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Nancy Luxon, ed., *Archives of Infamy: Foucault on State Power in the Lives of Ordinary Citizens*. Translated by Thomas Scott-Railton. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2019. xi + 371 pp. Preface, contributors, publication history, and index. \$120.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-5179-0110-3; \$30.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-5179-0111-0.

Review by Andrew Newman, Wayne State University.

This edited volume is a collection of thirteen chapters by contributors in a range of fields, including historians, literary theorists, philosophers, and specialists in gender and queer theory/studies. *Archives of Infamy* is a companion piece to Arlette Farge and Michel Foucault's *Disorderly Families* (originally *Le Désordre des familles*) also translated by Thomas Scott-Railton and edited by Nancy Luxon.[1]

While this review concerns *Archives of Infamy*, some background on *Disorderly Families* is warranted. Arlette Farge and Michel Foucault published their study in 1982, the style and substance of which was novel and not fully appreciated at the time. Farge's and Foucault's study was based on the analysis of a trove of eighteenth-century *lettres de cachet* from the Bastille Archives. *Lettres de cachet* were created by ordinary people in Paris who wrote to the king (often with the help of a professional scribe owing to low rates of literacy) to imprison family members due to myriad offenses, many of which involve violence and "debauchery." The letters are deep, multilayered documents described by Foucault as "poem-lives" (p. 69), which attest to the moral norms of everyday life in eighteenth-century Paris, the relationship between the household and the broader sociopolitical world, the ways in which common people interacted with royal power, and the operations of Parisian police inspectors at the time. Farge and Foucault chose a narrative approach that did not sublimate the letters within their own narrative but instead put the letters on display on their own terms. Upon release, their work was met with silence and some criticism from reviewers as "populist" and "aestheticized" (Luxon, p. 11). Arlette Farge described Foucault as "saddened and appalled" by the book's reception.[2]

*Archives of Infamy* revisits the context in which the book was written and contains later writings that serve to broaden the full theoretical scope of the work. In her introduction to *Archives of Infamy*, Luxon lays out the book's main intellectual aim: "This volume contends to situate *Disorderly Families* in its context, and to recover the problematics, themes, and political struggles from which it unfolded, to recover the place for agency in Foucault's work even as the agency is enmeshed in the contradictory logics of sovereign power, discipline, and governmentality" (p. 3). Luxon argues that *Disorderly Families* contains a broad theorization of the relationship between sovereign power and individual acts while also opening up productive lines of inquiry around the

process by which events are registered and notarized as real or not (in both the eyes of public officials and, for that matter, historians). The contradictory and liminal nature of the letters themselves also prompts new types of reflections upon the workings of circulatory power. The letters are "... a venue and language at the threshold of public and personal, and of criminal and licit," writes Luxon (p. 7). The paradox of the *lettres de cachet* is the authors' appeal to the very apex of the political power structure to keep their requests for punishment and the reported transgressions a secret (as compared to using the slower and more embarrassing venue of a legal proceeding). Thus, the king--via the police, of course--must know and verify the truth of the event to make it disappear.

Part one of the book, "Archival Materials: Audiences and Contexts," touches on several themes, one of which is the intimate pervasiveness of sovereign power. Foucault's "Lives of Infamous Men," is likely the most well-known text included in *Archives of Infamy*, and often strikes readers for the emphasis it places on the affective relationship with the sources in the archives: Foucault describes the letters as filled with "sufferings, meanness, jealousies, vociferations..." and notes that "...the shock of these words must give rise to beauty mixed with dread" (p. 70). The letters are close-up glimpses into painful lives while also being textual acts of violence in themselves, having been created for the purpose of condemning another person--a spouse, child, or parent--to imprisonment. This intimate perspective on the workings of "absolutist abuse" (p. 77) leads Foucault to reimagine the monarchial system as less a centralized, top-down system of power, than as a circulatory network in which "each individual could avail himself, for his own ends and against others, of absolute power in its enormity" (p. 77).

This is followed by chapter two, a transcript of Foucault and Farge's 1983 appearance on the radio show *Les lundis de l'histoire* with sociologist André Béjin and the historians Michelle Perrot and Roger Chartier. It provides a glimpse into the way that Farge and Foucault pivot to make the work speak to the concerns of a broad mass media audience. In this context, the commentators seize upon gender and power, and when Farge and Foucault debate the other commentators on whether or not royal paternalism led to male-headed households, the underlying premise of the conversation--that there is nothing natural or ahistorical about patriarchal family structures--gives the work a post-May '68 feel that doesn't come to the surface in the book itself. In a similar fashion, Foucault's general way of distilling a principal theoretical argument--"authoritarian intervention into the heart of society" was driven in no small part "...because there was strong societal demand for it" (p. 90)--has a more explicit resonance with popular, post-Vichy reflections on the broad nature of collaboration and culpability than it does in the book itself. Michel Heurteaux's 1983 essay, which follows as chapter three, magnifies this effect, providing a bridge between the analysis of absolutism in *Disorderly Families* and popular concerns over the willingness of citizens to collaborate, report, and denunciate.

The subsequent section is composed of a set of chapters that deal specifically with the question of how an event is registered as such, and demystifies the role of the historian in producing history. The book contains a new translation by Thomas Scott-Railton of "The Order of Discourse," Foucault's inaugural address to the Collège de France in 1970. The piece reads almost as a primer to Foucault's thinking around the capacity of power to both create and render invisible with wide brush strokes: "...in every society the production of discourse is simultaneously regulated, selected, organized, and redistributed by a certain number of procedures, whose role is to conjure away its power and its dangers, to master chance events, to evade its heavy formidable materiality" (p. 143). Roger Chartier's essay "The Public Sphere and

Public Opinion” (1990) follows this, and examines the “organizing principles govern[ing] the political public sphere” through readings of Kant, Hegel, and Habermas. Chartier takes special aim at the dichotomy between *peuple* vs. public. If the former category was associated with instability, disorder, and the domain of the popular, the latter was connected to emergent notions of democracy, and “public opinion” as a political force of reason. From this perspective, *Disorderly Families* occupies a liminal space that seems to exist precisely between these poles, and in doing so, the book subverts generalizations about the nature of society that undergirded both the Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment alike.

Similarly, Pierre Nora’s “The Return of the Event” (1972) begins as a critique of positivist historiography but broadens quickly into a meditation upon the process of “eventliness” itself. Of the historian, Nora writes, “The event had been, in the traditional system, his privilege and his purpose...and no event could enter into history without his stamp of approval.” The disciplinary power of historians to make history comes under threat however, due to the event-making capacity of popular media: suddenly the historian is confounded as “the event presents itself to him with its external face, with all of the weight of a fact, prior to any elaboration, before being subject to the work of time” (p. 197). History, it seems, no longer needs historians to pronounce it as such. If Chartier sought to explore the tension between *peuple* and public, Nora does the same with the dichotomy of event and *fait divers*, and in raising this question collapses the distinction between philosophy and history.

Arlette Farge’s 2002 essay “Thinking and Defining the Event in History” (translated by Thomas Scott-Railton) preserves the event as a “cornerstone” (p. 215) of historiography but opens up the possibilities of defining it in a manner that attends to the sensitivities and intimacies of everyday life: “Once the historian has integrated into the concept of the event its most minuscule elements, such as silences, utterances, emotions, low intensities, and the ordinary course of things, she will have to ask herself the question of meaning with greater acuity than before” (p. 223). Farge’s attentiveness to gender and voice, along with the “minuscule” and “ordinary” should not be misunderstood as simply a call for a counter-history. Rather, it is a call for an attentiveness to that which is “complex” and “differentiated,” and in doing so she resists the kind of ideologically loaded generalizations critiqued by Chartier. Her attention to silences and willingness to expand the margins of the event itself gives the essay an intellectual reach well beyond the realm of historians. Indeed, lines such as “no event can be severed from what caused people to remember it, and from what it threatened to portend” (p. 219) seem every bit as useful to understand the all-encompassing “eventliness” of the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, as it does Paris in the eighteenth century.

Farge’s thinking on power shines even more, however, in the subsequent chapter by Stuart Elden. Elden writes: “While it is of course possible to see this book [*Disorderly Families*] as a continuation of Foucault’s interests in the microphysics of power, his project on ‘lives of infamous men,’ and his own analysis of spaces, Farge’s role in the work is arguably the more significant” (pp. 241-242). Undoubtedly, it is Elden’s long history of engagement with Foucault’s work that allows him to so clearly discern Farge’s thought within the text, and Farge’s understanding of space and geography merits special attention. Turning to Farge’s *La vie fragile* as a continual reference through which to read *Disorderly Families*, Elden invokes Farge’s analogy of the apartment building as an “anthill” (p. 233) as a referent to understand eighteenth-century Parisian space: “confusion exist[ed] between public and private space and the impossibility of distinguishing between ‘open’ and ‘closed’ in a situation where each space continued with the

next, opened out onto another, or overlooked and was overlooked by everyone else” (Farge quoted in Elden, *ibid.*). Such passages convey the symmetry between Farge’s grasp of urban social space and Foucault’s circulatory concept of power that is central to *Disorderly Families*.

The subsequent chapters in the book by Rey, Wingrove, Luxon, and Huffer all thematically relate to the juncture between circulatory power on one hand, and transitory spaces on the other, while also bringing questions related to gender and sexuality into starker relief. Michel Rey’s 1985 essay is a fascinating analysis of eighteenth-century police reports on sex between men in Paris. In contrast to most of the other pieces in the collection, it foregrounds thick descriptions of particular places and social conventions. There are striking alignments between Rey’s Paris and the city as it is described by Foucault and Farge in *Disorderly Families* in that both emphasize the blurring between what would today be viewed as public and private spheres. Rey points out that public or barely hidden heterosexual and homosexual acts were an expected part of the social landscape in Paris at the time. The essay also follows the process by which homosexuality and heterosexuality transitioned from being a behavior to an identifier over the course of the century. In this respect, Rey’s piece offers a parallel with the gradual normalization of the patriarchal, heteronormative family discussed by Foucault and Farge, as well as Luxon in chapter twelve.

Elizabeth Wingrove’s chapter, “Sovereign Address” follows the correspondence of Geneviève Gravelle, who might be described as a prolific, albeit undisciplined letter writer of the eighteenth century, who was herself banished by *lettres de cachet* in an attempt to silence her ceaseless appeals to royal officials and the king. Wingrove provides an analysis of both the letters and the postal system which, in her words “...provided infrastructure for literary transmission, cultivated imagined communities and introduced new ways of watching and touching others” (p. 285). The postal infrastructure and the “epistolary practice” of letter writing is reminiscent of Rey’s depiction of Paris in that it evokes a sphere of embodied, gendered exchange and communication that is neither public nor private, but an intermediary space that includes intended recipients (royal officials and the king himself) as well as unintended interlopers (in this case, spies and antagonistic noble families attempting to intercept communications). In addition to exposing the political work of letter writing, Winfield contributes to a broader analysis of the “fragmented and multiple mediated processes of kingly rule...” (p. 286) that align with the policing of sexuality analyzed by Rey, as well as the inspector’s reports in *Disorderly Families*.

Nancy Luxon’s chapter, “Gender, Agency, and the Circulations of Power,” begins with the critical premise that gendered dynamics are “barely discernable” in Foucault’s “Lives of Infamous Men” even though half of the letters in the archive were penned by female authors (p. 297). Luxon then offers a reading of eighteenth-century women’s social worlds through the letters, analyzing women as “exchangers” who “both trespass and connect other domains” (p. 330). Luxon employs the concept of *mesnagement* to describe the practices and social relations involved in maintaining a household to characterize these multifaceted forms of labor. Then, she draws from *Capital*-era Marx alongside Foucault to theorize the household as a site for the transmutation of value that circulates alongside and through power. Luxon’s critical reading of Foucault gives the piece a generative quality that stands out in the collection; it also allows for a way of thinking about women’s political and social power that thankfully goes beyond the binary, off/on understandings of power that all too often accompany the language of agency.

In the book’s final chapter, Lynee Huffer brings Foucault into dialogue with Freud and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, closely following Foucault’s poetic and affective expressions in the essay

“The Lives of Infamous Men.” “Startle shakes up our present by interrupting it and refusing the consolations of narrative connection that would make us recognizable to ourselves,” writes Huffer (p. 353). In tracing Foucault’s “rhythmic hand,” she identifies “a poet at work in the archives of that history, breaking the circuit of our time, resituating us in a present rendered strange by enjambement” (p. 353). Foucault’s poem-lives “leave us gawking, like Freud’s fantasizing patients...” (pp. 353-354) at the newly found strangeness of ourselves and our time. Huffer’s emphasis on the defamiliarization of the present and of the self makes it a fitting point of return for the collection of essays.

*Archives of Infamy* is a readable but complex set of texts that would be ideal for teaching Foucault in a theory seminar, as well as for courses in gender, history, sexuality, and the family. For a broader readership, one finds an intimacy and pervasiveness in this account of eighteenth-century power that is absent from *Discipline and Punish*.<sup>[3]</sup> The contributors focus more on the interstices between well-defined categories (i.e. disciplinary power vs. sovereign power) as opposed to an archaeology detailing the emergence and predominance of such categories. Indeed, the book’s final set of pieces by Elden, Huffer, Luxon, Rey, and Wingrove seem to build towards this conclusion, and exemplify the value of reading interstitial spaces of all kinds. There is, of course, a long history of influential scholarship, which has focused on “in-between” spaces and figures as either polluted, ritualistic, or at times fetishized as sites of inherent resistance. While Luxon herself describes the interstitial domain of eighteenth-century women as a space of “insurrection,” her use of the concept of a “switch point of power” (p. 320) rather than a binary resistance-oriented framework shows the promise that such a mode of analysis can hold. This point makes an important contribution in rethinking the complexities often glossed over by the term “agency.”

The insistence on context in *Archives of Infamy* leads one to raise additional questions about how Foucault is read and cited in English. Does the inclusion of this material—or, rather the need for it—imply the anticipation of a problematic reading of Farge and Foucault (and perhaps Foucault in general) due to a lack of context? If so, is this because Foucault’s popularity has reached a point where his work has become mystified and as a result misread and mis-critiqued? (An ironic turn, given Foucault’s famous posing of the question: “Qu’est-ce qu’un auteur?”). If so, Foucault’s collaboration with Arlette Farge is not only an important work on its own terms, but it lends itself to revisiting and re-contextualizing Foucault’s work in a broad sense. *Archives of Infamy* is invaluable in the development of such a reading. To paraphrase the “Lives of Infamous Men,” the book is not an archive. It is a forward-looking and expansive re-examination of the concepts of the historical event, circulatory power, the household, gender, and sexuality. As such, *Archives of Infamy* is an important and worthwhile work for a very broad audience interested in Foucault. For many English readers, alongside *Disorderly Families*, *Archives of Infamy* is also a long overdue introduction to the thought and work of Arlette Farge.

## LIST OF ESSAYS

Nancy Luxon, “Introduction: Policing and Criminality in *Disorderly Families*”

Part One, Archival materials: Audiences and Contexts

Michel Foucault, “Lives of Infamous Men”



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Jean-Philippe Guinle, “Review of *Disorderly Families*”

Michel Heurteaux, “Denunciation, a Slow Poison”

Part Two, Letters and Events: From Composition to Contestation

Michel Foucault, “The Order of Discourse”

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Elizabeth Wingrove, “Sovereign Address”

Nancy Luxon, “Gender, Agency, and the Circulations of Power”

Lynne Huffer, “Foucault's Rhythmic Hand”

## NOTES

[1] Arlette Farge and Michel Foucault, *Disorderly Families: Infamous Letters from the Bastille Archives*, Nancy Luxon ed., Thomas Scott-Railton trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

[2] Arlette Farge, “Afterword to the English Edition” in *Disorderly Families: Infamous Letters from the Bastille Archives*, p. 272.

[3] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Alan Sheridan trans. (New York: Vintage, 1995).

[4] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966).

[5] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969).

[6] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Donald Nicholson-Smith trans. (London: Blackwell, 1991).

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