure the cultural, political and social issues of British associational culture (1986 Leicester conference: "Sociability and Urbanity: Clubs and Societies in the Eighteenth-Century City"; *British Clubs and Societies, 1580-1800: the Origins of an Associational World*, 2000).

-Faced with the idea of cosmopolitanism, the stress had been put, on the English side, on the fashioning of national references or on the crystallization of national identities (Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837*, 1992), sometimes thanks to the examination of persisting stereotypes (Paul Langford, *Englishness Identified: Manners and Character, 1650-1850*, 2000).

-The relationship between sociability and politeness has been explored by the social historian Lawrence E. Klein and has enabled scholars to define what model of sociability France offered. He has particularly highlighted the mechanisms of imitation and rejection at work, thus outlining the contours of a 'British' sociability ("Politeness and the Interpretation of the British Eighteenth Century", 2002).

-The question of gender and sociability, superimposed with the opposition between France and Great Britain, has been thoroughly studied by Michèle Cohen and Tim Hitchcock (*English Masculinities. 1660-1800*, 1999).

-The study of social networks has gained ground in recent years in France among sociologists, who have provided an analysis of social bonding (Bidart, Degenne & Grossetti, *La vie en réseau. Dynamique des relations sociales*, 2011) and among historians as well, who have either devoted their research to the relationship between networks and history (C. Lemerrier), or to intellectual and commercial circulations and networks (Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire and Pierrick Pourchasse).

-The research of the **GIS Sociabilités** (<https://www.univ-brest.fr/gis-sociabilites>) has focused:

- on the emergence and evolution of different models of sociability in the long 18th century (1650-1850): see *Transversales* (Paris, Le Manuscrit), a bilingual series (General Editor: Annick Cossic) with 6 vols. to date, co-edited by French and British scholars, <http://catalogue.manuscrit.com/collection/transversales>
- on the exchanges and tensions between these social and cultural models: see *British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century: Challenging the Anglo-French Connection*. Ed. Valérie Capdeville & Alain Kerhervé (Boydell & Brewer, 2019) and *British Sociability in the European Enlightenment: Cultural Practices and Personal Encounters*. Ed. Sebastian Domsch & Mascha Hansen (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).
- Lately, our network has paid greater attention to sociable spaces and to the cultural transfers involved in the circulation of these models across Europe and its colonial empires (3 books and a special issue of a journal are forthcoming: Paris, Le Manuscrit, vols. 7 [March 2021] & 8; Presses Universitaires de Montréal; *Etudes Anglaises*).

Our interdisciplinary research on sociability has shed new light on aspects that had been overlooked or perhaps not connected.

- **The structure of the encyclopedia**

As a matter of fact, the shaping and circulation of models of sociability rested on the influence and agency of individuals and groups, men and women, famous and less known **people**; on the role played by diverse **places** and institutions that enabled these individuals to interact and various sociable **practices** to exist and flourish; on **objects** that became material or visual vectors of sociable exchange and performance. Finally, the definition and evolution of a number of **concepts** linked to the notion of sociability provide an essential theoretical framework to such a wide-ranging investigation. Hence the 5 main categories that structure the encyclopedia: **People, Practices, Places, Objects and Concepts**.

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