

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

Reviewed by Cissie Fairchilds

Historians of eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century French business doubtless will be surprised to learn that the people they write about did not exist. That is the implication of Sarah Maza's brilliant but exasperating book. Taking as her starting point the long-accepted revisionist position that the French Revolution was not, as Marxist orthodoxy maintained, the work of a rising bourgeoisie eager to free the French economy for capitalism and industrialization, Maza contends not only that such a bourgeoisie did not make the Revolution but also that as a class—a self-conscious group actively promoting policies to further its own interests—it did not exist before, during, or even after the Revolution. She argues that the bourgeoisie did not become a political force until the 1820s, only to disappear from French politics with the advent of Louis Philippe's misnamed "bourgeois" monarchy in 1830. Instead of the bourgeoisie, Maza argues that the main political force in pre- and postrevolutionary France was a mixed noble and nonnoble elite of officeholders, lawyers, professionals, and intellectuals, who longed for a transcendent national community and promoted self-sacrificing service to the state rather than a capitalist pursuit of self-interest. They, she contends, made the Revolution and dominated French politics in the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, the bourgeoisie did play an important role in French history, not as a political force but as what Maza calls a "social imaginary," a social group serving as an "other" against which the French defined themselves as a nation. Specifically, the bourgeoisie was made to embody the heedless self-interest and vulgar materialism that France's political and intellectual elites firmly rejected. Thus, to Maza, the bourgeoisie is a "myth" in two senses: the self-conscious, politically dominant class portrayed by historians never really existed, but an imaginary, culturally constructed, negatively perceived bourgeoisie has been central to France's identity as a nation.

There is much to admire in Maza's book, starting with the wide range of her sources (dictionaries, plays, novels, and histories, as well as the expected political pamphlets and debates), the ingenuity of her argument, and the clarity and vigor of her writing. If her attack on the Marxist interpretation of the Revolution is hardly original (if ever there was a dead horse that needs no more beating, that is it), rarely has the revisionist position been stated so eloquently. Maza's work on the politics of the Restoration is fresher, and her accounts of the assassination of the duc de Berry and the debate among historians over the role of the bourgeois communal governments in the medieval French monarchy give us new landmarks in its underexplored political landscape. And Maza is surely right to move the state, state service, and the elite devoted to it to the center of French political history, and to emphasize that this elite refused to identify itself as bourgeois, disdaining the qualities of money-grubbing, vulgar materialism and the pursuit of self-interest it projected onto an imaginary bourgeoisie.

Yet, for all its virtues, this book has serious flaws. Its problems are those of much cultural history: an arbitrary choice and reading of sources and an uneasy relationship with what cultural historians often disdainfully call "lived experience"—that is, historical reality. Maza should have followed more thoroughly the example of Dror Wahrman, whose *Imagining the Middle Class: The Political Representation of Class in Britain, c. 1780–1840* (1995), obviously in most ways her model, dealt only with the politically and culturally constructed images of the bourgeoisie. But because her starting point was an attack on the Marxist interpretation of the Revolution, she evidently felt obliged to deny, or at least to downplay, the very existence of a commercial and industrial bourgeoisie and the economic development it promoted. Therefore, she either does not mention the relevant findings of French economic and business historians or, worse, cites only those aspects of their work supporting her thesis. (Her treatment of David Garrioch's *The Formation of the Parisian Bourgeoisie, 1690–1830*, published in 1996, is an example.) Maza does nicely summarize the work on the great increase in domestic production and the consequent consumer revolution in eighteenth-century France, but she considers their sole effect to have been to give rise to the luxury debate, in which the association of materialism, self-interest, and national decline were first projected onto an imaginary bourgeoisie. She blithely ignores the fact that the luxury debate was a *debate*, with many

of its participants praising economic growth, freedom, and the pursuit of self-interest as contributing to national strength. She also ignores the fact that the side espousing commercial development won during the Revolution, and that the economic freedom enacted during the Revolution produced many favorable economic consequences, including the spread of shops, especially in the countryside, the growth and rationalization of the network of markets and fairs, the economic stimulus given to country towns when they became seats of the new local governments, and the redistribution of income away from the traditional elites produced by the inflation of the revolutionary years. She is similarly silent about the important economic developments of the Restoration, including falling transportation costs and the establishment of a modern banking system and money market. Among those who implemented such changes, especially in the provinces, Maza might have found a self-conscious, politically active bourgeoisie, and in provincial newspapers and in the debates over such topics as the abolition of the guilds, the imposition of a new tax system, and the establishment of the *Crédit Foncier* she might have found a more positive image of that class and the economic growth it fostered. Using such sources, one could construct a bourgeois “social imaginary” opposite to Maza’s. France was—and is—a nation of shopkeepers as well as intellectuals. The French bourgeoisie may have been a myth, but it was also an economic and social reality.

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