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Barbara B. Diefendorf, ed., *Social Relations, Politics, and Power in Early Modern France. Robert Descimon and the Historian's Craft*. Kirksville, Mo.: Truman State University Press, 2016. 320 pp. \$50.00 U.S. ISBN 9781612481630.

Review by Jonathan Spangler, Manchester Metropolitan University.

In an academic world that is increasingly fixated on competitiveness and aggressive ambition, it is a delight to read a festschrift that is so strongly centered on the simple pleasure of collegiality developed through sharing historical interests and research methods over decades of collaboration and mutual support. The warmth of historical camaraderie emanates from this volume dedicated to the scholarship of Robert Descimon like a comforting fire at a favorite family campsite. It is also a pleasure to read a book that is put together with such care—it is well organized, clearly written, and extremely well edited, without a single typo or continuity flaw. It makes the reviewer's job a little difficult, if one wants to say something critical. The scholars brought together are all quite well known within the French historical community, though perhaps that might be my only gentle criticism: it might have been enlightening to have some fresh voices add their views on how the methodology of historians like Descimon continue to influence their work. Some of these newer scholars are alluded to in the final contribution, by Descimon himself, but these are mostly French scholars—are there Anglo-Americans who continue to work in this vein? On the other hand, with so many edited volumes now being produced each year, including chapters by increasingly inexperienced researchers who often lack the breadth and depth of “experience” (but need to publish for career reasons), it is refreshing to read a series of texts by established scholars who have already published numerous works. Though again, this makes the task a little bit difficult for the reviewer: these are all wonderful essays! All ten of the essays (plus the introduction) are tied together well, and make a case for a real “Descimon School” amongst Anglo-American historians of early modern France. There is a clear method that joins together the work of these scholars (and friends). So what is this method?

The title of this volume clearly defines the nexus in which most of these essays sit: where social and political history meet. As set out by Barbara Diefendorf in the introduction, the approach taken by Robert Descimon and the contributors in this volume is one of joining together historical approaches: rigorous empirical work in archives paired with theory and analytical tools borrowed from sociology and anthropology. Descimon's book *Qui étaient les Seize?*, for example, pioneered the use of genealogical research not as window dressing or a “visual aid” for a historical narrative, but as a research tool in and of itself.[1] The personal and family histories of the members of the Paris League were used to determine individual actions and group *mentalités*, and whether these shifted in the period, leading to a transformation of the social order in late sixteenth-century France. As a young researcher myself in the nineties, I was thrilled to discover the term “prosopography”—finally there was a formal term I could use to justify my own method for getting inside the histories of the families I was studying. In defiance of my undergraduate instructors, I was relieved to see the works of Jonathan Dewald and Mack Holt focus on elites and on lineage.[2] I did not read French at the time, nor did I know what an Annales School was, but as I have matured over the years as a historian, I have come to appreciate the work of these historians

in extending the life of the Annaliste approach to the historian's craft. As described concisely here by Diefendorf, Descimon's works bring together social and political history, influenced but not led by economics, and looking more at actions than structures (p. 3). In a very inclusive manner, his works have examined both horizontal and vertical relationships between his subjects: in other words, both kinship patterns and client networks. All of this attention to micro-history feeds into the redefining of the 'big picture' as well, however, as he searches to clarify how state and society of late sixteenth-century France were transformed into something new in the seventeenth—was there a breakdown of traditional values in elite urban society that contributed to the rise of the absolutist state? Much of Descimon's conclusions sit comfortably with those historians of the later seventeenth century who argue for a "collaborative monarchy" (rather than "absolute"), an alliance between the rising *noblesse de robe* and the crown, but also between the robe and the older court nobility, as has become doctrine since the work of Roger Mettam and Jim Collins in the late 1980s and early 1990s.[3] In an interesting way, this work by Anglo-American scholars was then reflected back across to France when a historian like Descimon, in collaboration with the next generation in the form of Fanny Cosandey, published a work aligning with this altered approach to the study of monarchy and elite power in the ancien régime.[4] In summary, Diefendorf writes, social history of the kind written by Robert Descimon is a combination of continuity and change, macro- and micro-history, motives and values, and both the how and the why (p. 12). The methodology employed in the articles that follow all attempt to blend archival material with theory, micro-studies, and macro-ideas.

The first chapter is by Jonathan Dewald who gives an overview of the Annales tradition and its view on studying the elites. He notes that the founders of the school (Febvre, Bloch) were themselves both interested in elites, and that after this interest was somewhat suppressed in the postwar period, it was historians like Robert Forster and Jean Meyer who revived it in the 1960s looking at the provinces, followed by Descimon and his generation in Paris. A crucial aspect of this work is that it strives to have no agenda—praising or condemning what the elites achieved or founded—but merely to examine, anthropologically, who they were and how their society functioned. This is still very much my own mantra, as it is for many of my generation, not just in studies of the French nobility, but also Spanish, Italian, Polish, Swedish, but curiously not so much yet for either Germany or England where older taboos remain entrenched. Dewald's chapter ends with an examination of the newly emerging (and exciting) trend of analysis of published genealogies in the early modern period as expressions of power,[5] and, to confirm the ideas given in the previous paragraph, that for the most part, these expressions were done in conjunction, not opposition, to the power of the crown. In fact, by using the crown's new bureaucratic record keeping to compile their genealogies, elites were constructing a new image of nobility, one based increasingly on *ancienneté* of lineage and less on individual merit or honor (p. 36).

The next chapters all focus on different aspects of legal and urban social history. Michael Breen looks at works done by historians like David Parker and Sarah Hanley in drawing together legal and social history, looking at law not for itself, but as a mechanism for regulating society. He then compares this to Descimon's work on the Parisian robe nobility who used the law to define themselves as a social category. Breen makes the point effectively that elites, from princes to notaries, had so many vested interests in the legal process that the fact that it was slow and unproductive was often of great use, as it allowed them to maneuver within the process without ever fully coming to potentially damaging and irreversible conclusions—extremely lengthy lawsuits could in fact be quite beneficial to all parties concerned (p. 54), as indeed the archives I consulted for the Guise family demonstrated (by perpetually delaying any final sentence, both creditors and debtors could continue to make use of the financial assets in dispute).[6] Sara Beam's chapter is less historiographical, and provides a clear case study, applying the methodologies discussed in this volume. She analyses the social and cultural factors that influenced the development of legal practice in Bordeaux, concluding, notably, that much of the change in the reduction of torture as a legal practice came not from above but from the self-moderation of a local body (the city council, or *jurade*) as an expression of its distinct identity. And as now expected in this collection of essays, her analysis of family structures in urban elites of Bordeaux shows that social and kinship relations between the city council and the Parlement of Bordeaux allowed these two groups to work together rather than in

competition, in their shared goal of maintaining local autonomy in the face of growing royal centralization (p. 78). In a similar manner, Mack Holt applies this methodology to a case study on urban elites in Dijon, stressing the symbiosis of social and political relationships. Holt explains in particular the types of sources useful in exploring these relationships, in this case, notarial records, tax rolls and baptismal records. As always, Holt writes with both critical analysis and detailed color, using specifics to extract meaning: how and where do people live? who were godparents to whom? What emerges is a much tighter connection than might be expected between Dijon's *échevins* and the *vignerons* in the surrounding countryside.

Staying with Burgundy, Jim Collins' chapter is also a micro-case study, examining a set of intermarried families in the Morvan, and the power of writing to control local affairs, notably the methods employed by these families to avoid taxation. Those who could read and write clearly had the upper hand and could manipulate the system to their advantage. The methodology here is similar: by looking at specific details, in this case names of godparents, it becomes apparent that certain families had the support of the local lord and others did not. Sometimes this type of history is criticized for being just a string of details, just lots of people's names rather than grand theories, but, as Collins puts it "Descimon's work has enabled historians to understand how ten-thousand individual decisions, taken for particular reasons, collectively make sense" (p. 107). Hilary Bernstein's chapter shifts our focus slightly to the west, to Bourges, where she employs the Descimon model for examining the municipal elites of Paris. She stresses the social clues hidden in lists of names. By now this is familiar territory in this volume, but Bernstein twists the approach slightly by also examining how contemporaries viewed these lists themselves. The local scholar and lawyer Jean Chenu wrote a history of the privileges of urban officials in Bourges, and was careful to show only positive advances in these privileges, omitting setbacks in previous centuries. Bernstein also looks at the marginalia in Chenu's work, to see what other erudite readers in Bourges made of his conclusions, notably their consistent interest in connecting the offices he describes with the families who have held them.

The next two chapters take us back in time to the Wars of Religion and the topics focused on in the earlier of Descimon's works, the League (and its opponents). Philip Benedict's chapter focuses on the Protestant deputies sent to Paris on the eve of the outbreak of the first war in 1561/62. These men (around 20) have mostly been ignored by historians, but Benedict argues that their experiences were central to determining the course of Protestant activity and policy in the following decades. Benedict therefore employs "the Descimon approach" to use archival data to reconstruct biographies of as many of these men as possible, and thus create a portrait of the group as a whole (much of this chapter is based on a previous project Benedict undertook with Nicolas Fornerod, published in 2009 and 2013).<sup>[7]</sup> What emerges is that there is an interesting mixture of social levels, from lawyers and royal officials to nobles, and that several of these went on to be prominent in the household and administration of the House of Navarre, but some were also closely connected to the royal administration, reinforcing our ideas that, at this early stage, divisions between the Catholic monarchy and Protestant men of learning was not clear cut. In her chapter, Barbara Diefendorf looks towards the end of the Wars of Religion at poor relief in Paris as a means of understanding a perceived shift in the capital's elites from a unified civically minded group, all contributing towards mandatory forms of charity ordained by the city, towards a trend of more private benevolence by the early seventeenth century. Aligning with Descimon's work on the emergence of an identity of the Parisian robe nobility distinct from the rest of the urban elites, Diefendorf here sees his "rupture in communal values" as contributing to the shift in charitable practices, and that, rather than continuing traditional associations with municipal bodies, the robe nobility increasingly adopted practices of the sword nobility with whom they were eager to associate socially. Diefendorf highlights the intersection of an event (a clash between royal and civic government over public assistance) and the ambitions of an individual family, in this case, the Séguiers, who founded one of the biggest private charities in Paris in the 1620s on their way to becoming a leading royal (rather than civic) administrative family.

The 1620s also form the backdrop of the final two contributions to this volume, which are paired quite nicely. Mark Greengrass (with Marco Penzi and Mark Critchlow) examines a manuscript written by a former member of the League who wished to justify his association's impassioned stance during the Wars of Religion, particularly against the "moderates" or *politiques*; while Robert Schneider looks at the writings of some of these moderates in justifying their move away from the passions (and violence) of the ultras, whether Catholic or Protestant. Robert Descimon himself has previously studied this unpublished manuscript of the history of the League, and suggested the identity of its author, but here Greengrass and his collaborators (again, in the spirit of friendship espoused by this volume and its dedicatee) attempt to situate the document in the broader context of a reaction against the growing propaganda of the Bourbon regime to blacken the reputation of the League and anyone who had been associated with it. Once again, prosopography is employed, to connect the dots in identifying the author of this piece by noting family connections between the League of the 1590s and the Paris Oratory of the next generation. In contrast, Schneider's chapter evaluates the relationship between the Dupuy brothers (Pierre and Jacques) in the early seventeenth century and their uncle, Jacques-Auguste de Thou, a leading *politique* in the previous generation. As with the chapter by Diefendorf, this essay looks at the process through which certain Parisian elites lost their sense of belonging exclusively to the city, and instead saw themselves as part of a broader elite working for the crown and for the good of France as a whole (reflected in its title "Gallicans not Magistrates"). But Schneider emphasizes that this evolution is complex: the Dupuy brothers went beyond this sense of Gallican identity, and their circle of scholars supported the Republic of Letters with connections all across Europe (up to 1/3 of their correspondence was outside Europe, p. 255). And there is another contradiction here as well, since, in their "self-fashioning" as supporters of the state, *érudits* like the Dupuys were distancing themselves from the ideals set forth by their predecessors who saw that true gentlemen preferred to retreat from the world of politics to focus instead on the pure acquisition of knowledge.

One thing this collection of superb essays does not do is compare work done in this methodological vein in France with that being done by historians of England or Germany. In the last chapter, by Descimon himself, however, he does do this for us, noting in particular the growing link with ideas coming from German historians about monarchy and ceremonial, and the growing strength of comparative history. [8] Descimon's final words in this book are truly heart-felt, sharing his joy at reflecting on several decades of fruitful and enjoyable collaboration with colleagues and recognizing that the work continues, stressing the resurgence of studies of kinship and family since the millennium (pp. 278-279), and how this work is moving forward chronologically into the eighteenth century. This trend is to be praised as, despite what is a perceived over-familiarity (through myth and legend, and usually based on gossipy memoirs and anti-noble writings of the post-Revolutionary period), the eighteenth-century nobility remains fairly uncharted territory, in comparison to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Surely the lessons on methodology presented so eloquently in this volume will be a great inspiration to the next generation of scholars to flesh out our understanding of the details of eighteenth-century elites, or even beyond, in looking at such groups in the nineteenth or even twentieth centuries.

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Bibliography of Robert Descimon's Writings

#### NOTES

[1] Robert Descimon. *Qui étaient les Seize? Mythes et réalités de la Ligue parisienne (1585-1594)* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1984).

[2] Jonathan Dewald, *Pont-St-Pierre 1398-1789: Lordship, Community and Capitalism in Early Modern France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Mack P. Holt, "Patterns of Clientèle and Economic Opportunity at Court during the Wars of Religion: The Household of François, Duke of Anjou," *French Historical Studies* 13, no. 3 (Spring, 1984): pp. 305-322; Mack P. Holt, *The Duke of Anjou and the Political Struggle During the Wars of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

[3] Roger Mettam, *Power and Faction in Louis XIV's France* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988); James Collins, *Classes, Estates and Order in Early Modern Brittany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

[4] Robert Descimon and Fanny Cosandey, *L'Absolutisme en France: Histoire et historiographie* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2002).

[5] A fascinating recent example: Olivier Rouchon, dir., *L'opération généalogique. Cultures et pratiques européennes, XVe-XVIIIe siècle* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2014), with nine essays by an array of French scholars.

[6] Jonathan Spangler, *The Society of Princes: The Lorraine-Guise and the Conservation of Power and Wealth in Seventeenth-Century France* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), especially chapter 5, "Lorraines in the Courts: Successions and the French Judiciary."

[7] Nicolas Fornerod and Philip Benedict, "Les 2,150 'églises' réformées de France de 1561-1562," *Revue historique* 651, no. 3 (2009): pp. 529-560; Philip Benedict and Nicolas Fornerod, "Les députés des Églises réformées à la cour en 1561-1562," *Revue historique* 666, no. 2 (2013): pp. 289-332.

[8] A good example of ongoing collaborative projects of comparative histories are the various collected volumes produced by the German historian David Sabeau and his regular team of co-editors, for example, C. H. Johnson, D. W. Sabeau, S. Teuscher and F. Trivellato, eds., *Trans-regional and Transnational Families*

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*in Europe and Beyond: Experiences Since the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2011); and D. Sabeau, C. Johnson, B. Jussen, and S. Teuscher, eds., *Blood and Kinship: Matter for Metaphor from Ancient Rome to the Present* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2013).

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