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Sarah Maza, *The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie: An Essay on the Social Imaginary, 1750-1850*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003. x + 255 pp. Notes and index. \$39.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-674-01046-9.

Review by Jeremy D. Popkin, University of Kentucky.

By writing a book whose “central thesis ... is that the French bourgeoisie did not exist” (p. 5), Sarah Maza has deliberately put herself in the company of the little boy who announced that the emperor had no clothes. How can France, the only European country to legally abolish its nobility, not have had a bourgeoisie or middle class to carry out that revolutionary deed? And if there was no such group, was post-revolutionary France, so famous for its social conservatism, actually a “classless society”? Maza’s provocative essay may not convince all readers to throw out the concepts of bourgeoisie and bourgeois society, but she will certainly compel historians who want to use them to think carefully about how they define these terms.

The heart of Maza’s argument is that no group in France and, above all, no French political movement ever identified itself as “bourgeois” or “middle class.” The society that emerged as the alternative to the hierarchical society of the Old Regime in the eighteenth century and triumphed after 1789 was not a social order based on individualism and property but one that denied class distinctions altogether. To the extent that French thinkers recognized a bourgeoisie, they defined it as “an imaginary other against whom the nation’s values and destiny were forged” (p. 13). In fact, Maza suggests in a brief epilogue to her essay that the figure of the bourgeois in French culture should be understood as an analogue to the negative stereotypes of Jews and Americanization, another way in which French culture has objectified “all that was frightening about emerging modernity: rootless urban living, the tyranny of the market, the first signs of industrialism” (p. 195).

Maza builds her argument on several levels. Throughout the book she contends, perhaps a little too emphatically, that France did not experience a capitalist revolution in the period from 1750 to 1850: in the mid-nineteenth century, agricultural wealth still dominated the country, and industrialization was only in its infancy. In her view, there is thus no basis for any argument that economic change was producing a “rising” class eager to assert itself. She acknowledges that one could find, throughout this period, individuals who lived in cities, owned property, had some education, and did not support themselves through manual labor, but she denies that they constituted a cohesive group aware of its own distinctiveness and capable of or even interested in defending its own interests. Analyses such as Jean-Pierre Chaline’s *Les bourgeois de Rouen* (1982) thus strike her as beside the point: combing the archives to find people who shared certain social, economic, and cultural characteristics is meaningless if they had no sense of common values or purpose and never engaged in collective action. Since, in her view, economic and social processes do not generate classes, class consciousness must be seen essentially as something politically constructed. And here the difficulty is, as Maza sees it, that very few French politicians or intellectuals ever tried to articulate a “bourgeois” or middle-class program.

The first two chapters of *The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie* deal with the eighteenth century. At the beginning of the period, the label “bourgeois” conjured up the images of provincialism and cultural awkwardness exploited by Molière. The social critics of the period, she argues, were much more concerned with reforming the nobility than with the possibility that a group as marginal as the bourgeoisie might somehow replace it. The increasingly strident social criticism of the later eighteenth century, with its denunciations of *luxe* and materialism and its call for purified *moeurs*, had nothing to do

with class. Instead, it called for members of all social categories to return to a “natural” life structured around sentimental family bonds. The *dramas bourgeois* put on the stage to promote this ideal were never limited to bourgeois or middle-class characters, and their message was that “the triumph of social morality would not so much overcome social distinctions as make them irrelevant” (p. 61).

Maza recognizes that the political leaders of the French Revolution could be classified sociologically as bourgeois, but she argues that they did not act as agents of a particular class. Imbued with the sentimentalist values of the age, they dismissed all social divisions as artificial and “naturalized and universalized citizenship by portraying it as a matter of blood ties on a national scale” (p. 74). The reforms of 1789 were certainly meant to promote economic prosperity, but not necessarily to favor or help create a capitalist entrepreneurial class, and “the allegedly bourgeois French Revolution, at least in its first few years, produced no language or ideology justifying a middle- or upper-middle-class leadership” (p. 100). François Furet argued that the universalist rhetoric of the Revolution’s ascendant phase gave way to greater sociological realism after Thermidor; Maza consequently pays special attention to the Directory period, often categorized as a “bourgeois republic.” The years from 1794 to 1799 were certainly characterized by a new rhetoric of conflict between rich and poor, but Maza points out that the regime’s spokespersons, such as Madame de Staël, continued to cast their program in universalist terms. Furthermore, the ruling elite they supported was defined not in economic terms but in terms of state service: the Directory was the period when the government bureaucrat came into his own, a tendency greatly increased under Napoleon.

Only with the emergence of the liberal opposition movement during the Restoration does Maza see an effort to build a political movement with an explicit “language of middle-class identity” (p. 143.) Historians like Thierry and Guizot wrote narratives depicting French history as a centuries-long struggle between the urban *communes* and their opponents. The Revolution of 1830 brought forth Louis-Philippe’s “bourgeois monarchy,” the only French regime ever to accept such a qualification. But, as Maza points out, the result was not to institutionalize middle-class domination; instead, the experience of the July Monarchy made it “forever impossible to govern in the name of such a group” (p. 161). The regime’s numerous opponents stigmatized it as the rule of a narrow elite and called for “a universal association, a classless, mystical *patrie*” (p. 180). Openly acknowledged bourgeois rule proved to be “a disastrously self-defeating idea” (p. 192).

Although Maza presents the case for the mythical nature of the bourgeoisie with unusual consistency and clarity, she is to some extent building on post-Marxist conventional wisdom. Daniel Roche’s study of provincial academies and Robert Darnton’s analysis of the reading public long ago exploded the notion that eighteenth-century French thought could be categorized as “bourgeois.”[1] The revisionist movement in revolutionary historiography demolished the notion of a frustrated bourgeois class rising up in 1789 to overthrow a “feudal” aristocracy, and David Garrioch, in his *The Making of the Parisian Bourgeoisie* (1996), has argued that a self-conscious bourgeoisie can be more convincingly cast as a consequence of the Revolution than as its cause. Maza’s refusal to accept the definition of post-1830 France as a bourgeois era may seem more radical, but in fact it fits with a long historiographical tradition that has emphasized the weakness of French liberalism. (Mark Hulliung’s *Citizens and Citoyens: Republicans and Liberals in America and France* [2002] is a recent example of this type of argument.)

The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie certainly provides much food for historiographical thought. By pushing her argument as hard as she does, however, Maza sometimes inspires one to respond, like Zadig, “mais....” One fundamental question her book often seems to skate over is the question of what level of ontological reality she is describing. Maza’s book is subtitled “An Essay on the Social Imaginary,” which she defines as “the cultural elements from which we construct our understanding of the social world” (p. 10). Early in the book, she classifies the social imaginary as one of three components of social experience, together with “the raw elements of social position such as wealth, status, or power” and “social practices such as tilling a field, playing the piano, or joining the army” (p.

10). As her argument proceeds, however, references to social position and social practices largely disappear, leaving the impression that “the social imaginary” is in fact constitutive of social reality. It is only in this sense that Maza’s claim that there was no French bourgeoisie makes sense. She is well aware that there always were businessmen, property-owners, and educated professionals among the French population, and that such people played a leading role in the country’s public life; in fact, most of the sources she cites come from individuals whom historians traditionally have classified as “bourgeois.” Nevertheless, because these individuals did not explicitly organize under the banner of a “bourgeoisie,” she contends that no such thing existed. Similarly, her insistence on the pervasiveness of the ideology of a classless society in France might lead unwary readers to assume that French society lacked sharp class divisions. In fact, however, sociological analysis regularly shows that France has been one of the modern societies with the highest levels of income inequality and lowest rates of social mobility.

Marxist criticism long ago created the concept of ideology to explain such disjunctures between consciousness and social reality. Maza does not accept the base-superstructure model inherent in the Marxist explanation, however, or the notion that there is a “true” social reality independent of its representations. She thus often seems to suggest that discourse about the bourgeoisie (or the absence of such discourse) is what really mattered. While Marx does come in for a certain amount of discussion in *The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie*, Pierre Bourdieu, the leading contemporary theorist of class in France, rates only one passing mention in the conclusion. Maza thus fails to engage with Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*, the ingrained and unconscious complex of behaviors that Bourdieu saw as generating class distinctions, among other things. Bourdieu’s model suggests a mechanism by which social distinctions can perpetuate themselves without overt political intervention. The French educational system, as it has been analyzed in studies such as Antoine Prost’s classic *Histoire de l’enseignement en France* (1968), has often been seen as such a mechanism: theoretically classless and meritocratic, but in fact constructed so that it automatically favors the “inheritors” of privileged positions within the system. Aside from one reference to her own school experiences in France, Maza does not discuss the relationship between education and social standing.

A second issue that a skeptical reader might want to raise about Maza’s book concerns the range of sources deployed. Maza ranges widely, invoking plays, novels, political treatises, and politicians’ speeches, but the compressed nature of her essay requires her to be highly selective. In deciding whether French legislators ever considered bourgeois interests, for example, she concentrates on debates over election laws. Her picture of French lawmaking might look different if it referenced discussions about labor law—there is no mention of the *loi le Chapelier* of 1791, which banned union organization—or those concerning tariffs and taxes. She herself admits that her picture of Balzac’s attitude toward the bourgeoisie would look different if she had chosen to discuss *César Birotteau*, whose businessman hero, in sacrificing himself to pay his debts, achieves an almost Christ-like status, rather than *La Cousine Bette*. The cover of *The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie* features one of the innumerable caricatures of bourgeois types produced during the first half of the nineteenth century, but visual materials are notably absent from Maza’s discussion. The caricature, which shows a bourgeois couple out for a walk, also suggests questions about gender that the book largely avoids.

Finally, there is the question of the analogy Maza suggests in her conclusion between French attitudes toward Jews, toward Americanization, and toward the bourgeoisie. The analogy is meant to underline the role that myths, as Maza defines them, have played in modern French culture, but it is not clear that Maza has considered all of its implications. Jews and Americans were not wholly mythical creatures, and the analogy thus suggests something artificial about Maza’s attempt to bracket the question of social reality in discussing the bourgeoisie. Furthermore, those individuals in France whom social historians have conventionally classified as bourgeois may have been caricatured at times, but they were never truly outsiders. Whatever novelists and politicians may have said about them, they continued to amass their fortunes, monopolize legislative seats and government jobs, and pass their advantages on to their

descendants. Myths about Jews led to the Dreyfus Affair and Vichy's *statut des juifs*; nothing remotely similar has happened to members of the French bourgeoisie.

Written with great verve, if also with what its own author concedes is a certain amount of hyperbole (p. 6), *The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie* would be an ideal book to assign to bright students: it is bound to provoke discussion. Maza's arguments about the Old Regime and the revolutionary period are perhaps less controversial than she implies: the revisionist critique of Marxist historiography has already largely undermined notions of a "bourgeois" Enlightenment or revolutionary movement. Her attempt to extend this framework to the first half of the nineteenth century and, by implication, to the era of the Third Republic is more original but less persuasive. Nevertheless, by pointing out the reluctance of French political movements to identify themselves openly with a bourgeoisie or middle class, Maza has raised an important question about the relationship between French institutions and the social group that supposedly dominated them during this period. More broadly, *The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie* poses fundamental questions about the nature of the "social imaginary" and its relationship to other aspects of social life. Its author leaves no doubt that her object in writing the book has been to incite debate: one can only hope that her colleagues will oblige her.

NOTES

[1] Daniel Roche, *Le siècle des lumières en provence: Académies et académiciens provinciaux (1660-1789)* (The Hague: Mouton, 1978) and Robert Darton, *The Business of Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the Encyclopédie, 1775-1800* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1979).

Jeremy D. Popkin
University of Kentucky
popkin@pop.uky.edu

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