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Jeremy L. Caradonna, *Enlightenment in Practice: Academic Prize Contests and Intellectual Culture in France, 1670-1794.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012. xii + 352 pp. Maps, notes, appendices, bibliography, and index. $59.95 U.S. (cl)

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In *Enlightenment in Practice*, Jeremy L. Caradonna intends to make the prize competitions sponsored by French academies more central to our understanding of the Enlightenment by illuminating its social and cultural practices from the reign of Louis XIV through the Revolution but focusing, in particular, on its distinctive character during the eighteenth-century. The benefit of taking the prize competitions into account, he insists, is that the range of Enlightenment issues broadens and the approaches to them become more diverse.

Caradonna intends to reignite scholarship about academies, in which Daniel Roche played the central role by highlighting the vitality of the provincial academies. Roger Chartier, Christian Desplat, and Michel Taillefer subsequently developed the study of academies as important sites of sociability and scholarship.[1] Caradonna narrows his focus to the prize competitions. (His first appendix provides an impressive list of all such academies and the years they held competitions.) As a result, his study reveals a forum with greater public involvement as the participation of contest sponsors and contestants, which expanded the scope and significance of academic culture. Prize competitions thus mediated between public sphere and the more restricted venue of the academy.

Caradonna traces the antecedents of the such competitions back to contests characteristic of Greek intellectual life and medieval troubadour tradition. Later, students in Jesuit lycées regularly engaged in academic competitions. Such activities served as apprenticeships in the intensely competitive intellectual culture of France. Caradonna points to the annual poetry competition of Floral Games at Toulouse of the seventeenth century as especially significant in shaping the parameters of later prize competitions. It also offers a rather sobering example of state influence as prize winning entries consistently extolled Louis XIV.

That Louis XIV influenced culture is well understood, but Caradonna adds to that story by delineating the king's efforts to influence academic competitions by controlling their topics and using them to promote his image and to advance technological innovation in the state's interest. The monarchy conferred prestige on the academies and made them the arbiters of intellectual distinction. Despite the symbiosis of crown and academy, the prize competition opened discussion of intellectual issues to a broader public. Even more importantly, with guarantees of anonymity, they ultimately became a venue able to critique the status quo, including the monarchy. Even these seventeenth-century competitions belong in our notions of the "Republic of Letters," Caradonna insists, because they constituted a self-identifying community of intellectuals. They fostered intellectual exchange and allowed competitors to expand their networks, attract patrons, develop careers, and cultivate a nascent Republic of Letters.

While there have been important studies of French academies, little is known about their social practices during the Enlightenment—the focus of Caradonna's second chapter. His extensive research into their operations reveals unusually open venues; academies operated free of official state control,

submissions were anonymous, and winners selected by anonymous vote. The awarding of prizes was often a public event. The raw data of the prize competitions thoroughly grounds and richly supports Caradonna's claims of their importance. He finds approximately twenty-three hundred prize competitions from 1670-1789 with about twenty-five entrants per competition, in other words, between and fifteen thousand participants. These competitions thus constitute one of the largest, most extensive intellectual exchanges of the Enlightenment. Prize contest were central activities of academies. They set the topics, advertised the competition, judged the submissions, and conducted the award ceremony, which was an important social event. The publication of the prize-winning essays made an author's work public, and the academy's endorsement gave it public acclaim. And the prize itself offered a significant financial incentive.

While this chapter asserts the importance of these academic activities, it also describes the less-than-ideal functioning of some competitions. Some were tainted by fraud as contestants submitted the work of others or under pseudonyms so as not to be disqualified for having won in the past. Competitors lobbied academies on their own behalf or that of others. Caradonna describes the raucous self-promotion, braggadocio, and blatant disregard of academic conventions by Jean La Harpe as an especially egregious example. If the system was ripe for abuse by contestants, academicians could subvert the competition's intellectual integrity as well by implementing self-censorship to avoid more rigorous scrutiny by Church or state.

Surprisingly, Louis XIV "haunted," as Caradonna puts it, these competitions long after his death as academies continued to propose topics designed to elicit appreciations of his glory. Not until the 1730s did they raise the more controversial social, political, and intellectual issues central to the Enlightenment, giving contestants opportunities to weigh in on intellectual issues and to gain fame. By that time, contestants had many more opportunities to compete as the number of academies grew exponentially. The age and social diversity of competitors grew as well with French and international, newly-minted and established intellectuals, peasants and aristocrats as contestants. Caradonna thus defines the competition circuit as a "competitive Republic of Letters."

Prize competitions also gave women a forum. (An appendix documents the forty-nine women who won or placed high, primarily in poetry competitions.) Some women identified themselves as such in their submissions, and some topics were directly relevant to them, such as the education of women. Despite their relatively small numbers, women took advantage of the opportunity such contests gave them to participate in intellectual debates. Another interesting aspect of the prize competitions is that many who competed later became central figures of the French Revolution, not, Caradonna insists, presaging their revolutionary views but rather revealing that young, ambitious men participated in both.

In the central chapter of his book, Caradonna revisits the famous Dijon competition, which awarded its prize to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's negative response to the question "Has the restoration of the sciences and the arts tended to purify morals?' and so launched Rousseau's career. Caradonna's account makes it much less unconventional than the mythology that has surrounded it. Rousseau, like many others of his contemporaries, attained intellectual celebrity by participating in prize competitions and even greater visibility through the publication of winning entries and the controversy surrounding it. But, as Caradonna emphasizes, the Academy of Dijon awarded the prize in acknowledgement of Rousseau's rhetorical ability but disclaimed his argument. (He had competed in the category "morale," that is to say, eloquence directed to moral issues.) On the other hand, Caradonna contends that the award signals the academy's openness to different views; it awarded prizes on both sides of the question in this very competition. Rousseau's *First Discourse* and the debate surrounding it gave him a central position in the public sphere of the Enlightenment as the prize competition did for many others.

Caradonna then places these competitions in the context of the historiography of the public sphere, in particular, and the culture of the Enlightenment, more generally. While Jürgen Habermas defined the

public sphere as bourgeois and antithetical to the state, [2] Caradonna contends that the prize competitions complicate that view because they were "critical, public, and participatory intellectual practice backed by almost all levels of the local and national government" (p. 145). They thus suggest that the state was more inclusive, inconsistent, and ultimately complicit in its own destruction as it encouraged open discussion such as those the prize competition fostered. The intellectual community created and sustained by such competitions also constituted a public sphere more socially diverse than Habermas's bourgeoisie. It was also more active than the passivity suggested by a public sphere defined by public opinion or consumption. In that sense, Caradonna suggests, those who competed in prize competitions might well be seen as analogous to the lawyers David Bell studied.[3] In other words, the Enlightenment public sphere reflected greater diversity, both socially and ideologically, when viewed from the perspective of these competitions. They were also somewhat conservative: Religious as well as Enlightenment ideas were prominent; And, while entries might criticize the state, academies avoided overtly dangerous speech.

Caradonna explores in detail how academies responded to three relevant and politically-charged subjects of eighteenth-century inquiry—slavery, poverty and poor relief, and the grain trade. While Caradonna emphasizes that his book is not an intellectual history of what the academicians wrote, it is nonetheless worth noting that his discussions of the content of the various prize submissions are particularly interesting, most notably these debates as well as his extensive discussion of the academicians' fervent appreciation of and identification with Rousseau during the Revolution. Caradonna's extensive research provides much information about the topics proposed by a vast array of academic competitions, which should provoke much further study. (That extensive information is an appendix, available only on-line.)

The French monarchy's cultivation of practical knowledge and expert opinion in prize competitions should not be completely unexpected, although one might more usually associate the rise of the expert with the nineteenth century. But, as Caradonna points out, when royal academicians could not adequately address the practical needs of the kingdom, monarchs turned to prize competitions to seek solutions to concrete problems. Competitors, including Antoine Lavoisier, offered solutions to the problem of lighting Paris streets. Prizes were offered for submissions on the best means to harvest saltpeter, on new methods in agronomy, on how to provide water for cities or contend with persistent poverty. Caradonna sees the role of these particular competitions as positive for the production and diffusion of knowledge as fostered but not controlled by the state.

Finally, Caradonna carries the story from the beginning of the French Revolution to the creation of the Institut in 1795. The earliest days of the French Revolution emptied academies as members became more politically engaged and as other venues for expressing one's views opened. The few prize competitions that persisted attracted little attention and remained wedded to conventional themes with scant acknowledgement of the dramatic political changes underway. For Caradonna, the conservative character of these competitions is less a corroboration of Charles Walton's sense of the conservative character of the early revolution than cautious self-censorship by academicians.[4] This chapter focuses explicitly on the contests eulogizing Rousseau as a heroic progenitor. Such entries confirm the impact not only of the *Social Contract* but also of *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Heloise* and the *Confessions*. Post-1790, academies may well have been considered retrograde, but the persistence of prize competitions nonetheless further illuminates the public sphere in the Revolution. While Habermas sees greater freedom of expression in this period, in the case of the prize competitions, the Revolutionary government exercised great control over the topics proposed and the conduct of the competition and the awards given.

Caradonna's careful positioning of all parts of his argument within a nuanced appreciation of Enlightenment historiography allows his study to amplify our understanding of the movement with a slight shift of overall perspective. Incorporating the academic competition and its social practices into a

broader understanding of the movement alters its contours in subtle ways. This, he suggests, should be in no way unexpected. Instead of postulating a new or different Enlightenment to challenge or undermine others, he urges historians to recognize both postmodern approaches and to acknowledge that different sources lead to different Enlightenments. By focusing on the *concours*, the Enlightenment he brings to light is not one restricted to great men with major philosophic ideas such as the earlier notions of the Enlightenment, most notably those of Ernst Cassirer and Peter Gay.[5] Instead Caradonna's Enlightenment is shaped by a more inclusive intellectual community which transcended, to some degree, age, status, and gender differences. Caradonna's Enlightenment is thus more inclusive in social composition and more ecumenical and moderate in intellectual perspective than the radical Enlightenment of Jonathan Israel.[6] By carefully placing his work within the historiography of the Enlightenment and conscientiously considering academic practices surrounding the prize competition, Caradonna offers a moderate revision, presenting an Enlightenment that is relatively more connected to the state interests, more public, more pragmatic, and less radical.

NOTES

[1] Daniel Roche, *Le siècle des lumières en province : Académies et académiciens provinciaux, 1680-1789*, 2 vols. (Paris: Mouton, 1978); Roger Chartier, « L'Académie de Lyon au XVIII siècle, 1700-1793, étude de sociologie culturelle , » *Nouvelle études Lyonnaises* (1969): 133-250; Christian Desplat, *L'Académie Royale de Pau au XVIIIe siècle* (Pau : Société des Sciences, Lettres et Arts de Pau, 1971) ; Michel Taillefer, *Une académie interprète des lumières : L'Académie des sciences, inscriptions et belle-lettres de Toulouse au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, CNRS, 1984).

[2] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991).

[3] David Bell, *Lawyers and Citizens: The Making of a Political Elite in Old Regime France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

[4] Charles Walton, *Policing Public Opinion in the French Revolution: The Culture of Calumny and the Problem of Free Speech (*Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[5] Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, 2 vols. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1966).

[6] Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

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