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Dominique Margairaz, *François de Neufchâteau : biographie intellectuelle*. Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2005, 557 pp. Bibliography, Index. €30.40 (cloth). ISBN 2-85944-525-0.

Review by Jeff Horn, Manhattan College.

Forty years ago, sociologist Michel Crozier discussed the emergence of the “bureaucratic phenomenon”[1]; he might well have been talking about Nicolas-Louis François de Neufchâteau (1750-1828) or at least that is the impression left by Dominique Margairaz’s “biographie intellectuelle.” In a lengthy theoretical introduction, Margairaz is at pains to differentiate her intention to explore her subject’s “*oeuvre*”—referring both to writing and action—from more conventional biographical concerns (pp. 7-34). That being said, however, Margairaz follows this scion of the Enlightenment through his illustrious career in Revolutionary politics and administration and situates him within diverse intellectual and political milieus under Napoleon and the Restoration. From a relatively humble beginning as a mediocre poet and playwright from rural Lorraine, Margairaz’s account depicts how and why François de Neufchâteau found his niche in the rarified world of Parisian salons, learned societies and ministerial offices.

Four wide-ranging, dense and highly-theoretical chapters illustrate François de Neufchâteau’s evolution from “poète prodige” to “avocat écrivain” and from “magistrat lettré au réformateur éclairé.” These chapters shed new light on many of the arguments about the spread and practice of the Enlightenment made by Keith Baker, Roger Charter, Robert Darnton, Jurgen Habermas and especially Daniel Roche. The work is based mostly on de Neufchâteau’s work as Lieutenant-General of the bailliage of Mirecourt (1778-83), subdelegate of three bailliages in Lorraine (1780-83) and as *Procureur-Général près le Conseil supérieur du Cap-Français in Saint-Domingue* (1783-86). In these four chapters, Margairaz focuses on the construction or self-fashioning of the public figure of this ambitious, autodidactic provincial rather than on what he actually thought or did. Although much of this discussion is too purely theoretical for this reader, it is full of interesting insights. Of particular note was Margairaz’s exploration of the function of the press in the construction of the “figure” of François de Neufchâteau and the significance of that example for Habermas’s understanding of the growing division between public and private in the eighteenth century (pp. 114-115).

Margairaz devotes three thoroughly-researched chapters to the transitions of François de Neufchâteau both from reforming magistrate to revolutionary politician and from a generalist to a specialist in agronomy. Here scholars intrigued by the seminal works of Timothy Tackett and Pierre Rosanvallon will find a fully realized example of the intellectual process they have elucidated. Margairaz’s attention to the intellectual origins of François de Neufchâteau’s growing interest in agronomy will be of interest to historians of science; her conclusions about this aspect of his experience are original and important. For example, she argues convincingly that on matters of rural economy, François de Neufchâteau was influenced not by the Physiocrats, but by the English (p. 186). Her approach, however, will remind English-language readers of Nanerl Keohane’s thematically- and conceptionally-organized work rather than a more standard biography.[2]

The most thoroughly drawn period in Margairaz’s examination of François de Neufchâteau’s oeuvre is, appropriately, his two stints as Minister of the Interior in (1797, 1798-99) and his eight months as a member of the Directory in 1797-98). Based on his assiduous public service, this determined, thorough, and creative administrator vaulted into the ranks of significant Revolutionary politicians and redefined

the job description of the Minister of the Interior. Although this period gets the greatest attention, it is also the most problematic. Although her theoretical concerns in the five chapters devoted to these five years take the linguistic turn a twist too far, Margairaz does not avail herself of many insights and approaches that would be useful to her. For example, consideration of how François de Neufchâteau's administrative and political actions were received both in the provinces and in Paris would have fleshed out the "figure" of this creative Minister considerably. In a *biographie intellectuelle*, it is also startling not to see some examination of how François de Neufchâteau understood the reception of his actions. In addition, as I will argue elsewhere, his oeuvre and the motivations behind it also makes much more sense if placed in the framework of administrative and political action in the Year II which gets short shrift in this account (pp. 211-212).^[3]

The four chapters that depict François de Neufchâteau's public service and intellectual concerns under the Empire and Restoration are the least detailed and the least satisfying. François de Neufchâteau's political notability placed him in august company both inside and outside the organs of government. Heavily involved in the Senate, the Institute, the *Académie Française*, and the Society for the Encouragement of the National Industry, and with a full chapter devoted to his participation in the *Société libre d'agriculture du département de la Seine*, sociability is the focus in Margairaz's reconstruction of the last thirty years of François de Neufchâteau's life. Despite his enjoyment of the fellowship of these dedicated, practical individuals, the dominant impression of François de Neufchâteau in his declining years was that of a frustrated bureaucrat denied scope for his administrative abilities (p. 431). For this era too, Margairaz fails to make the most of her theoretical underpinnings. To take just one example, the literary historians and literature specialists cited at such length surely could have done more to unpack the practical applications of François de Neufchâteau's use of symbolism in his writings on the food shortages of 1817 (p. 476).

In sum, Margairaz's *biographie intellectuelle* is a detailed, meticulously researched, theoretical-based account of the evolution of an important, understudied figure whose life paralleled the tumultuous transition from the age of Enlightenment through the trials and travails of the revolutionary decade and Napoleonic era until the eve of the Revolution of 1830. It applies and tests many important hypotheses about this era advanced by other scholars and situates these ideas within a theoretical framework that will be both familiar and congenial to many scholars in France and around the world. However, those wishing for a more traditional biographical approach similar to other recent biographies of second-rank Revolutionary figures like those by Pierre Serna and Michael Sydenham will be disappointed by the absence of a clear biographical narrative (although the relevant information is generally to be found in the text), the long theoretical discussions, and the lack of a clear sense of François de Neufchâteau, the man^[4], Margairaz largely succeeded in the goals outlined in her introduction, but this work reveals that there are clear limits to what even the best *biographie intellectuelle* can tell us about this complex individual or about the exciting times through which he lived.

NOTES

[1] Michel Crozier, *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967 [1963]).

[2] Nanerl O. Keohane, *Philosophy and the State in France: the Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980).

[3] Jeff Horn, *The Path Not Taken: French Industrialization in the Age of Revolution 1750-1830* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), chapters 5-7, forthcoming.

[4] Pierre Serna, *Antonelle: aristocrat révolutionnaire, 1747-1817* (Paris: Éditions du Félin, 1997) and Michael J. Sydenham, *Leonard Bourdon: the career of a revolutionary, 1754-1807* (Waterloo, Ont: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1999).

Jeff Horn
Manhattan College
jeff.horn@manhattan.edu

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