

ENCYCLOPEDIA
OF THE

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REPUBLIC OF LETTERS. A defining commonplace of European and, later, American intellectual culture from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, the idea

of the Republic of Letters symbolized and helped to shape the social and discursive practices of intellectual life, institutions, and sociability, and it was, in turn, modified by them as they evolved. In 1752, when Voltaire wrote about the “literary republic” that had gradually been established throughout Europe in the age of Louis XIV (*Siècle de Louis XIV*, chap. 34), he was drawing on a notion that had existed in the cultural imaginary of Europeans for hundreds of years. The term appears to have emerged in the Latin form, *respublica litteraria*, in the early fifteenth century. The two words *res* and *publica* mean, respectively, “matter” or “object,” and “public” or “common”; *litteraria* denotes learning or knowledge, including scientific knowledge, rather than literature in the narrower sense of our own time. The expression was used, then, to refer to the shared pursuit of knowledge for the common good, and it never lost this primary meaning, although it was invested over time with other meanings and symbolic powers of representation. Such was the case at the time of the Renaissance.

A paradigm shift occurred in the worldview of Europeans in the sixteenth century following the invention of the printing press, which brought about an increased circulation of knowledge and books, the discovery of the New World, and the rediscovery of classical texts from Greek and Roman antiquity. According to the French author Jean Bodin, writing in *Les six livres de la République* (1576), all peoples were now interconnected and “marvelously involved in the universal Republic, as if they were part of one and the same city.” Of course, Bodin was using the concept of the republic in a political, albeit ideal, sense. Scholars such as Erasmus also thought in these terms, seeing themselves as citizens of the world (*cives mundi*) and members of the *respublica litteraria*, which united all like-minded people everywhere, past, present, and future. The Republic of Letters was, then, a conceptual space defined in terms of cosmopolitanism and universality, although in reality its membership was limited to the educated elite and was, therefore, almost exclusively male, university-educated, and European.

It was, however, also an actual space defined by a common language, Latin (the language of education in this period), networks of communication, and cooperative enterprise. Although scholars did travel between different centers of learning and acted as vectors of information, communication was for the most part by correspondence. Those involved in scientific investigation or the task of editing biblical and classical texts wrote to one another with requests for help. Books and samples were exchanged; research was undertaken on behalf of others, in the form of visits to libraries, deciphering of manuscripts, or consultations with specialists, and the results were conveyed by letter, or in packages carried by travelers and

mutual friends. In other words, learning was based on collaborative interconnection and cooperative networks of intellectual exchange, which were practical expressions of the ideal of the *respublica litteraria*; these were to receive further elaboration in the seventeenth century.

The picture of the solitary thinker reinventing knowledge by deduction from first principles, promoted by Descartes’s philosophy, tends to predominate in our image of the seventeenth century, but the reality was very different. Francis Bacon’s utopian image in *New Atlantis* (1627) of what he called “Solomon’s House”—a vast powerhouse of research into all branches of knowledge, based on induction and experiment, exploratory voyages, collaboration, and intellectual exchange—is a more meaningful, albeit ideal, representation of the contemporary world of learning. This is the period that witnessed the creation throughout Europe of what we designate as the institutions of the Republic of Letters: academies, book fairs, clubs, salons, societies, libraries, gazettes, newspapers, and periodicals. All of these were designed to facilitate the circulation of information and the pursuit of knowledge—which was becoming increasingly specialized—to help people keep up with the latest developments, to create networks of exchange, and to provide places, means, and occasions of sociability. In few of these was Latin still used as the language of exchange, having been replaced by the vernacular languages or, toward the end of the century, by French.

As a result of these developments, there was a notable expansion in the cultural elites, which now included people who had not received a university education, such as many members of the bourgeoisie and also many more women. Women prodigies had always been a part of the *respublica litteraria*, but in both the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, more conventionally educated women became the driving force behind the salon movement, although they still remained in the minority overall. From the outset, as Jürgen Habermas has written, these new cultural elites were an educated, critical, reading public who played an increasingly central role in the formation of opinion. Whether this critical public was constituted, at least in part, by the ideal of the Republic of Letters, or whether in fact it gave rise to further elaboration of that ideal is impossible to say. What is clear is that, at the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth, lexicographers and scholars attempted to define and codify the evolving notion of the *respublica litteraria*.

Significantly, the three French language dictionaries that appeared between 1680 and 1694 all agree in defining the Republic of Letters as a corporate body of learned people, a definition that formalized its existence as never before. In 1684, Pierre Bayle, a Huguenot refugee,

launched the *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres* (News of the Republic of Letters) in Amsterdam; in the preface, he outlined the values it would exemplify. In his view, the Republic of Letters was a “fraternity” where scholars were to be judged not on their social standing but on learning alone. He undertook to exclude all causes of division from his periodical, specifically mentioning religious differences, and he urged his readers to concentrate on what united them: the shared pursuit of knowledge. He also invited them to send him books and information, which they did, and he created a vast network of correspondence with them that kept him informed of the latest publications and news. In other words, although Bayle wrote the vast majority of the articles himself, his periodical in fact embodied a community of discourse, which he defined as a meritocracy based on principles of fraternity, equality, reciprocal communication, and tolerance.

In the first edition of the *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1697), Bayle gave another influential and frequently quoted definition of the Republic of Letters (art. “Catus,” footnote D). It was a “state,” he wrote, presided over by truth and reason, where discursive interaction was typified by reciprocal criticism and intellectual independence, since no authority—familial, social, or political—could prohibit the inhabitants from exercising their natural right to make war on error and ignorance. Other thinkers produced similar definitions: Vigneul-Marville in 1700 stressed the diversity (of age, gender, religion, ethnic or social origin, language or culture) of the members of the Republic of Letters; Pierre Desmaizeaux in 1729 insisted on their freedom and independence of judgment. Jean Le Clerc in 1706 wrote about it as an alternative state that took no part in the wars between nations, but instead provided a conceptual space where scholars could engage collaboratively in the pursuit of learning, although this might result in learned battles and the spilling of ink. In 1708, Christian Loeber observed that it was a “universal society” engaged in transmitting “true knowledge” to posterity (Bots and Waquet, 18–21, 39). Thus, by the turn of the century, the concept of the Republic of Letters had been transformed into a self-conscious alternative community of rational, critical discourse that sought to embody certain values, including collaborative learning, impartiality, and the right to pursue the truth without interference from the authorities.

In the eighteenth century, then, when the philosophes and others—for example, Gisbert Cuper, Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock, or Gotthold Ephraim Lessing—referred to the Republic of Letters, they were not innovating, but rather situating themselves in a great cultural tradition that they sought to develop. The most outstanding example of the ideals, values, and practices associated with that tradition

is the *Encyclopédie* of Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert, which, as its title page proclaims, was the work of a “society of learned people” engaged in rational investigation. Its objective, like that of Solomon’s House in Bacon’s utopia—the collection of all the scattered knowledge of the globe—could be realized only by the collaboration on a grand scale of people from all walks of life, as Diderot reminded readers. While the *Encyclopédie* may be outstanding, however, it is not untypical of intellectual sociability in this period, when people of lesser reputation, including those of both genders whose names are often lost to us, expanded their cultural world, conceptualizing it as the Republic of Letters. Academies, clubs, salons, and societies were founded throughout Europe, especially in provincial towns, and also in the American colonies. Periodicals, journals, and newspapers were launched (and sometimes lost), and correspondence networks widened to include the American colonies to the west and Russia to the east. Freemasonry offered yet another opportunity for intellectual sociability and collaborative interaction; and reading clubs, commercial lending libraries, and coffeehouses became centers for formal and informal discussion. As a result of these developments, ideas, information, books, and learning were diffused to a far wider public, made up of both genders and of social strata from outside the participating elites of the previous century. In their different ways, these institutions exemplified one or other of the ideals of the Republic of Letters as already defined.

Learned periodicals and newspapers, for example, not only drew information from correspondents, as Bayle had done; they also began to publish their letters and views, thereby making their readers members of a discursive community and participants in a body of opinion that had been shaped collaboratively. Academies, salons, and societies had corresponding members, both at home and abroad, and meetings were often held to fit in with the arrival of the post from foreign correspondents. By the 1750s, the academies of science in Europe were in regular contact, and they occasionally collaborated on projects that required the involvement of observers from all over the world. Although French continued to be the principal language of intellectual exchange (it was the language used by Leibniz to write to the majority of his four hundred correspondents, many of them German), the increased use of other vernaculars drove journals and academies to engage translators to maintain international communication. Collaboration and communication across national boundaries were also encouraged by the prizes offered by academies and societies, such as the one advertised by the Dijon Academy in 1749, which stimulated Jean-Jacques Rousseau to present his famous essay on the relationship between learning and morality. Greater opportunities for

travel, including the Grand Tour and journeys undertaken to universities and other centers of learning (the *peregrinatio academica* or *voyage littéraire*) made for increased contact between people engaged in the common pursuit of knowledge.

Eighteenth-century intellectual sociability seems to exemplify, then, the values of the Republic of Letters that had been nourished by cultured people over the centuries, but in fact, a radical shift had occurred since the Renaissance. The Republic of Letters had always been an alternative community driven by the ideals of reason, truth, tolerance, reciprocal service, equality, universality, criticism, intellectual independence, and impartiality. It was not an apolitical community, as some historians have claimed. On the contrary, individuals and groups, often motivated by these or similar ideals, engaged actively and critically with social, political, and religious institutions. They did not act as a corporate body, however. By the 1750s in France (earlier in England), the gradual expansion of the participating elites had created what Habermas calls a "public sphere." This was a space no longer limited to scholars, but shared by all who were "adept in the public use of reason" and the free exchange of opinions and ideas (Habermas, 1992, 105). Public opinion, which continued to be conceptualized in accordance with the values of the Republic of Letters as rational, critical, universal, and impartial, had become "a new political space with a legitimacy and authority apart from that of the crown" (Baker, 1990, 199). It was to play an important part in the elaboration of a new kind of politics in which authority was subject to its scrutiny and public policy the result of its deliberations.

If we stand back in conclusion from what the Republic of Letters became, and from the ideals and values that inspired it, certain limitations and shortcomings become obvious. Because its membership was more exclusive than inclusive in nature, its claim to universality is clearly more formal than real. Its egalitarianism is suspect for similar reasons. Although it established reciprocity between elite social groups, women and others less fortunate were mostly excluded. Certain places, institutions, and people were more important than others: cities had priority over rural centers, and Paris over all other cities; academies located in capital cities claimed precedence over those in the provinces; and outstanding individuals—Erasmus, for example, who was known as the prince of the Republic of Letters—carried more weight than the run-of-the-mill. Its members claimed to act in accordance with reason and to be motivated by tolerance, but they were all too often driven by envy, bitterness, and the will to power when they engaged in debate and reciprocal criticism. Their intellectual independence was frequently compromised by patronage, state controls, or censorship; and their

pursuit of impartiality ultimately alienated knowing and knowledge from embodiment and all the diversity and enrichment that implies. The cosmopolitan ideal was increasingly limited by communication problems created by the use of vernacular languages, misunderstandings arising out of national rivalries, and chauvinistic impulses generated by war. Yet, for all its limitations, the Republic of Letters was a set of social and discursive practices that functioned as a motivating and transforming ideal in the construction of what we designate as modernity.

[See also Academies; Bayle, Pierre; Cabinets de Lecture; Cartesianism; Censorship; Clubs and Societies; Coffeehouses and Cafes; Correspondence and Correspondents; Diderot, Denis; Encyclopédie; England; Freemasonry; Grand Tour; Habermas, Jürgen; Journals, Newspapers, and Gazettes; Language Theories; Le Clerc, Jean; Learned Societies; Libraries; Men and Women of Letters; Netherlands; Paris; Patronage; Politeness; Republicanism; Rousseau, Jean-Jacques; Salons; Scientific Journals; Sociability; Toleration; Translation; and Voltaire.]

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