

Antoine Lilti, *Figures publiques. L'invention de la célébrité (1750-1850)*. Paris: Fayard, 2014. 430 p. Notes, index. \$35.94 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-2-213-68238-9.

Review essay by Colin Jones, Queen Mary College

With *Figures publiques*, Antoine Lilti has established himself as one of the most significant and talented historians of eighteenth-century France. A late-blooming scion of the *Annales* school, for which he was chief editor (*directeur de la rédaction*) between 2007 and 2011, he is virtually the only historian under fifty to receive mention in Peter Burke's compendious (and recently updated) history of the *Annales*.<sup>[1]</sup> As is usually the case with historians in France, many of his numerous publications are located in those edited volumes which are infuriatingly difficult to obtain outside France. Among his articles in learned journals—again mainly in French—one should read his essay “Comment écrit-on l’histoire intellectuelle des Lumières,” published in the *Annales* in 2009, to get a measure of the scholar: the piece is a stimulating, highly intelligent, and rather exquisite skewering of Jonathan Israel's work on the radical Enlightenment.<sup>[2]</sup>

Lilti's first book, *Le Monde des salons: sociabilité et mondanité à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (2005), was a superb revisionist account of Parisian salons in the Enlightenment, whose interest to a broader audience was recognized by Oxford University Press, which published a translation in 2005.<sup>[3]</sup> The intellectual authority enjoyed by Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962; English translation, 1989) was evident in a whole slew of works from the late 1980s onwards. These highlighted the salon as one of the key institutions of the “bourgeois public sphere” that, Habermas had argued, was then emergent. Those institutions collectively formed a public, which both stood as a counterweight to monarchical court culture and also instantiated public opinion as a “tribunal of reason” that prepared a pathway towards revolution.<sup>[4]</sup> Lilti's *Le Monde des salons* made such views very difficult to sustain: he demonstrated that the myth of the salon as an ante-chamber to revolution had been created in the early nineteenth century. Salons, he showed, were an exemplar of an aristocratic (rather than bourgeois) sociability, were far more hedonistic than intellectually improving, and exhibited an antagonism to court culture that rarely even reached frondeur level. In the wake of *Le Monde des salons*, Habermas's stock has started to sink, as questions pile up about the role of the elite in Enlightenment culture and the nature of the links between Enlightenment and revolution. The debate is in fact nicely laid out by Lilti's frequent collaborator, Stéphane van Damme, in his stimulating essay, “Farewell Habermas” (2011).<sup>[5]</sup>

The work of demolition and reconstruction is carried devastatingly forward in *Figures publiques*. The work demonstrates the emergence of a celebrity culture from the middle decades of the eighteenth century so powerful that Habermas's rational enlightening actors seem to morph before our eyes into avid consumers and starry-eyed fans. Other historians—one thinks especially of Tom Crow <sup>[6]</sup>—have noted the existence of currents of thought in the Enlightenment hostile to the idea of the public as a rational agent. Usually, however, these

figured in the context of a critique of plebeian involvement in culture. Lilti's celebrity culture may have had its denizens among the popular classes, but it was also, he demonstrates, solidly enracinated among middling groups and elites. He turns the screw on the Habermasian schema: the Enlightenment as the "âge d'or de l'espace publique" is a willful idealization that owed much to Habermas's wish to contrast the place of reason in the Enlightenment with public discourse in his own day. He paints the commercial reshaping of the public with the advent of mass media from the late nineteenth century in particularly lurid colors, making the contrast with an allegedly "rational" Enlightenment public sphere all the more glaring (esp. pp 16-18).

In a way, *Figures publiques* was a book waiting to happen. The obsessive interest in celebrity in our own age has generated fascination with the nature of the phenomenon. But its politics, economics, and semiology have tended to crowd out its history. Indeed, historical forays into the topic often collapse into anachronism of the "Marie-Antoinette, c'est Lady Di!" variety, as Lilti notes (p. 7). Lilti's grounded analysis is therefore particularly refreshing. He artfully places celebrity in the context of other pre-existent and concurrent forms of public notoriety, such as glory and reputation. And he also explores the way that its emergence triggered related shifts in the perception of private life. The birth of celebrity culture was thus in effect "l'invention conjointe de la vie privée et de la publicité" (p. 8). From Rousseau onwards, *grosso modo*, celebrity engendered heightened and emotionally-engaged processes of identification and intimacy-at-a-distance that are, Lilti argues, fundamental to the phenomenon. A key marker of this transformation is the advent of the fan letter. Adoringly and sometimes forlornly emotive, such correspondences characteristically oscillate wildly between the adrenalin rush of putative closeness and the deep and sentimental melancholy of separation.

Did the Enlightenment thus mark less the Age of Reason than the Acme of Fan-dom? Probably not. But Lilti's arguments will mean that we will need to look carefully again at the limits and the limitations of Enlightenment rationality. William Reddy's seminal work on the history of the emotions invited us into this kind of territory some years ago, and although Lilti's schema does not map on very closely to Reddy's, it signals the pertinence of the emergent historiography of the emotions to debates on Enlightenment culture.[7]

The trajectory of Lilti's study runs, crudely put, between the 1760s and the 1840s—from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Jenny Lind. The emotional element that Lilti detects within Enlightenment culture makes the passage into Romanticism surprisingly smooth. Material and technological changes in the distribution of the cultural products on which celebrity depends (books, pamphlets, newspapers, certainly, but also celebrity engravings, china knickknacks, and sundry bric-à-brac) also give the period a degree of homogeneity. Starting with the proto-"consumer revolution" first identified for England by Neil McKendrick and for France by Daniel Roche, the study starts drawing to a close with the birth of photography and mass newspaper circulations, which would take the culture of celebrity to another level.[8]

*Figures publiques* places the "invention of celebrity" firmly in England and France. The United States only enters the picture relatively late. The parallelism and entanglements that Lilti incorporates in his narrative are at odds with the history of national stereotypes which normally highlights antagonisms between the two "sweet enemies." [9] Even if this move appears justified, one does wonder whether the case would have been quite as convincing had Lilti focused only

on France; England, a more commercial society throughout the period under consideration, seems the leader in most of the developments outlined.

Fortunately, Lilti is able to complement his own primary research with drawing on a host of studies which have explored celebrity in tighter focus in both countries over the period under review. Although such studies are sometimes a little patchy, there is excellent published work on eighteenth-century actors, on celebrity portraiture and on celebrity figures as varied as Rousseau, Marie-Antoinette, Benjamin Franklin, Joshua Reynolds, Lord Byron, Queen Victoria, Jenny Lind and others. This means that the *dramatis personae* of his study to some degree are determined by the researches of others, which means that there are inevitably many gaps. One (or at any rate I) would have liked to understand more the role of cultural entrepreneurs (publishers, newspaper-men, showmen, agents, and so on) who understood the raw mechanics of the market for celebrity and knew how to exploit it.

But it would be unfitting to end the review of this thought-provoking study on a carping note. As Lilti states unequivocally, his aim is not to write a history of celebrity *per se* (p. 366). Rather, he seeks to analyze the emergence of a key feature of modernity and one that has evident and continued resonances in our own day. For Lilti, the past may be a foreign country—but that foreign country is more like our own than historians often admit.[10] *Figures publiques* is thus more than a synthesis of existing research. It is an imaginative study, at once audacious and theoretically grounded, that establishes celebrity as an object of historical analysis and lays the groundwork for further studies of the phenomenon. One has the sense that a conversation may be starting—and one hopes for a speedy translation that will allow more Anglophone scholars to join in.

#### Notes

[1] Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution. The Annales School, 1929-2014*, 2nd ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015). Lilti was born in 1972.

[2] “Comment écrit-on l’histoire intellectuelle des Lumières? Spinozisme, radicalisme et philosophie,” *Annales. Histoire Sciences sociales* 64 (2009): 171-206. For other publications, see his webpage at the Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales. Accessed September 26, 2015, <http://geh.m.ehess.fr/index.php?3046>

[3] Translated as *The World of the Salons: Sociability and Worldliness in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[4] See for example Roger Chartier, *Les Origines culturelles de la Révolution française* (Paris: Seuil, 1989); Craig Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992); and Dena Goodman, “Public Sphere and Private Life: Toward a Synthesis of Current Historiographical Approaches to the Old Regime,” *History and Theory* 31 (1990): 1-20.

[5] Stéphane Van Damme, “Farewell Habermas ? Deux décennies d’études sur l’espace public,” *Les Dossiers du Grihl*, les dossiers de Stéphane Van Damme, Historiographie et méthodologie, posted June 28, 2007, accessed September 26, 2015, <http://dossiersgrihl.revues.org/682>.

[6] Thomas Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-century Paris* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985).

[7] William Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling. A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Immodesty forbids me to not to seize this opportunity to plug my own work in this field, *The Smile Revolution in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) and that of my colleague, Thomas Dixon, *Weeping Britannia: Portrait of a Nation in Tears* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[8] Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and John Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: the Commercialisation of Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Europa, 1982); and Daniel Roche, *Le Peuple de Paris. Essai sur la culture populaire au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Aubier, 1981).

[9] Isabelle & Robert Tombs, *That Sweet Enemy: England and France from the Sun King to the Present* (London: Heinemann, 2006).

[10] See the discussion of “anthropological” and “genealogical” approaches to the past at p. 21.

Colin Jones  
Queen Mary College, University of London  
[c.d.h.jones@qmul.ac.uk](mailto:c.d.h.jones@qmul.ac.uk)

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