
H-France Review Vol. 2 (February, 2002), No. 19

Christine Adams, *A Taste for Comfort and Status: A Bourgeois Family in Eighteenth-Century France*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000. x + 292 pp. Appendixes, bibliography, and index. \$65.00 US (cl). ISBN 0-271-01956-5.

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Historians of the early modern period are prone to lament their lack of the intimate documents available to scholars of later periods and to regret the historical enigmas that apparently cannot be solved without a similar wealth of diaries, personal correspondence, or autobiographies. In the papers of the Lamothe family of Bordeaux, Christine Adams has discovered an exceptionally rich vein of private papers, and in this thorough and thoughtful study she uses them to uncover the “identity” of the eighteenth-century bourgeoisie. The result is a deeper understanding of the mind-set and values of the eighteenth-century provincial bourgeoisie and of a range of historiographical questions associated with middling families of this period.

The Lamothe family belonged to the local notables of Bordeaux. In the period covered by this book (roughly the second half of the eighteenth century), the family consisted of Daniel Lamothe, a barrister at the Parlement of Bordeaux with origins in the land-owning classes of the surrounding region, his wife, and their seven surviving children. Three sons—Delphin, Alexis, and Alexandre—became lawyers; a fourth, Jules, entered the priesthood; and a fifth, Victor, became a doctor. The family’s pious daughters, Marie and Marie-Anne, never married and devoted their adult lives to running the household for their brothers. Family members shared the same home in Bordeaux and pooled their financial resources, estimated at around 180,000 livres. This close-knit family life continued even after Delphin (the only child who married) brought his wife and subsequent children into the family fold.

The Lamothe brothers provide a model family for Adams’ investigation of the pre-Revolutionary bourgeoisie in at least three ways. First, they were successful and prominent members of the liberal professions. Building on his father’s success, the eldest brother, Delphin, also became a barrister at the Parlement of Bordeaux and later was appointed professor of French law at the University of Bordeaux. Younger son Victor, whose studies in Paris acted as a catalyst for much of the family’s correspondence, had an equally successful career as a doctor, with a successful private practice and a post as physician at the *Hôpital des enfants trouvés*. A second exemplary aspect of the Lamothe brothers was their active involvement in local political, cultural, and social life. Alexis occupied the top position of *jurat* in the city government, while Delphin served in municipal assemblies. The latter played a key role in founding the *Académie de peinture, sculpture et architecture* in 1768, for which he served as perpetual secretary. Victor was treasurer of the more prestigious *Académie royale des belles-lettres, sciences et arts*. Outside of official institutions, the Lamothe brothers were regular members of the most important salon of Bordeaux and convivial guests and hosts at numerous social gatherings.

Finally, the Lamothe family also provided an exemplary case for the author in that they were prodigious writers, leaving behind an impressive array of published and unpublished writings. Their surviving correspondence consists of three hundred personal letters written by family members over twenty-five

years, most by the father and brothers, with a small number of painstakingly composed epistles by the sisters and their mother. Their other written work ranged from Delphin and Alexis' authoritative published history of customary law in Guyenne to unsigned poems, personal reflections, and copies of pornographic libels about the royal family. Adams has fleshed out documents written by Lamothe family members with an exhaustive examination of archival evidence about the family and its activities. These include land sales contracts, wills, tax statements, and records from the two academies and the founding hospital. (The most important of these are reproduced in the book's appendix.)

The starting point of Adams' study is her contention that the Lamothes were "representative, if not typical" (p. 5) of their social group: successful provincial professionals. To what extent, she asks, did these groups constitute a "bourgeois" social class, possessing a self-conscious class identity? Given the importance ascribed to the bourgeoisie in Marxist views of the Revolution and the denial by subsequent historians such as Sarah Maza and David Garrioch that such a class even existed prior to 1789—Adams believes the answer to this question carries considerable historiographic weight.[1] In her search for answers, she focuses on what she views as three main sources of bourgeois identity, to which she devotes successive sections of her book. The first section examines the affective and material ties that bound the Lamothe family and their relations with colleagues, kin, and friends; the second investigates the professional lives of the Lamothe brothers over the final decades of the Old Regime and, in Victor's case, through the Revolution; the final section explores the cultural interests of the Lamothe brothers, as members of formal institutions and as private readers and writers.

Under her overarching theme of bourgeois identity, the author uses her rich evidence to probe and evaluate a number of existing hypotheses about the values, activities, and attitudes of the middling classes. In her first section, she establishes the close ties that bound members of the Lamothe family, suggesting that the family unit "provided firm foundation for the identity of each individual member" (p. 15). Adams uses the Lamothes as a test case for the new domesticity that historians have posited for the eighteenth century and finds that indeed family life was characterized by mutual love and affection.[2] This was a patriarchal family, but one ruled by a benevolent and fond patriarch who apparently respected his wife and daughters. Unlike the working-class or aristocratic women who may have challenged the nineteenth-century model of the public-private split, the Lamothe women prefigured this model by restricting their energies to home and hearth. Moreover, in their focus on family, frugality, religion, and forging networks with social equals, Adams finds that the Lamothe family demonstrated all the values normally associated with the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie.[3] They did not sacrifice younger sons to purchase ennobling offices for a privileged heir—as a classical eighteenth-century bourgeois should do—but instead sought to establish all the brothers in respectable professions.

In the book's second section, Adams charts changes in the liberal professions across the second half of the eighteenth century. One chapter focuses on Delphin's trajectory as a barrister and law professor, another on Victor's medical career. For both brothers, Adams argues, professional education and practice served as a basis for their masculine and class identities. The traditional historiography of the Revolution would lead us to expect a deep well of resentment and frustration within these men, given the constraints on their social horizons and political activities under the Old Regime. Instead, Adams concurs with revisionist scholars, finding that Delphin and his barrister brothers advocated legal reform but that "nothing in their work suggests a radical desire to overthrow the Old Regime political or legal system, or any real challenges to basic assumptions of the authority of the state and king." (p. 149) Delphin the barrister and Victor the lawyer shared a common belief that their professions served the public good and thus confirm Colin Jones' argument that professionals were redefining their roles in the eighteenth century, with new emphasis on "justice, public utility, and good citizenship" (p. 148).[4] Where some might suspect a Foucauldian project of social control on the part of these enlightened professionals, Adams sees a stalwart work ethic and a deep commitment to public service, all of which prefigure the values of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie.

In her final section, Adams takes up the issue of the Lamothe's cultural activities. In so doing, she places the brothers in the context of recent historical work on the social institutions of the Enlightenment and the effects of Enlightenment philosophy on the educated classes of pre-Revolutionary France. As if to oblige the inquiring historian, the Lamothe brothers were fervid participants in formal and informal institutions of Enlightenment and enthusiastic amateur poets, artists, and musicians. Drawing on Daniel Roche's scholarship on provincial academies, Adams contends that membership in such institutions was a crucial element of Old Regime "bourgeois sociability" (p. 220).^[5] The Lamothe brothers' status as academicians and salon-goers allowed them to demonstrate their mastery of social and cultural forms and thus their affinities with social superiors. The books collected by the Lamothe brothers testify to their wide reading of Enlightenment literature; favorites included local hero Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Rousseau. The existence of hand-written copies of seditious libels against the royal family among their papers suggests that even such up-standing and respectable members of the professional classes had absorbed the message of the gutter press documented by Robert Darnton.^[6] The Lamothe brothers, she concludes, were active consumers and producers of the Enlightenment and the new political culture associated with it.

The small-scale conclusions Adams draws in each chapter are compelling and perform a valuable service in confirming or challenging the work of previous historians. It is important to know whether the sweeping arguments of a Robert Darnton or Joan Landes stand up to the intense scrutiny her sources provide. On its more ambitious level, however, Adams' project is on less solid ground. Based on her findings, Adams concludes that a bourgeoisie indeed did exist in pre-revolutionary France. This is a reasonable conclusion, and one she amply documents in her chapters. Adams is more tentative about the self-consciousness of this class. Instead of "class consciousness," she prefers to speak of a "specific bourgeois mentality" that took root among urban professionals in the mid-eighteenth century (p. 259). She thus declines to form a definitive statement on the matter that has occupied the heart of her study.

Adams' difficulty in grappling with this issue, I would suggest, stems from theoretical and methodological shortcomings inherent in her approach. First, beginning with an objectively middle-class social position and moving backward in search of "bourgeois" mentalities, Adams' argument cannot avoid a certain circularity: the Lamothes belonged to the bourgeoisie, therefore their attitudes and values were "bourgeois," therefore they typify a "bourgeois" social class in pre-Revolutionary France and demonstrate its significant continuities with the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie.

Second, Adams also is hampered by her apparent disinterest in debates about the formation of social groups and group identity that have enlivened the French academic scene for the past fifteen or twenty years.^[7] Without this—or some other—account of the way that individuals forge social groups and create, contest, and reproduce collective identities, she can only read her sources hoping to spot expressions of an emerging group identity. As her hesitant conclusions attest, however, even the most intimate sources cannot be trusted merely to deliver their authors' "identity," be it one of class or gender or race. What is needed are the methodological and conceptual tools to assist the historian in thinking through the thorny question of what constitutes identity and how it is created. Had she spent more time on the problem of identity formation itself, Adams might have used this case study not just to improve our understanding of the bourgeoisie, but to offer new insight into how Old Regime society thought and created itself, or indeed how any social group comes into being in moments of intense social, economic, political, and cultural change.

A final shortcoming of Adams' analysis is the lack of comparison. For all its richness, what her evidence cannot tell us is who else shared these values in eighteenth-century Bordeaux. It is certainly not beyond the realm of possibility that noble magistrates in the Parlement of Bordeaux also had warm family relations, exercised financial prudence, forged useful social connections while believing they served the greater public good, and adopted a limited Enlightenment program of societal and political reform. Lower down the social scale, one could probably say the same of literate guild masters and merchants.

The particularly “bourgeois” content of these attitudes—apart from the fact that they were held in this case by members of the social groups that would later make up the middle class—is unclear. This reader wondered how the argument would have been affected if Adams had focused not on the similarities between the Lamothes and other liberal professionals and/or nineteenth-century bourgeois, but on the differences. In what ways did they not reflect what was to come, but challenge or resist it? Such an approach might have restored a sense of risk and contingency to the Lamothes’ story, rather than inserting them in a narrative whose conclusion was already foregone.

If it does not offer a shining new methodological path, this book is an important addition to the still very slim literature on the middling classes. As historical debate continues about gender, the family, professionalization, the public/private divide, the social practices of Enlightenment, and the origins of the Revolution—among other contentious issues—students and scholars will draw on the rich details Adams provides here.

NOTES

[1] Sarah Maza, “Luxury, Morality, and Social Change: Why There Was No Middle-Class Consciousness in Prerevolutionary France,” *The Journal of Modern History*, 69 (June 1997): 199-229; and David Garrioch, *The Formation of the Parisian Bourgeoisie, 1690-1830* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996).

[2] Adams cites Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. Robert Baldick (New York: Vintage, 1962) as well as Jean-Louis Flandrin, *Families in Former Times: Kinship, Household, and Sexuality in Early Modern France*, trans. Richard Southern (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Randolph Trumbach, *The Rise of the Egalitarian Family: Aristocratic Kinship and Domestic Relations in Eighteenth-Century England* (New York: Academic Press, 1978); and James Traer, *Marriage and the Family in Eighteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 1980).

[3] On the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie, she cites Theodore Zeldin, *France, 1848-1945* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); and Bonnie G. Smith, *Ladies of the Leisure Class: The Bourgeoisies of Northern France in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981).

[4] Colin Jones, “Bourgeois Revolution Revivified: 1789 and Social Change,” in Colin Lucas, ed. *Rewriting the French Revolution* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

[5] Daniel Roche, *Le Siècle des lumières en province: Académies et académiciens provinciaux, 1680-1789*, 2 vols. (Paris and The Hague: Mouton, 1978).

[6] Robert Darnton, “The High Enlightenment and the Low-Life of Literature,” *Past and Present* 51 (May 1971): 81-115.

[7] An oft-cited work, for example, is Luc Boltanski, *The Making of a Class: Cadres in French Society*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987). Important recent historical works focusing on social group formation include Simona Cerutti, *La Ville et les métiers: Naissance d'un langage corporatif*, (Turin XVIIe-XVIIIe s.) (Paris: Editions de l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 1990) and Maurizio Gribaudi, *Itinéraires ouvriers: espaces et groupes sociaux à Turin au début du XXe siècle* (Paris: Editions de l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 1987).

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ISSN 1553-9172