

**Anne Martin-Fugier, *Les Salons de la
III^e République. Art, littérature, politique,*
Paris, Perrin, 2009, 508 p.**

Philip Nord

Anne Martin-Fugier is an accomplished chronicler of *la vie élégante* in nineteenth-century France, and she has returned once again to the subject, this time through a sparkling portrayal of the *salons* of the Third Republic. The book itself is written with care, encyclopedic in detail and effervescent in style. The *salonnières* of the Third Republic understood themselves as conserving a form of aristocratic sociability which had known its heyday in old-regime days. Martin-Fugier's book is in its own way an act of conservation, an effort to keep alive the memory of an institution at one time ascendant but now fallen on hard times. What then was so special about the Third Republic *salon*, and why over time did the institution lose its erstwhile preeminence? Martin-Fugier is strongest on the first question. The heart and soul of every *salon*, she makes plain, was the *salonnière* herself, a woman of temperament, who knew how to make and to steer conversation. Late in the book, Martin-Fugier launches into a discussion of the *dîner*, almost always an all-male event convened at a restaurant or club. Here, the talk is free-wheeling, punctuated by salacious stories and a general lack of restraint. That was not what the *salon* was about. To be sure, the discussion was not always high-minded. There was plenty of gossip, sometimes malicious, but mixed company imposed boundaries. Witticism, repartee, the well-turned phrase or *aperçu*, these were the coin of the realm, and all the more valuable depending on how the speaker delivered them. What made a person *salonfähig* was not so much breeding (although that helped) as *esprit* and manners, a certain way of behaving that was itself a fine-honed thing. The *salon* conversation, in a word, was an art form, the expression of a civilization that was quintessentially French.

The *salon* was also an intersection, a space, as Martin-Fugier's subtitle indicates, that connected "art, literature, politics". For politicians on the way up, the *salon* was an excellent place to network. Painters and writers just starting out met patrons; they cultivated already-established artists whose influence helped to place articles and whose votes helped to elect the up-and-coming to this academy or that; and, of course, they met each other, establishing alliances that were the starting point for magazines and little reviews, themselves so vital to getting a literary or artistic movement off the ground. Now, what made such mixing possible was the shared cultural space the *salon* created, and creating that space, as Martin-Fugier shows, was no easy matter. The *salonnières* of the era—from the *princesse* Mathilde in the 1860s when the push for a Republic was just gathering momentum to Marie-Laure de Noailles and Winnie de Polignac in the twenties—were often aristocrats or married to aristocrats, and in such circumstances, the artist might well find himself condescended to, if not by the hostess, then by other titled guests who were much less solicitous. But over time, Martin-Fugier argues, such snobbishness dissipated, and the *salon* became an ever more welcoming home to artists who came to talk, to recite

verse, to play music, to put on theatricals. Without the *salon*, the artistic scene of the Third Republic would not have been what it was.

Last of all, the *salon* was a piece of machinery. Martin-Fugier is less insistent on this point, but it is borne out by other work she has done on *la vie élégante*. A celebrated *salon* did not work unless there was wealth behind it: to pay for the servants, to pay for the space, whether mansion or apartment, and to pay for the fashions. The *salonnières* who populate the pages of Martin-Fugier's book are a well-to-do bunch, spangled with *bijoux* and dressed in *décolleté* by Worth or Paquin. And they occupy a very specific geography which is the geography of Parisian money: the *Faubourg Saint-Germain*, the *Chaussée d'Antin*, and, at a stretch, the *Parc Monceau*.

Civilization, art, elegance, such were the values that the great *salons* of the Third Republic incarnated, and thus it is little wonder that Martin-Fugier celebrates the institution as the very expression of *la qualité française*. Why then did the *salon* lose its cachet?

Martin-Fugier supplies the beginnings of an answer in the body of her text. She devotes a chapter to various *salons* “*tout au long de la III^e République*”, associating each with a start-up date. The first in the catalogue is the *salon* of *Madame Charpentier*, wife of the celebrated publisher, and it is dated from 1875. The last is the *salon* of *Adrienne Monnier*, bookseller extraordinaire, and it is dated from 1915. The Great War and the sacrifices it entailed put a damper on the luxurious display characteristic of the high-end *salon*. The return of good times in the 1920s brought a revival, a revival, though, shadowed by memories of happier, prewar days. There was a sense of hauntedness made all the more poignant as the volumes of Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* came tumbling out over the course of the decade. Then came the thirties. Martin-Fugier makes the point that each generation of *salonnières* trained its successors, younger women learning the craft at an older woman's knee before striking out on their own. In the Depression-decade, however, there was no *relève*.

Martin-Fugier does not speculate why this should have been so, but it is not hard to guess. The Great War, the Depression, and the Occupation too for that matter dealt body blows to established fortunes and not just in France. The country house, the emblem of English upper-class life, suffered eclipse much like the *salon* and for similar reasons. They cost prohibitive sums to keep up. Repairs had to be paid for and grounds maintained, and, of course, there were the servants' wages to pay. Complaints about the shortage of good, affordable help—the servant question—cropped up not just in Paris but in London and New York too. The economics of twentieth-century life just made it too difficult to preserve certain, expensive forms of upper-class life, the *salon* among them.

But not just that: Martin-Fugier notes that the young in the twenties sometimes felt they had better things to do than to truss themselves up for an evening at the *salon*. They preferred instead to go out together in groups, heading for the nightclub, the *Boeuf sur le toit* say, to sip drinks and listen to Jean Wiener play jazz at the piano. Martin-Fugier does not develop the point, but it is still a telling one. The market economy generated dreams of emancipation for the young and for young women perhaps most of all. Wasn't it more fun, more modern, to shuck off the gowns and jewels of yesteryear in favour of a cocktail dress from Chanel? Wasn't it freer to let one's hair down or cut it off altogether in the *garçonne* style?

The *salon* afforded well-to-do women an opportunity to preside and to referee, to play a role in social life beyond that of wife and mother. Younger women, however, had different ideas, opting to become writers themselves and not just hostesses to writers, preferring a night on the town to an at-home *soirée*. Such indeed was the path pursued by a Simone de Beauvoir who, of course, does not appear in Martin-Fugier's text, but who matters to her story, for de Beauvoir, just starting out in the twenties, helped to invent roles for women, intellectual and social, that made the *salonnière* of old obsolete.

Martin-Fugier's book offers clues as to why the *salon* might have fallen on hard times but does not develop them. Until the conclusion that is, and here she makes a pair of bold claims, one of them compelling, the other less so. She notes that self-styled "intellectuals" like Émile Zola and Julien Benda had unkind words for the *salon* which, they claimed, distracted writers from getting down to the serious business of art. Better, they felt, for would-be *salonnières* to spend their time attending Sorbonne *lectures* or sessions of the *Chambre des députés*. The figure of the intellectual, as has often been remarked, made its historical debut at the time of the Dreyfus Affair. Intellectuals, though, were not just novel types but pioneers of a new way of conducting debate. They looked past the great and the good to appeal to opinion at large, agitating in a most public way via manifestoes and petitions. There was little room, if any at all, for the *salon* in this scheme of things. A related point: the argument has been made that the rise of the intellectual was part and parcel of a yet larger phenomenon, the autonomisation of elites. Painters and writers, who had once been plugged into career paths that led from bohemia to the academy, now more and more set themselves apart, hunkering down into artistic enclaves and interacting with the wider world through the intermediary of dealers and critics. Think of the artistic geography of twentieth-century Paris, and what neighbourhoods come to mind: not so much the *Faubourg Saint-Germain* (Proust notwithstanding), as Montmartre, Montparnasse and the *Quartier Latin*. When writers had been men of letters and not intellectuals, the *salon* had mattered as a place to make connections. With the autonomisation of the artistic field, it mattered less.

But the real culprit in the *salon's* demise was not, in Martin-Fugier's view, the intellectual, but democracy itself. She opens her conclusion with a series of quotes from Stendahl's *Lucien Leuwen*, which add up to a general indictment of the vulgarity, money-hunger, and mediocrity of democratic life. The city of Washington, Lucien reflects, might be an estimable place, but it would be far better to live among noble people of elegant tastes, better even to frequent "a corrupt court" of the old regime, for there at least might be found the refined pleasures that an ancient civilization has to offer. Looked at from this angle, the *salons* of the Third Republic appear as hold-over from more genteel times. They were bunkers of cultural distinction, under siege from the levelling assaults of a democratizing world, a democratizing world in the end destined to win out. But the relationship between the *salon* and the Republic was more complicated than such a conclusion lets on. The *salon* flourished, as Martin-Fugier herself demonstrates, through the Third Republic's first forty years, and not just in spite of the regime. There were a number of celebrated and very republican *salonnières*, Juliette Adam and Geneviève Straus among them, and the society press, after some initial misgivings, in the end made its peace with the regime, dutifully reporting on republican galas and *fêtes*. After the Great War, the *salon* began to encounter difficulties, but so too did the Republic.

Communists and right-wing rabble-rousers had little use for the niceties of democratic politics, nor, it might be added, did they much care for the restraint and decorum of *salon* life. If France's political climate was not congenial to the *salon* in the interwar decades, it was not because democracy was in the ascendant but because more authoritarian forms were or were trying to be.

Martin-Fugier's book is an elegant one. Analysis is not its strongest suit, but was it ever meant to be? In the sparkle of its prose, the book wants to recapture the charm and ferment of the last great age of the *salon*. As such, it works less well as a work of historical explanation than as an elegiac evocation of a bygone form of Frenchness.