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Christine Adams, *Poverty, Charity, and Motherhood: Maternal Societies in Nineteenth-Century France*. Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2010. Xi + 251 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$45.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-252-03547-0.

Review by Jennifer J. Popiel, Saint Louis University.

In *Poverty, Charity, and Motherhood*, Christine Adams explores nineteenth century France's most prominent philanthropic organization for women and families, the Society for Maternal Charity (Société de Charité Maternelle). Her in-depth analysis of the Society provides insight into the nineteenth-century origins of the social welfare state. It also offers readers useful reflections on changing ideas about family life and the rearing of children, as well as the possible relationship between these ideas and public activity on the part of wealthy elites. However, the book's most important and unique contributions come from its placement of the eventual governmental assumption of social welfare obligations directly into the context of charitable work based on maternal rhetoric. At its heart, this is an engaging story of the civic associations that women of privilege created and the ways in which women negotiated between their own expectations, public demands, and state interference. While local branches of the Society for Maternal Charity eventually found themselves entirely supplanted by governmental family assistance, national policies were themselves influenced by the goals and philosophies underlying the nineteenth-century maternal societies. If voluntary associations "both reflect and shape the interests and sympathies of citizens (p. 10)," it is no surprise that women not only used their domestic roles and "natural obligations" to participate in civil society but also, ultimately, to influence public policy. As Adams explains, while the influence of the Society for Maternal Charity "eventually waned, its methods and goals helped to shape twentieth-century policies on family assistance" (p. 180). The history of this society is, then, an exciting look at the ways in which "mother love" and women's moral unity were also related to philanthropy, female activism, and state power.

Current work on feminism and public life has begun to recast the problem of nineteenth-century women's civic participation. The insightful and suggestive *The New Biography: Performing Femininity in Nineteenth-Century France*, edited by Jo Burr Margadant, noted the paradox between women's activism and the conservative social and political positions that they sometimes inhabited<sup>[1]</sup>, while Sarah Curtis has recently argued that the "growing body of historical scholarship on the 'feminization of Catholicism' ...[sits] uneasily in the dominant narratives of modern French and European women's history, which are primarily concerned with the growth of domesticity, as well as the attempts to resist it."<sup>[2]</sup> Curtis is concerned with nuns who lived outside of traditional families, but her words resonate with Adams's concerns as well.

Both recognize that women who could be called political conservatives still might participate in activities that challenged male authority and transgressed male discourses about power, though this subversion of traditional hierarchies is "to be found outside the usual categories of analysis."<sup>[3]</sup> While some modern feminists might not recognize the women of the Society for Maternal Charity as their foremothers, their activism, political savvy, and insistence on their right to make social claims are, Adams demonstrates, something that should be understood as part of the foundation of the modern state.

Adams begins the book with an explanation of the origins of the Society for Maternal Charity, which was founded in February, 1789. Wealthy women, accepting an increasingly widespread nurturing ideal,

argued that the dissolution of impoverished families was not primarily a result of depravity or unconcern, but was instead the result of poverty's crushing blows. They believed that poor women felt forced to choose between keeping their infants and driving the entire family deeper into penury, or abandoning their babies in order to save the children whom they already loved. Poverty thus destroyed natural bonds of affection by forcing women to choose between their infants and older children. The elite women who dominated these organizations argued that charitable support through the first year of a child's life would allow poor mothers to forge a natural bond with their children, à la Rousseau, so that they would no longer consider abandonment. "Maternal societies...promoted two goals: the preservation of children and the encouragement of women's maternal role" (p. 83). The society was thus liberal in inspiration, as it was based on Enlightenment optimism about human nature, though it combined philosophical rhetoric with religious principles, as might be expected of a society founded primarily by women and not by their more skeptical spouses. In keeping with this combination of ideologies, maternal charity was predicated on "the restoration of the morality of the people" through motherly influence (including breastfeeding) and honest living (religious marriage rather than cohabitation). Elite women, themselves familiar with the experiences of childbirth and motherhood, also believed that face-to-face contact was central to accomplishing these goals. Support and exhortation from an elite visitor would console and encourage the mother. In this way, a greater number of legitimate children would survive to adulthood because they were kept within the bonds of their families, and the children themselves would help to regenerate society.

This goal found a great deal of backing from elites in the early Revolution. The government lent financial support and no less a personage than Marie-Antoinette served as titular head of the society. As the Revolution progressed, however, elite patronage became a liability. Organized private charity became politically suspect, especially for this organization, which had drawn the bulk of its support from aristocrats and the Queen. Nevertheless, the politically savvy women who continued to support maternal charity used the language of revolution to justify their demands for financial support. They pointed to the relatively low mortality rate of children supported within their families and highlighted the importance of children to the future of the *Patrie*. They also defended their society from charges of elitism, explaining that it did not "harm equality" but instead joined "those who distribute with those who receive" (p. 47). Despite their defense, the Society disappeared from sight after 1794. Some of the principal actors fled France, while others were jailed during the Terror. As Jacobin promises concerning welfare failed to come to fruition, the years that marked Napoleon's rise were also accompanied by famine, hardship, and the dramatic increase in infant mortality. The government began to see the wisdom in allowing—or even encouraging—private charitable efforts, and foundlings and child abandonment again came to the fore. Maternal societies were established in numerous cities and towns, with their elite female participants stressing their sisterly concern for poor women.

The success of the maternal societies sparked increased government interest after the Revolution. Under the Napoleonic Empire, these private associations increasingly became an arm of the state, which expected them to carry out functions of social service to the poor as a whole, and not just to expectant mothers. This resulted in some conflict, as elite women, despite the government pressure, resisted the nationalization of the charity that they wished to see remain in their locales. They did agree to provide more services than maternal care but continued to emphasize the bonds between mothers across classes. Despite a hope that the Restoration might bring renewed autonomy, however, maternal societies continued to be "semiofficial organs of the state" (p. 81) and fought to strike a balance between the new duties imposed by the state and the tasks that women believed were at the core of their mission. Though there were some conflicts, national interest in the maternal societies was based on an idea that women and politicians shared: that mothers were the key to a stable and moral society. Elite women would, through individual contact and personal ministrations, mother poor women, modeling behavior even as they participated in a shared experience, and they recognized that their social goals could have a greater impact when combined with state support.

As there were never enough resources available, even with state assistance, the *dames administrantes* and *dames visiteuses* did more than counsel. They served as a tool of surveillance, for they enforced moral family behavior in their determination of who was needy *and* deserving, with the “wife [deserving] more consideration than a concubine” (p. 95) and women sometimes losing their support for engaging in immoral behavior. Not all Maternal Societies were founded with bylaws that demanded religious marriage as a basis for financial support, but after the middle of the century, even as these societies renegotiated their status with respect to the state, the requirement for a religious marriage became increasingly common. For its part, the state came to count on maternal societies for surveillance and support, but it also saw them as subject to government oversight. After all, if maternal charity could change society, and it was financially supported by the government, then the state also had a right and even an obligation to make sure that the branches of the organization were obedient to state policy and supported current political agendas.

While the Society had enjoyed a mostly unproblematic relationship with the Interior Ministry during the Restoration, the July Monarchy began to scrutinize the individual branches and push for additional state control over the charity. There were multiple reasons for this. The Society for Maternal Charity had visible political and financial influence, unlike many other women’s associations. Additionally, the elite women at its head often had close ties to conservative politics and an overt religiosity, both of which were grounds for suspicion by the Orléanist and Bonapartist regimes. The national government, which was already moving toward centralization and had fewer philanthropists exerting influence over governmental policy, thus began to evidence concern about possible gaps between the Society’s goals and its own. The government feared that women’s groups might offer a venue that would present a challenge to legitimate authority. However, the push for increased scrutiny, which tended to emphasize the submission of bylaws for approval, sparked resistance on the part of the women within the charity. For example, the Societies for Maternal Charity in Marseille and Bordeaux both temporized and resisted compliance with demands from the Interior Ministry. The conflicts between the Interior Ministry and the individual societies demonstrate that the maternal societies were an intermediary, not wholly public, but far more than only private. The conflicts that arose as a result offered savvy women practical experience in political negotiation. While the maternal society “never promoted an overtly feminist political vision” (p. 138), both the impulse toward state scrutiny and the administrative responses from the branches of the Maternal Society indicate the application of domestic rhetoric to public life. Savvy and self-confident women refused to be intimidated by authorities and opposed “what they sometimes saw as unwelcome infringements on their activities” (p. 141). This, however, could lead to conflicts as the state, under the Third Republic, became increasingly anticlerical and distrusted not only feminine interference but also the religious agenda that many women brought with them.

The connections between maternal societies and the state that had existed from the beginning were strong from the Napoleonic era until the end of the Second Empire. The elite women of the maternal societies had sustained contact with poor women and were committed to performing hard and unpleasant work themselves, often because of a strong belief in the spiritual component of their work. With the increasingly anticlerical position of the Third Republic, however, the casting of charity as a domestic and religious function came to have undesirable political repercussions. While some maternal societies, such as that in Paris, emphatically noted that they would assist all poor mothers for the love of humanity, “without distinction of nationality or religion’ ... the focus of the various branches...remained intensely local” (p. 164) and often opposed secularization by doing such things as distributing catechisms, insisting on moral requirements, and requiring religious marriages for maternal support. Adams even notes that “In fact, it may be that some maternal societies stiffened their resistance to secularism in reaction against the sometimes bullying tactics of state and municipal authorities” (p. 169). Regardless, after 1880, local insistence on religious language and norms led to a shift away from the previously favored status of the Society. The “protection of children [became] too important a task to be left in the hands of charitable organizations, especially ones espousing rigid moral requirements”

(p. 178), so in the end, secular—and male—politics came to be responsible for managing the question of poverty.

Adams tells an important and intriguing story, one that concludes with both success—state welfare policies that were committed to the idea of family assistance—and disappointment—the elimination of a substantial opportunity for influential public activism on the part of women. The story of the success is already somewhat familiar because of work on the twentieth century, like that of Paul Dutton and Susan Pederson [4]. While Adams does an excellent job of offering an important precursor to those studies, the central achievement of her work is ultimately the way in which an analysis of maternal societies makes us newly able to appreciate the complexities, costs, and contested outcomes of nineteenth century women's organizations and their relationships with state policy.

## NOTES

[1] Jo Burr Margadant, *The New Biography: Performing Femininity in Nineteenth-Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

[2] Sarah A. Curtis, *Civilizing Habits: Women Missionaries and the Revival of French Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 8.

[3] Curtis, p. 8.

[4] Paul Dutton, *Origins of the French Welfare State: The Struggle for Social Reform in France, 1914–1947* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005) and Susan Pederson, *Family, Dependence, and the Origins of the Welfare State: Britain and France, 1914–1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

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