Friendship and Politics in Post-Revolutionary France

Horowitz, Sarah

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In establishing a social order based on individualism and in giving birth to ideological conflict, the Revolution led the citizens of early nineteenth-century France to be fearful of a lack of social cohesion. Politics was divisive, especially for men, and public life was an arena of suspicion and anomie. As a result, trust and loyalty had to be understood as coming from the private realm. Ultimately this problem made friendship central to the political culture of the early nineteenth century. Imagined as a refuge from public life, friendship could build durable bonds of affiliation and reestablish trust, both of which were necessary to the functioning of the parliamentary system.

Discussions of the affection between friends, for instance, had a persuasive force in politics, as they could be used to secure commitments, persuade individuals to act in a particular fashion, and establish norms of interpersonal behavior. As the elites of the post-revolutionary era were learning how to practice modern politics within the framework of a representative system, they did so by relying on personal ties. The notion of a separation between public and private was a powerful norm in the period, and indeed it structured patterns of personal relations and limited women’s ability to exert influence within the political system. But at the same time, the confinement of women to the private realm allowed them to play critical roles in parliamentary life as they worked between politicians to build trust. In the face of the problems of the post-revolutionary era, the ruling elites found that a strict division between a public, masculine sphere and a private, feminine one was impossible to maintain.

Looking at friendship opens up a vantage point onto the problems of early nineteenth-century French society. The revolutionary and post-revolutionary eras held out the prospect of new freedoms, such as the ability
to participate in the political system (for elites, at least) and the destruction of the hierarchical and corporate social order. But both of these came with a very high price. It was difficult to imagine any cohesion among free and equals citizens. In the nineteenth century, the emerging market-based economy added to fears about what was being sacrificed in the pursuit of individual gain. Representative government also unleashed ideological hostilities into the elite strata. Political engagement meant factionalism and the poisoning of social relations. Moreover, despite the fact that the government of the Restoration was more liberal than that of the Napoleonic era—at least in terms of freedom of the press and a meaningful representative government—certain illiberal elements of the previous regime remained in place. The heavy hand of police surveillance did not disappear, nor did the state cease its efforts to control associational life. All of these forces would lead to a sense of anomie and estrangement, as well as a heightened suspicion of others.

The revolutionary and post-revolutionary eras thus left the men and women of the early nineteenth century with a series of practical problems and emotional difficulties. How could they make their way in a social climate that was perceived as being hostile? Where could they find individuals who would remain loyal to them and help them when they needed assistance? And where could they find confidantes? Friendship was one solution to these problems. Men limited their ties to other men who had the same ideological outlook. They understood that male friendship was a space of solidarity that was supposed to induce men to act for each other’s benefit. Because action and not emotional expression was central to male friendship, men turned to women for the revelation of their confidences and discussions of their emotional states. Bonds with women helped them find forms of affection and connection seen as missing in an otherwise anomic society.

This is not to say that friendship was the only solution to the difficulties of the post-revolutionary era: the family was another source of solidarity and affection. But on an individual level, there were those like Béranger who were not particularly close to their families. Even Guizot, who was devoted to his children, sought extra-domestic forms of affiliation. More generally, writers, artists, and scholars needed communities of peers. Nor could politicians function if they were confined to their familial contexts. Were they to rely on their relations to serve as brokers and allies, they would be far too limited in their ability to operate within the political system. In the broadest sense, the fact that friendship was an elective tie made it especially useful, as this bond
was one way to understand how citizens would voluntarily come together. Friendship could reconcile individualism and cohesion.

In certain respects, however, friendship was an old solution to a new problem. Social habits from the Old Regime remained intact in the post-revolutionary era, alongside certain understandings of how men and women operated in society. Male friends continued to be understood as allies and companions in arms. As they did in the eighteenth century, women still orchestrated elite sociability and served as political brokers. In an era of parliamentary politics, these ideas would take on a new importance and urgency. Women applied their skills with social relations to the political terrain to help men get along with one another and work with one another in the wake of ideological divisions. The notion of the friend-as-ally took on a new importance in the parliamentary systems of the Restoration and July Monarchy. Likewise, long-standing understandings of how friendship operated were applied to discussions of political life and affiliation.

The rest of the epilogue looks at both the problems and legacy of the reliance on friendship in political life. First I discuss why a political culture based on friendship was unable to prevent the Revolutions of 1830 and 1848. Indeed, the intermingling of friendship and politics led to unhealthy forms of politics. Despite this, friendship remained central to political life in the second half of the century. Between 1815 and 1848 political struggles were particularly acute and the memory of the Revolution was still fresh. But the political and social difficulties of the period of parliamentary monarchy have continued to echo throughout modern French history, as has the conflation between the political and the personal. Friends, for instance, were put to many of the same uses during the Third Republic as they had been in the era of parliamentary monarchy. Likewise, politics remained a source of division, as the men and women of France have continued to grapple with the ideological divides stemming from the Revolution.

AN IMPOSSIBLE STABILITY

Although ties of friendship restored trust within political life and thus helped the parliamentary system function, neither the Restoration nor the July Monarchy was durable in the long run. After all, both were swept away by revolutions. Why, then, was friendship unable to lead to a more permanent form of stability? If friendship could help politicians negotiate and form alliances, why
was it unable to prevent revolution? One reason is that friendship ties—either those between men or those between men and women—were not good at forcing compromise. Indeed, in some cases they could reinforce the intransigence of politicians. Nor could a political culture built on friendship necessarily help facilitate the entry of new groups into parliamentary life. Instead, the centrality of friendship to politics opened up these regimes to charges of corruption, ones that would do significant damage to the July Monarchy in particular.

Insofar as they were political revolutions, the Revolutions of 1830 and 1848 both occurred because of the intransigence of the government. In neither case was this a problem that friendship could solve. The spark to the Revolution of 1830 was the July Ordinances, which restricted both the powers of the Chamber of Deputies and the freedom of the press. This came almost a year after the installation of the ultra Polignac ministry, a cabinet that closely matched Charles X’s own views and shared his hostility to the very idea of a parliamentary monarchy. In this climate, women helped those who opposed the government to come together; this is what Allart did when she facilitated contact between Chateaubriand and her liberal friends. But any ability women had to span political divides and form alliances was useless to the government, for neither the king nor the ministry had any desire to compromise. Likewise, the proximate cause of the Revolution of 1848 was Guizot’s inflexibility. Because he was so hostile to the expansion of the franchise, it was clear that any political reform would not happen on his watch. While he could have used some of the women in his life—such as Lieven or Gasparin—to reach out to those on his left, he saw no reason to do so. It was only after he had been deposed that he started to build bridges to his former opponents, although when he did, he turned primarily to those on his right.

Moreover, the shape of male friendship networks and assumptions about women’s access to political life reinforced this intransigence. In the late 1840s, for example, all of Guizot’s male friends shared his politics. He could not be friends with any man who had significant political disagreements with him. As a result, the men he trusted the most and with whom he had the most open political exchanges were not going to encourage him to be more politically flexible. Indeed, the political cohesion among his male friends meant that their discussions took place in an echo chamber. Of course, this was not true for every female friend. Most notably, Gasparin’s politics were more moderate than were Guizot’s. Although he accepted her views and even tried to make use of them on occasion, his relationship with her contained
elements of masculine presumption and an insistence that she was not a fully qualified political actor in her own right. Thus he closed himself off to political debate with one of the few individuals willing to challenge him. Female friends were able to change a politician’s views only if he wanted to change them, while male friends normally had no desire to alter the opinions of the men around them.

The reliance on friendship ties was also fundamentally undemocratic, for it reaffirmed the sense that the political system was both run by and designed for the benefit of a small elite. This, too, helped undermine the July Monarchy in the 1840s. During the last years of the regime, corruption charges swirled around the government.2 There were spectacular scandals in the late 1840s, such as the Teste-Cubières affair, in which Jean Baptiste Teste, a former minister of public works, was found guilty of accepting bribes. In the Choiseul-Praslin affair, the duc de Choiseul-Praslin, a well-connected peer, brutally murdered his wife and was then allowed to poison himself before standing trial. Other charges were more pedestrian but no less damaging to the regime, such as the accusations that the government doled out lucrative postings to deputies in exchange for their support in the Chamber. In this climate, the fact that Guizot had a habit of providing positions to those closest to him no doubt contributed to the sense that the government was run by a small clique who had their own interests at heart. From his perspective, this was being a good friend. It also helped him place men to whom he was close in important governmental positions. But from the vantage point of someone opposed to or outside the political system, this was but another illustration of the self-serving nature of the regime.

Likewise, if women’s networks spanned factional divisions, they did not necessarily span social ones. This meant that women did not facilitate the entry of new social groups into politics. For instance, although Lieven had connections to politicians who ranged from the far-right to the center-left during the 1840s, her world was socially very exclusive. She was a salonnière in one of the most aristocratic neighborhoods in Paris. As Steven Kale has shown, salons were institutions that fostered elite social reproduction.3 As a result, she had no incentive to cultivate ties with those who were not elites. Alternately, there is the case of Hortense Allart. During the July Monarchy, she had an expansive network that reached from the far-left to the far-right, and she maintained friendships with Chateaubriand, Thiers, and many on the left. Although many of her intimates were interested in social questions during this era, they were still members of the elite. As a result of the exclusivity
of their networks, women could help facilitate politics between elites and between those who were already admitted into the political system. But they could not necessarily connect elites and nonelites. Thus, although ties of friendship enabled the early nineteenth-century parliamentary system to function, they did not necessarily result in a healthy and long-lasting form of politics.

Despite the problems of relying on personal ties to transact politics, friendship remained central to political life in the second half of the nineteenth century. So, too, did politics continue to be a force for division within elite society. Salons and other institutions of sociability were crucial in the formation of the opposition to the Second Empire, as well as the politics of the Third Republic. It is the Dreyfus Affair, however, that presents the clearest parallels between the political culture of the post-revolutionary era and that of the late nineteenth century. This was another battle between the “two Frances” that both ruptured social ties and formed friendships based on shared political affiliations. Here, too, women played crucial roles in orchestrating alliances between different ideological groupings.

Three new factors in the structure of politics in the second half of the century made friendship less necessary to the political system. Associational life grew considerably in strength during the mid to late nineteenth century; as clubs and organizations increasingly dotted the French landscape, men and women could find new methods of organization and cooperation. The creation of official political parties in the Third Republic meant that politicians had less need of personal ties to organize political life. Lastly, the rise of mass politics reshaped the political terrain. In the period of parliamentary monarchy, the centrality of social ties to political life went hand in hand with the restriction of political rights to the notables, an elite that was intermarried, interrelated, and habituated to socializing with one another. But the advent of universal manhood suffrage in 1848 and its enshrinement in the Third Republic decoupled political rights from wealth and status. High politics was no longer contained in Parisian salons and was no longer the exclusive property of an elite world.

Nevertheless, remnants of the social practices of the post-revolutionary era remained. Philip Nord has shown that the burgeoning associational life...
of the 1860s and 1870s became imbued with a new democratic spirit. At the same time, middle-class members took over leadership positions in these organizations and challenged the domination of the notables. In turn, these men and this newly emergent civil society provided crucial support for the Third Republic. Once again, social interactions and a distinct type of sociability helped to establish the basis for the political system and ensure its stability. Likewise, during the 1860s, oppositional groups—and notably republican ones—crystallized in Parisian salons, such as that of Marie d’Agoult and Juliette Adam. Two of the men who circulated in these salons were Jules Ferry and Léon Gambetta. In turn, Gambetta’s friendship was crucial to Ferry’s first electoral success. Gambetta had greater access to networks of republicans than did the bourgeois Ferry, and he facilitated Ferry’s introduction to the electors who voted him into office in 1869.

In the Third Republic, many of the problems of the post-revolutionary era reappeared, as did the same conflation between friendship and politics. The 1870s saw a revival of the politicization, social fragmentation, and bitterness that emerged in 1815. Thus, for instance, in one of his “Parisian Sketches” for the New York Tribune in 1876, Henry James wrote the following about politics:

Nothing else, it is true, is talked about. The elections are all-pervasive. . . . There is, of course, an infinite amount of more or less ferocious discussion, and every man suspects a political adversary in every other. . . . The intensity of political discussions is sharper in France than it is anywhere else—which is the case, indeed, with every sort of difference of opinion. There are more camps and coteries and “sets” than among Anglo-Saxons, and the gulf which divides each group from every other is more hopelessly and fatally impassable. . . . It is simply the old story that, either in politics or in literature, Frenchmen are ignorant of the precious art of compromise. The imagination sinks helpless before the idea of a Monarchist and a Republican ever really coming to terms.

James’s observations could have easily been written sixty years earlier. Once again, the political divisions created during the Revolution split French society apart—in this case, the struggle was between those who supported the Republic and those who wanted to return to a monarchy. Politics overwhelmed all other preoccupations, as it made elites intensely suspicious of one another and confined individuals to mutually hostile camps of those who were like-minded. These divisions also shaped social habits and spaces.
salons, such as that of Mme de Renneville, were centers of monarchism, while others, including Adam’s, provided a space for backers of the new regime. At the same time, salons were also sites of reconciliation. Adam, for instance, sought to bring together republicans, diplomats, and military men; her aim in part was to win over the last two groups to the Republic. Likewise, the salon of the Scheurer-Kestners—a family of wealthy industrialists from Alsace—facilitated Gambetta’s contact with elite circles and ensured that he had the support and financial backing of wealthy republicans. And, as in the era of parliamentary monarchy, politicians’ allies were often personal friends. This was the case with Gambetta, for instance, who was close to his allies Alphonse Peyrat and Eugène Spuller. In some cases, too, the pre-party forms of organization transitioned into organized political parties. Founded in 1901, the Parti radical emerged from men’s clubs and Masonic lodges.

It was, however, the events of the Dreyfus Affair that demonstrate the clearest parallels between the politics of the Third Republic and those of the post-revolutionary era. As in 1815, French society was ripped apart along ideological lines, and once again, the divisions created during the Revolution were made manifest within society. The Affair has long been understood as a foundational moment in French political culture as well as another battle between the “two Frances”—the one that accepted the gains of the Revolution and the one that did not. Of course, the dividing lines in the 1890s were not exactly the same as they were in the 1810s. There were certainly more republicans in France during the Third Republic than there had been during the Restoration; conservatism now mingled nationalism with monarchism. But Dreyfusards and anti-Dreyfusards had profoundly different notions of what France was and should be, as did liberals and ultras during the Restoration. Anti-Dreyfusards feared that France was going into decline thanks to the Third Republic. For them, the truth of Dreyfus’s guilt or innocence was less important than protecting the army, one sector of society that embodied traditional values and could regenerate the nation after its humiliation in the Franco–Prussian War. In contrast, Dreyfusards claimed individual rights, secularism, truth, and justice as their heritage from the Revolution.

Just as the Affair was the reopening of old ideological battles and the redrawing of new political lines, it also reshaped social networks. Notably, Dreyfusards and anti-Dreyfusards found that they could no longer be friends with one another. For instance, the comtesse de Martel de Janville was a noted salonnière and society writer who went by the name of “Gyp.” A fierce anti-Semite, she was committed to the anti-Dreyfusard cause and broke off ties to...
Dreyfusards, including Anatole France, with whom she had been friends for many years. Members of the Impressionist circle also ended their friendships with one another when they found themselves in opposite camps. Edgar Degas, for instance, became a passionate anti-Dreyfusard during the Affair. As a result of his political commitments, he became estranged from Camille Pissarro and Mary Cassatt, both of whom were in the Dreyfusard camp.

Shared political commitments also drew individuals together, as they had during the Restoration and July Monarchy. Alfred Dreyfus’s wife Lucie’s connections to other Dreyfusards sustained her during the Affair. Her relationships with Joseph Reinach, as well as Olympe and Louis Havet, were particularly important. Olympe provided Lucie with information on Dreyfus’s health and the conditions on Devil’s Island, where he was imprisoned. The Havets were also close to Colonel Picquart, the intelligence officer who discovered that Dreyfus had been framed. When he was imprisoned, the Havets wrote him, visited him to keep his morale up, and provided him with food that was an improvement on prison fare. Likewise, the politics of the Affair could make for relationships that had been improbable beforehand. Shared devotion to the Dreyfusard cause brought Bernard Lazare, an anarchist literary critic and journalist, together with Joseph Reinach, a committed republican. Thus, when the Dreyfusard Charles Péguy reflected on the Affair in 1909, he celebrated “those friendships that one did not think were possible in the modern world.”

Even some of the female political roles that were so important in the early part of the century were visible once again. For instance, women remained responsible for orchestrating alliances and for keeping political figures in touch with one another. The marquise Arconati-Visconti, a prominent salonnière, brought together centrists, radicals, socialists, and academics in support of the Dreyfusard cause. Meanwhile, Gyp’s network spanned the range of those in the anti-Dreyfusard camp—legitimists, military men, nationalists, and even anarchists. The salonnière Mme de Loynes also facilitated contact between the populist anti-Semite Édouard Drumont and conservatives from elite milieus.

Insofar as both the Dreyfusard and anti-Dreyfusard camps were coalitions, it was women who were largely responsible for forging these coalitions.

The story of the Dreyfus Affair thus demonstrates how central the Restoration and July Monarchy were in shaping French political culture, with its melding of the private and the political. The post-revolutionary era was formative in crystallizing the division between the “two Frances” and in
confronting the social and political legacy of the revolutionary period. It was in this context that the political system came to rely on the personal. A recourse to private life and to friendship helped individuals find the trust and affiliation they desired, and helped the political system function in the wake of the divisive events of the Revolution.