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Christopher Johnson, *Becoming Bourgeois: Love, Kinship and Power in Provincial France, 1670-1880*. Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 2015. vii + 345 pp. Map, figure, notes, bibliographical notes, and index. \$65.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN-13978-0-8014-5398-4.

Review by Stephen Miller, The University of Alabama at Birmingham

In writing this review of Christopher Johnson's excellent book, I find myself retracing my own academic career at a generation remove. In graduate school in the early 1990s, at a time when *Le mouvement social* was still a widely consulted journal in the field, I read Johnson's book on the socialist Étienne Cabet while studying for my comprehensive exams. Since that time, Johnson's essay in the book on 1830 by John Merriman shaped my thinking about the trajectory of capitalism, state formation, and class relations in France.[1]

The debates of the Bicentennial about the bourgeoisie, the origins of the Revolution, and the progress of French capitalism still enjoyed an academic audience in those days. It was undoubtedly in this context that Johnson wrote his book on textile manufacturing in Languedoc in the centuries surrounding the Revolution. This research carried particular interest for me as I wrote my own book on the Old Regime and Revolution in Languedoc.[2]

Johnson's latest book, in my opinion, represents his supreme intellectual achievement. Since the turn of the century, his method of studying economic history--culling data, facts, and testimony from archives; synthesizing and interpreting them by means of theories of development and crisis--has been overtaken by studies of the writings on political economy. Accordingly, this latest book, while exhibiting Johnson's continued interest in the big questions about the place of the bourgeoisie in the revolutionary upheavals, and political evolution, of France over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, contains very little economic history. Instead, Johnson studies relations of kinship through the letters of an extended family of bourgeois leaders in Vannes, a town in Morbihan, Brittany.

Johnson, in presenting these bourgeois individuals, makes no pretense of their contribution to industrialization. They did not make productive investments in agriculture or manufacturing. They instead exercised the professions of naval officer, jurist, notary, revenue collector for the clergy, and fiscal official of the state. They made their way by following the rules of Old Regime society, aspiring to titles such as *bourgeois de Paris*, which offered a certain number of privileges and made the bearer responsible for investigating troubles on behalf of the regime's forces of order. Indeed the Galles family, the only one in the book to own a private enterprise, did not accumulate wealth in ways liable to generate frustration with the monarchy's restrictions on business activity. To the contrary, the Galles paid the monarchy for a monopoly on the book trade and relied on a friend's connections in the royal court to have the ministry quash the decision of a local tribunal and prevent entrepreneurs from opening up any rival companies in Vannes.

In this way, what got the bourgeois families ahead, the epistolary evidence demonstrates, was not private enterprise so much as relations of blood and marriage forged through perceptions of love, reason, virtue, and moral rectitude. Ties of kinship permitted bourgeois families to consolidate their wealth and dominate the civic associations and governmental bodies of Vannes and Morbihan.

The family thus provided the glue that held together the bourgeoisie of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Elder males no longer dominated lineages like they had in former centuries. Their place was taken by sentiment and emotion expressed for benevolent grandparents and provided in abundance to children regardless of birth order or gender. Bourgeois households came to accept, as a rule, that affection ensured harmony and partnership in marriage. The individual enjoyed the autonomous right to choose a conjugal partner. Mutual feelings of tenderness imparted an essential equality between men and women within the couple. These feelings made patriarchal authority seem out of place and bred expectations that political authorities as well should be accountable to citizens accustomed to entering into relationships freely.

Johnson makes clear that love served class interests. It was made possible by a shared bourgeois culture at the same time as it strengthened political and economic power. The historian cannot disentangle the social goals and sentimental engagements. The liberty to enter into romantic bonds sustained assumptions about bourgeois morality. It provided members of the class with self-confidence in the correctness of their vision for the society and state. High standards of conduct in personal relations reinforced the bourgeoisie's sense of satisfaction with their well-deserved success in accruing wealth and attaining public office.

This bourgeois sense of moral worth and accomplishment, Johnson argues, precluded any references to a distinct social category in the family letters. Rather than name itself, the bourgeoisie envisioned a classless society made up of rational individuals pursuing instrumental ends and capable of generating public opinion. This myth was sustained by the sub-myth of unlimited social mobility, which for the members of the class was a reality. The bourgeoisie extrapolated their success as a potential for all human beings.

In making this case, Johnson cites the work of Roland Barthes but also could have pointed to the *Eighteenth Brumaire*. Marx argued that people are not inspired to political action by property relations and self-interested objectives. They require feelings of the essential rightness of their cause and the good it would do for the entire political community. In the Revolution, the bourgeoisie thus adopted the symbols and slogans of ancient Rome, Marx argued, to accomplish deeds of world historical importance and conceal from themselves the narrow banal class ends.[3]

Women, Johnson maintains, played fundamental roles in cementing the familial attachments that secured bourgeois interests. They hosted social gatherings, reported and analyzed politics, stood in for husbands away on business and in the military, assured the running of the household and maintained the family's place in civic activities. Most of all, in the private sphere of the family and kinship, women advanced the public status and power of the members by creating the context for courtship and researching potential spouses.

Reiterating the point made in his essay on the place of the Revolution of 1830 in the trajectory of the French economy, Johnson shows that the bourgeoisie was much more interested in social order than they were in political principles.[4] The common people of Vannes welcomed the Revolution. Aristocratic residences and the noble-dominated cathedral had cast a shadow of inequality over the urban population. Whereas the masses expressed antipathy to the nobility, the well-to-do commoners of Vannes, during the late Old Regime, joined or co-opted the second estate. They did not develop a discourse of antagonism to the nobility, church, or king. The bourgeoisie enjoyed hegemonic leadership over both the Revolution and counterrevolution in moderate ways. Social ties, increasingly cemented by kinship, served to transcend political differences. The mayor since 1778, Alexandre Le Menez de Kerdelléau, patriot as of 1788,

retained his post by a wide margin of votes in the first year of the Revolution. The municipal council remained similar to the one Vannes had had prior to 1789. A half century later, amid the social upheaval of the Second Republic, the bourgeoisie of Vannes put their faith in General Cavaignac. François Jollivet-Castelot, a member of one of the families in Johnson's letters, became mayor and deputy in the years of reaction following the spring of 1848.

The Jollivet family, whose correspondence features prominently in the book, had a country house called Truhélin in Morbihan. The rural mansion formed a central part of the bucolic idyll in European bourgeois consciousness. Like many markers of bourgeois status, the country house harked back to the aristocratic exemplar. Yet the bourgeoisie, Johnson argues, redefined these markers according to their own standards. The chateau no longer projected aristocratic authority. It instead became a private haven for a loving family, kin, and personal friends. The country house still measured the distance from those who did not have one. But rather than measure this distance as a God-given fact, the bourgeois estate did so as the way of the world in which some fared better than others. According to this principle, everyone supposedly had a chance to succeed in life and purchase a chateau.

The relationship of the Jollivets and Galles to their sharecroppers exhibited this bourgeois creed. The Jollivets and Galles showed responsibility for the sharecroppers' wellbeing, respect for their work, and admiration for their conservative politics. The Jollivets and Galles knew all the members of the sharecroppers' families and played with them as kids. The Jollivets and Galles invited the sharecroppers to their weddings. This relationship, Johnson maintains, evinced a rejection of the very idea of social class. Owners and dependent workers mingled together. If some enjoyed a higher social station, it was because of their moral worthiness.

Ironically, this emergent kinship regime ensured that the sharecroppers had less opportunity to breach the class divide than the Jollivets and Galles had had a century earlier when exogamous and unequal marriage was less rare. Consanguinity in marriage became more common in the beginning of the nineteenth century. People saw such close marriages as respectable, desirable, and familiar. Endogamy became a normal practice. It consolidated power, prestige, and assets. The cousins of the Jollivet and Galles families, who married in 1818, committed an illegal act in the doctrine of the Church. But taking care of the religious dispensation was a matter of course. Among the bourgeoisie, cousin marriage happened all the time.

The bourgeois sense of merit stemmed not only from familial relations based on love but also from intellectual attainment. Members of these families, Johnson asserts, were intellectuals in fullest sense of the word. Intellectual accomplishment meant much in and of itself and formed part of the history of bourgeois ascent. Respect and attention went to a man of letters, to a shaper of public opinion. The intellectual was well regarded in political, economic and cultural affairs. Intellectual recognition naturally led to political leadership and moral responsibility to the community. The bourgeois milieu of Vannes, both Liberals and Ultras, was disinterestedly dedicated to civic improvement, government service, and cultural advancement.

In this sense, although the bourgeoisie, in Johnson's book, did not contribute to economic development, democratic openings, or social mobility, they did help build the national community and, in this sense, still retained the progressive impetus attributed to them in the classic historiography of the Revolution. The bourgeoisie of Vannes, Johnson affirms, looked unfavorably upon the rural inhabitants' religious practices. The colorful "pardons" and intense veneration of the "Breton saints" did not seem appropriate to Roman Catholics like the Galles. The bourgeoisie thus differed from the noble landowners of the region. These former aristocrats lived in ways similar to the urban elites yet often spoke Breton and, in the 1790s, claimed counterrevolutionary leadership, as Chouan captains, over the armed movement of the peasants.

These differences between the bourgeoisie and nobility figured prominently in scholarly disputes of the nineteenth century between the *Société polymathique* and the aristocratic-led movement for Breton autonomy. Johnson deduces that the bourgeoisie of Vannes, like urban elites across provincial France, spearheaded the project of forging a nation through their civic and political engagement in local and regional societies. Their defense of France against the Breton countryside formed the basis of their state service in civil and military professions, as well as of their participation in societies for civic improvement. These members of the bourgeoisie far outnumbered the businessmen at the forefront of the industrial and commercial advances of the nineteenth century. They sent their sons out to achieve great things in civic associations and state offices, and to cement their gains through marriages to bourgeois family members. Human links of this sort, Johnson concludes, united the French nation. In the same era when the Republic imposed laws, festivals, and schools, the bourgeoisie forged bonds of kinship in civic societies and government offices, which simultaneously helped to fortify the French state.

## NOTES

[1] [Christopher Johnson](#), *Utopian Communism in France: Cabet and the Icarians, 1839-1851* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1974); and idem., "The Revolution of 1830 in French Economic History," in [John Merriman](#) ed., *1830 in France* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1975), pp. 139-89.

[2] [Christopher Johnson](#), *The Life and Death of Industrial Languedoc, 1700-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); and [Stephen Miller](#), *State and Society in Eighteenth-Century France: A Study of Political Power and Social Revolution in Languedoc* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2008).

[3] Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1994; trans. of 2<sup>nd</sup>. ed. 1869), pp. 16-17.

[4] [Johnson](#), "The Revolution of 1830 in French Economic History," pp. 151-7.

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