

Enlightenment Sociability: Strengths and Weaknesses

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When it was thought that human beings were completely subject to divine will and that all that counted was their relationship with God, interaction with one's peers was considered of little value. In 1690, in his *Two Treatises of Government*, John Locke argued that humans had left their state of nature to protect themselves from ferocious beasts and live in a society, thanks to a collection of laws that would preserve their natural rights, including freedom of thought but also the right to provide for their own everyday needs, and therefore also the right to property. Enlightenment thinkers placed man, and to a certain extent woman, at the center of the universe: not only the cosmic universe, but also and most importantly the social universe. Enlightenment thinking encouraged people to doubt and to have a critical approach, making them well suited to interacting with one another as they had a propensity to respect other people's points of view. Sociability was a new Enlightenment concept. Not only were humans living in society, but the company of their peers was considered beneficial, indispensable, vital. Man was understood as a social animal, who could not function as a hermit or monk. The art of "conversation" was valued. This meant exchanges that human beings needed to have with

one another if they wanted to improve themselves and make progress, in all senses. However, this sociability did not mean a wholesale acceptance of equality. In England, a new genre of painting emerged at this time, the "conversation piece," which depicted the members of a family, generally an aristocratic one, in a precise order. Sometimes, ironically, this included a servant, black or white, and pets. The extremely rigid order of appearance implicitly revealed the relationships between the subjects. There was no question of putting the father and the mother on the same footing, still less the aristocrat and the servant, even if everyone had the honor of being represented in the family portrait. In the English context, Gainsborough painted some particularly good examples. These trends coincided with the heyday of London gentlemen's clubs, which began at the turn of the century. These were very different to the later pre-1789 revolutionary political clubs in Paris.

From London gentlemen's clubs to the first lodges

This was precisely the context in which the first English lodges emerged. The lodges had a bit more substance about them, so to speak, than the gentlemen's clubs. On the one hand, unlike the highly elitist London

clubs, they were not exclusively reserved for aristocrats, far from it, and on the other, by forbidding any political or religious argument, they allowed Protestant dissenters to rub shoulders with members of the Church of England in a spirit of tolerance rarely equaled in other organizations of the time. These two phenomena were in fact closely linked. In England at that time, all aristocrats were members of the Church of England for two reasons: one, aristocrats were the landed elite and, two, only Anglicans were considered full citizens. Both land ownership and Anglican faith were requirements for the right to vote. The dissenters had been partially emancipated by the Glorious Revolution: they were no longer persecuted, having secured their freedom of religion, but were nevertheless not considered full citizens, as non-Anglicans did not have the right to vote. However, the new lodges welcomed them. This is why, unlike the London clubs, the first lodges were not bastions of aristocracy but were open to artisans, shopkeepers, and merchants, and slowly also to the industrial middle classes. Social exclusion was not practiced on religious grounds, nor on the traditional English divide between the landed gentry on the one hand and the industrial and commercial middle classes on the other. This also explains why Jews were admitted to British lodges, unlike some French and German lodges of the same period. From the 1740s, Jewish prayers featured in the religious work edited by Laurence Dermott, *Ahi-*

man Rezon, for the “Antient” Grand Lodge. Nevertheless, the Protestant work ethic dominated British lodges. “Glory in work,” well known to today’s Freemasons, was not merely an empty phrase in eighteenth-century England, in the wake of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* and with the industrial revolution still to come.

The primary purpose of eighteenth-century lodges in both France and England was to bring together men who were dispersed “at a perpetual distance” from one another, in the spirit of Enlightenment sociability. If we are to believe Anderson and Gould,¹ even if we do not take their assertions literally, the four London lodges decided to combine forces to organize an annual feast deserving of the name, with all appropriate pomp and splendor. Their primary motivation was therefore indeed a desire to come together in friendship. This extremely simple ritual was intended to strengthen the cohesion between lodge members. At that time, there was no initiation ceremony in the true sense of the term, simply a welcome or acceptance ceremony. The welcome speeches addressed to new initiates emphasized the convivial way in which brothers ought to treat one another, “Masonry... orders us to live within Compass, and always to act upon the Square with the World, and with one another. It is not gloomy, but cheerful; it forbids Intemperance, but encourages rational Mirth, and innocent Pleasure; in short, it is a Superstructure fixed with solid Firmness

1 Robert Freke Gould and Dudley Wright, *Gould’s History of Freemasonry*, 6 vols. (London: Caxton, 1931).

on the broad Basis of moral and social Virtue.”² Speech was regulated, brothers having to remain courteous both during and after the lodge’s business.

The lodge was the ideal setting for sociability. Nonetheless, this sociability had two major limitations, originating in Anderson’s 1723 *Constitutions*. Neither women nor slaves could become Freemasons.

The exclusion of women

The exclusion of women is the original sin of Freemasonry. It can only be explained by its context. At the time when Anderson and Desaguliers were writing, no English woman was allowed in the public sphere. London’s famous gentlemen’s clubs were exclusively male. Women were only accepted into Bible clubs, and even this was something that developed over the course of the eighteenth century. Was Anderson at fault? Not really, because during the Enlightenment women were still far from being emancipated.

In France, where aristocratic women had carved out a space for themselves in the public realm through salons, female Freemasonry began very early, in so-called “adoption” lodges. Frenchwomen were not the first to be included in Freemasonry: they were preceded by their sisters in The Hague, who participated in the De Juste Lodge alongside brothers in the 1750s. “Adoption” is a term that now has somewhat negative connotations. Certainly, at the time, it denoted a level of paternalism, as male Freemasons were the ones to es-

tablish these adoption lodges. However, these brothers, although concerned with equality, thought it necessary to welcome their sisters into their own specially created lodges with equal standing. In practice, in most lodges, each office was doubled, held at the same time by a brother and a sister, as the rituals that have now been made available to researchers show. The manuscripts from the Parisian Loge de la Candeur (Candor Lodge) preserved at the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BNF) (French National Library) are particularly eloquent. Adoption lodges grew over the eighteenth century, especially in France but also somewhat in Germany, and were officially recognized by the new Grand Orient de France (GODF) (Grand Orient of France) in 1774, one year after it was founded. These lodges were established during the Enlightenment and played a role, albeit a small one, in the emancipation of women.

It is important to note, however, that at a global level, the exclusion of women predominated in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Freemasonry, and persists in the vast majority of Masonic orders today. The first mixed Masonic orders appeared with Le Droit Humain (Human Duty) from 1893 onward, and the first female Masonic orders came in the post-war period (such as the Union Maçonique Féminine de France [French Feminine Masonic Union], forerunner of the Grande Loge Féminine de France [Grand Feminine Lodge of France], in 1945), but it was a century later that a male Masonic organization opened its doors to women (1982 for the Grand Orient de Luxem-

2 “A Charge delivered at the Union Lodge at Exeter,” in Péter, Révauger, and Snoek, *British Freemasonry*, 200–204.

bourg [Grand Orient of Luxembourg], and 2010 for the GODF).

While the GODF still does not officially refer to itself as mixed, preferring to state that it recruits “independently of any considerations of gender,” in practice the GODF has more and more sisters, almost 5,000 in 2021, present in about half of lodges (671 out of 1,338), and representing almost 10 percent of the GODF’s membership. There was some fear that sisters would come up against a glass ceiling in an organization that had been exclusively male for such a long period of time, but in fact, in January 2021, two sisters were elected to the ruling bodies of the GODF, one to the Conseil de l’Ordre (Order Council) and the other to the Chambre d’Administration du Grand Chapitre Général du GODF (Administrative Chamber of the GODF General Grand Chapter), the Ateliers de Sagesse (Workshops of Wisdom) of the French rite.

Following the example of the United Grand Lodge of England, most Grand Lodges around the world still exclude women. The arguments for their inadmissibility are of varying levels of obscurity,³ but it would be wrong to lay the blame at the feet of Anderson and the Enlightenment. Instead it belongs to those brothers who have interpreted Anderson and failed to acknowledge the innovative nature of the *Constitutions* and the extent of this document’s capacity to develop as the historical context changes. In short, the belief that women should not be initiated into Freemasonry today is simply anachronistic.

The exclusion of slaves or people “born slaves”

In Locke and Anderson’s time, the slave trade was in its infancy. The enslavement of Africans had begun much earlier, but the infamous triangular trade had not yet become established. The Atlantic slave trade only developed in the 1760s and 1770s, after the American Revolution had begun. When Locke mentions slaves, he is talking about prisoners of war, who at the time would only have been temporarily enslaved, and whose children would not have been considered slaves in their turn. When Anderson and his collaborators wrote in 1723 that Freemasons could not be “slaves” and must be “born free,” the reference to slavery was above all philosophical. The intention was not to exclude a section of the population but rather to extol the importance of the freedom to act and think for oneself, as a reasonable and responsible actor.

When the slave trade and slavery developed on the plantations of the American South and the Caribbean, in Saint Domingue, Barbados, and Jamaica in particular, Freemasons split into two camps. A number of plantation owners were Freemasons, and a slave ship even bore the ironic name “Le Franc-Maçon” (The Freemason), while Victor Schœlcher successfully persuaded the revolutionary government of 1848 to abolish slavery. The irrational people who destroyed the statues of Schœlcher in Martinique in 2020 and 2021 showed themselves to be both ignorant and racist.

³ See Cécile Révauger, *La longue marche des francs-maçonnnes: France, Grande Bretagne, États-Unis* (Paris: Dervy, 2018).

Toward the end of the eighteenth century, in 1784, Prince Hall, a former slave from Boston, created the first black lodge. His African Lodge was recognized by the Grand Lodge of England, but not by the Massachusetts Grand Lodge. Throughout the nineteenth century, Prince Hall's Grand Lodges gained momentum in the United States, but consistently came up against opposition from the white Grand Lodges. It was not until 1989 that a white Grand Lodge—the Connecticut Grand Lodge—recognized the Prince Hall Grand Lodge in its state, beginning a tradition of diplomatic relations between the white and black lodges of American states. It is regrettable to have to talk in this way of “white” and “black” lodges, but in the American context such ethnic divisions persist. Even today, four Grand Lodges in the Southern states maintain a discriminatory stance.⁴

French Masonic orders have never explicitly excluded Masons on the grounds of the color of their skin. Nonetheless, in Saint Domingue and Guadeloupe⁵ the only black brothers allowed were servants, there to assist white brothers during festivities, with no route to becoming Masters. The Haitian Revolution of 1802 put an end to this practice. The United Grand Lodge of England, for its part, replaced the formulation “born free” in its constitution with “free” in 1849, one year after abolition in France, and nine years after abolition in Britain. Slavery was formally abolished throughout the British Empire in 1833, but the practice was not completely eradicated until 1838.

Neither Voltaire nor Montesquieu, whose works, in particular their use of irony, have so often been misunderstood, is responsible for racism and slavery. The blame lies with the ignorance and sordid economic concerns of the descendants of the Enlightenment. While Voltaire evoked the suffering of the maimed Negro in Suriname, plantation owners shamelessly profited from forced human labor.

At this time of decolonialization and intersectionality, it is important to remember the egalitarian and universalist principles of the Enlightenment. Admittedly, the principles emphasized during the American and French Revolutions were often utopian, but at the very least they had the merit of aiming to bring men and women together, rather than segregating them or setting them against one another in fruitless power struggles.

4 See Cécile Révauger, *Black Freemasonry. From Prince Hall to the Giants of Jazz*, Rochester, Vermont, Toronto, Canada, Inner Traditions, 2016.

5 See Chloé Duflo-Ciccotelli, *La franc-maçonnerie en Guadeloupe: Miroir d'une société en tensions (1770–1848)* (Bordeaux: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2021).