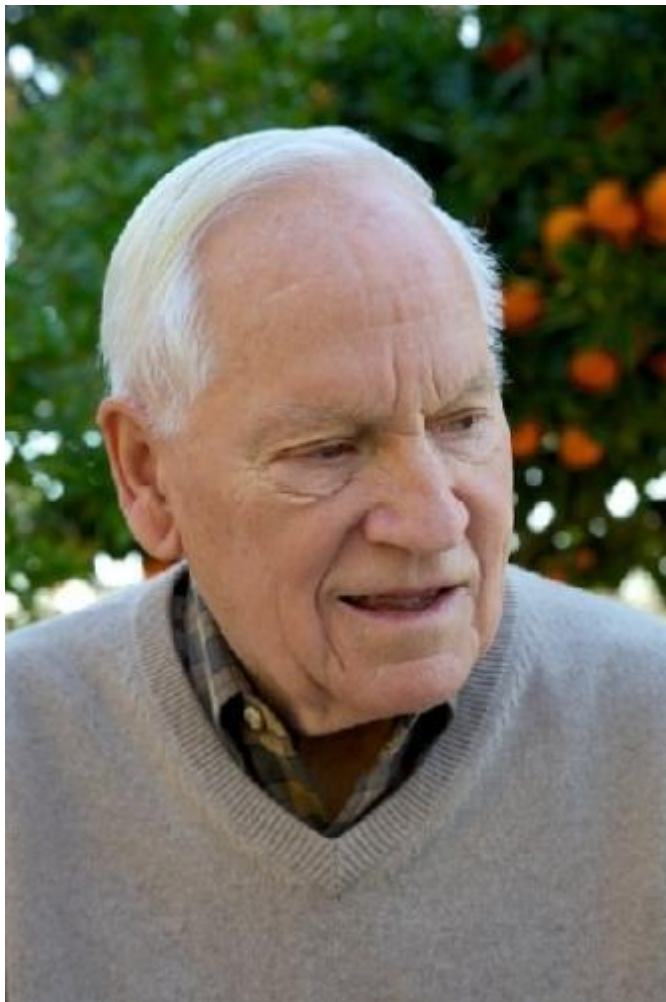


**In Memoriam**  
**David D. Bien (1930-2015)**



David D. Bien, one of the foremost scholars of the ancien regime, passed away under the care of hospice on September 25, 2015, at the age of 85. His path breaking analysis of eighteenth- century French history, combined with his fair-mindedness and generosity of spirit, elicited admiration from friends, colleagues, and students on both sides of the Atlantic.

Born and raised in Baltimore, Maryland, David Bien graduated with an A.B. in 1951 from Washington and Lee University, where he was valedictorian of his graduating class. That year he also wed the love of his life, Margaret Jane Clark (“Peggy”), and began a devoted marriage that lasted 64 years. In 1958 David Bien received his Ph.D. in History from Harvard University, where he had written a doctoral dissertation on the Calas affair under the direction of Crane Brinton. After he taught one year at Wesleyan University, Robert R. Palmer invited him in 1959 to come to Princeton University where he received tenure in 1964. In 1967 he accepted a professorship at the University of Michigan from which he retired as professor emeritus of history in 1996. A friend of the eminent scholar François Furet, David Bien played a central role in setting up an exchange

program between the History Department of the University of Michigan and the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales at a time when the *Annales* school was flourishing. David Bien taught a number of times at the EHESS in Paris. He also served as Chair of the Department of History at Michigan.

Although David Bien made significant contributions to the understanding of the old regime and origins of the French Revolution, he avoided grand narratives and overt theoretical frameworks. Instead, he honed a sensitive institutional approach to the study of history in the manner of Alexis de Tocqueville. Through this perspective, he explored the complex relationship of the state to social groups and uncovered underlying habits of mind that guided human choice, a methodology that combined immersion in archival sources with penetrating reflection.

David Bien's research addressed pivotal historiographical issues. His book *The Calas Affair: Persecution, Toleration, and Heresy in Eighteenth-Century Toulouse* (1960) reinterpreted the famous judicial case in which the Parlement of Toulouse convicted Protestant Jean Calas of killing his son because the son ostensibly wished to convert to Catholicism. Voltaire had cast the case as a clash between progressive Enlightenment thinkers and benighted Catholic judges, a position that eventually became commonplace. According to David Bien, however, magistrates had supported toleration at other times and invoked the enlightened concept of natural law. Fear of Protestantism as a subversive political force explained their verdict in the Calas case. An excellent example of David Bien's careful scholarship, this work also suggested his own commitment to toleration and abhorrence of legal travesties like the McCarthyism of the 1950s. David Bien's first article, "The Background of the Calas Affair," won the inaugural Koren Prize in 1958 for the best article on French history. Twenty years later he received the Koren Prize again, making him only one of four people to have been awarded this honor twice.

Subsequent pioneering research on corporate privilege, social mobility, state finance, and the culture of the army led David Bien to challenge, and often turn on their head, longstanding assumptions about the old regime and origins of 1789, including those critical to the Marxist interpretation of the French Revolution. It was common to argue that blocked social mobility of the bourgeoisie into the nobility was an important cause of the Revolution. Through irrefutable empirical data, David Bien showed the reverse. The widespread existence of ennobling venal offices made social mobility into the nobility not too slow, but too rapid. As a result, older nobles attempted to cordon off access of noble *parvenus* into key institutions like the army officer corps and Parlements, a stance that fragmented noble solidarity and prevented a common defense of aristocratic privilege on the eve of the Revolution.

Privileged bodies, historians often asserted, brought about the financial ruin of the monarchy in 1788 by preventing the creation of necessary taxes. David Bien, by contrast, showed that the monarchy itself had actually expanded the network of privileged groups so that it could borrow money from them. Privilege, therefore, was not opposed to the growth and financing of the Bourbon state; it was integral to it. Hence, although it was frequently claimed that the mission of the monarchy was to centralize administration and undermine the privileges of corporate bodies, David Bien argued, by contrast, that the monarchy's financial reliance on privilege had also promoted decentralization. The legacy of the government's financial dependence on privilege, moreover, made institutional reform before the Revolution difficult, if not impossible, to achieve.

Whereas common sense dictated that ideas of democracy developed in opposition to the privileges of corporate groups, David Bien suggested ways that habits of democracy could also be developing within these bodies and be transferred to the wider society once the Revolution destroyed the barriers of privilege. Tracing the logic underlying seemingly illogical paradoxes such as these became a hallmark of David Bien's innovative and sensitive scholarship.

David Bien presented his seminal findings in a series of elegantly-written and precisely-argued articles. The majority of them are now available in two convenient collections: *Caste, Class and Profession in Old Regime France: the French Army and the Ségur Reform of 1781* (2010), and *Interpreting the Ancien Regime: David Bien* (2015).

Independent-minded and curious, David Bien inspired his graduate students to work on topics close to his own interests, but also encouraged them to develop their own interpretations and consult professors who had different viewpoints and methodologies. The result is that David Bien's legacy has been both passed down and renewed with fresh approaches and insights.

David and Peggy Bien were known for their warm hospitality and opening their house in Ann Arbor and apartment in Paris to graduate students, professors, and friends. A family man *par excellence*, he is survived by his wife, four children and their spouses, nine grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren.

Gail Bossenga  
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