
H-France Review Vol. 20 (July 2020), No. 120

Chloe Edmondson and Dan Edelstein, eds., *Networks of Enlightenment: Digital Approaches to the Republic of Letters*. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2019. xii + 303 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$99.99 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-78694-196-1.

Review by Laurence Brockliss, Magdalen College, Oxford.

In the last twenty years historians have increasingly adapted the techniques of Social Network Analysis (SNA) to deepen our understanding of among other things family relationships, commercial links, power dynamics, and learned circles. Although in many respects the methodology they have espoused is only a development of the prosopographical approach to the past pioneered in the mid-twentieth century by Ronald Syme, Lewis Namier, and others, the advent of the relational database, allied to the statistical methodology of SNA, has enabled a much closer and more careful analysis of the formation and structure of social phenomena than hitherto possible. In the world of Enlightenment studies, the potential of SNA has been particularly championed by the groups working with Dan Edelstein at Stanford and Nicholas Cronk at Oxford on digitising the correspondence of the *philosophes* and other important literary, philosophical, and scientific figures in the eighteenth century. The book under review, edited by Edelstein and Chloe Edmondson, a doctoral pupil at Stanford, provides an introduction to what the new methodology can achieve.

After an introduction in which the editors explore briefly the advantages and disadvantages of SNA for the historian, the book is divided into three parts. The first consists of four essays which examine the structure of the correspondence of four very different letter writers. Nicholas Cronk examines how Voltaire used his correspondence as a vehicle for obtaining news from Paris and for circulating news about himself and his publications. In particular, he looks at the role the abbé Nicolas-Charles-Joseph Trublet played as a node: Trublet's willingness to pass and receive information of value to Voltaire through his own correspondence network shows how the sage of Ferney chose and used little known individuals to act as his intermediaries. The second essay, by Kelsey Rubin-Detlev and Andrew Kahn, pursues a similar theme. Catherine the Great even in the eighteenth century was relatively peculiar among monarchs in maintaining a large correspondence, but her letter-writing was an important part of establishing her authority at home and abroad, which was continually challenged because she assumed the throne as a usurper. She, like Voltaire, used intermediaries to pass on her thoughts and wishes without having to commit herself to paper.

The third and fourth essays in part one look at two figures with a lower profile. Cheryl Smeall explores the European-wide correspondence circle of the Italian experimental philosopher

Francesco Algarotti, known in his own day for his 1737 popularisation of Newton, specifically written for women. Algarotti, it is shown, built up an international correspondence through his constant travels outside Italy, starting in Paris where he inveigled his way into the good books of Voltaire, among others, by using the fact that at the age of sixteen he had been the first Italian to replicate Newton's optical experiments. Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire, in contrast, examines the correspondence network of a no less ambitious but much more static member of the Republic of Letters, the Huguenot pastor Jacques de Pérard. Pérard was based for most of his life in Stettin. However, he had visited Holland in his early twenties, and he used the contacts he had made there to act as a book-buyer and literary agent for enlightened figures in Poland and to co-edit several periodicals. He also used his correspondence to gain admission to learned societies and pursue his agenda of toleration by developing an epistolary relationship with Cardinal Querini.

The second part of the book contains three essays on social networks. Edmondson revisits the role of the Paris salons which continues to be a matter of debate: were they or were they not institutions of Enlightenment? Edmondson examines specifically the salon of Julie de Lespinasse. From a database she has created of the members of the salon, itself difficult to construct given the serendipitous range of sources which provide her with information, she demonstrates that the people who attended were for the most part serious literary and philosophical figures, if relatively few were scientists. By comparing and contrasting the composition of Lespinasse's salon with d'Holbach's, she feels able to conclude that at least one female salon was a centre of intellectual exchange. Charlotta Wolff turns the focus from Lespinasse's salon to one of its members. Gustav Philip Creutz was Swedish ambassador in Paris between 1766 and 1783. Wolff uses the information about his contacts in the Paris police records to show how over time their profile became more aristocratic: while Creutz always mixed with people interested in the Enlightenment, he appears to have spent less time with the *encyclopédistes* as his diplomatic stature grew. The final essay of the three by Maria Teodora Comsa uses the information in Casanova's memoirs to show how a low-born Venetian made contact with the great and good in European capitals, even before he had gained notoriety by escaping from prison in Venice. Essentially, he used actors and actresses, especially the latter, to make contact with potential patrons: his charm and cheek did the rest, to particular effect in Paris where the government entrusted him to run a lottery.

The final part of the book consists of two essays grouped under the title of "Knowledge Networks." The first, by Melanie Conroy, uses the database of members of French academies compiled by the Comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques (CTHS) to construct the linkages between academicians within Paris, between Paris and the provinces, and between Paris and abroad. This is an original endeavour that no historian of the French academies has attempted before. It leads her to conclude that in France, even before the French Revolution, the life of the mind was organised from Paris: members of the Paris academies overlapped, provincial intellectuals frequently moved to Paris, and provincial academicians, if they belonged to more than one academy, were connected to one in the capital. She also concludes that this national network was dominated by scientists. The last chapter shows how NAS can also be applied to famous texts. Mark Algee-Hewitt analyses the distribution of the quotations used in Johnson's *Dictionary* to reveal that the work had an intended, if hidden, cultural message. It alerted browsers to which works of English literature, generally drama and poetry, should be read, and also by associating specific literary texts with particular clusters of words instructed readers how to perceive those texts. It was thus not a neutral text but an education in literary criticism and right behaviour.

The collection of essays is a delight to read and frequently highly informative. There are hardly any typographical errors and only one obvious faux pas: Queen Ann (sic) was not the wife of William of Orange (p. 166). The essays are also suitably reflective: by and large the authors recognise the limitations of the approach and accept that there are many questions about the nature and significance of contacts in any social group that can be answered only qualitatively. They also appreciate the problem of the fullness of the data. Historians of epistolary networks, as Cronk is quick to point out, seldom possess the complete corpus of an individual's letters: Voltaire's correspondents kept the letters he sent them; those they sent to Voltaire were generally destroyed. Police records similarly never provide a full list of a suspect's contacts: Wolff was surprised to find that neither Diderot nor Franklin, whom Creutz met frequently, turn up in the reports. Nor do diaries or travel journals. Algarotti, we learn in Smeall's essay, corresponded with the Veronese antiquarian and naturalist Francesco Scipione Maffei. As both were in Paris and then London in the 1730s, it is hard to believe they did not meet: nonetheless this reviewer was interested to discover that there is no mention of the fact in the travelogue of Maffei's secretary, Jean-François Séguier of Nîmes, nor in his letters.

Admittedly, the incompleteness of the chosen source is unlikely to greatly distort the findings. In one case, though, the limitations should have been signalled more overtly. Conroy's essay on the French academies is a new departure but it is based on an inadequate source. The CTHS's database is a work in progress and still very thin. A quick trawl looking for a data entry on academicians in the Midi mostly drew a blank. A more complete database might have led her at the very least to nuance her findings. Séguier, himself an antiquarian and naturalist, is one of the absentees. He fits her argument in that he was a provincial *érudit* affiliated to the Parisian Académie des inscriptions and to the Académie des sciences, the one as an associate, the other as a corresponding member. On the other hand, he is a particularly good example of a provincial academician who was a member of multiple academies: this was not simply a characteristic of Parisians. By 1759 he was an *associé* of the academies of Toulouse, Montpellier, Dijon, and six Italian academies. His close friend, Esprit Calvet of Avignon, had a smaller but similarly wide range of associations: on the eve of Revolution he too was connected to the Parisian Académie des inscriptions, but he was also an associate member (later full member) of the academies of Marseille, Lyons, and Grenoble and a member of the Italian academy of Volterra. It would seem too that the CTHS database does not even include members of all the Paris academies as entries for members of the Académie de chirurgie and the Société royale de médecine are missing. This was a society to which Calvet was attached, as was Pierre-Joseph Amoureux of Montpellier, another naturalist with several other associations who is not in the database (though his father is). A full member of the Société royale des sciences of Montpellier, Amoureux belonged in 1789 to the academies of Lyons and Toulouse and was an associate of the Société des amis scrutateurs de la nature de Berlin.

This is not to detract in any way from the editors' achievement in bringing together a rich collection of essays that illustrate the potential of applying SNA to a variety of historical sources. It is a pity that the editors are let down by the quality of the illustrative material. The network diagrams are frequently so dense that they are almost impossible to decipher (e.g., p. 244), while others have been printed in such a small font that they are illegible (especially p. 168). The cluster clouds which rely on subtle shadings of grey are meaningless to the uninitiated reader (e.g., pp. 270-1). Whereas the old-fashioned bar charts can be read and understood as they stand, virtually all the visualisations borrowed from SNA make no sense without the accompanying text and to that extent become redundant. This is not the fault of the editors or the authors. It demonstrates

the limitations of the printed book as a vehicle for presenting complex visual material. SNA diagrams are made for PowerPoint and its successors which allow network diagrams and cluster clouds to be built up like a palimpsest and particular features isolated and enlarged. The way forward, it appears, is for historical studies of this kind, in hard or online copy, to be accompanied by a digital pack of illustrations which gives the reader the chance to understand properly how the data has been visualised.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Dan Edelstein and Chloe Summers Edmondson, "Introduction: historical network analysis and social groups in the Enlightenment"

Nicholas Cronk, "Voltaire's correspondence network: questions of exploration and interpretation"

Kelsey Rubin-Detlev and Andrew Kahn, "Catherine the Great and the art of epistolary networking"

Cheryl Smeall, "'He belonged to Europe': Francesco Algarotti (1724-1764) and his European networks"

Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire, "The networks and the reputation of an ambitious Republican of Letters: Jacques de Pérard (Paris 1713-Stettin, 1766)"

Chloe Summers Edmondson, "Julie de Lespinasse and the 'philosophical' salon"

Charlotta Wolff, "'Un admirateur des philosophes modernes': the network of Swedish ambassador Gustave Philip Creutz in Paris, 1766-1783"

Maria Teodora Comsa, "Casanova's French networks: transitioning from a backstage coterie to the *beau monde*"

Melanie Conroy, "The eighteenth-century French academic network"

Mark Algee-Hewitt, "The principles of meaning: networks of knowledge in Johnson's *Dictionary*"

Laurence Brockliss
Magdalen College, Oxford
laurence.brockliss@magd.ox.ac.uk

Copyright © 2020 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without

permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172