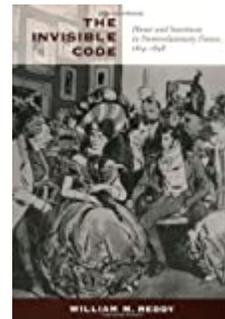




William M. Reddy. *The Invisible Code: Honor and Sentiment in Postrevolutionary France, 1814-1848.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. xv + 258 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-20536-9.



Reviewed by Edgar Leon Newman (New Mexico State University)

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William M. Reddy has a subtle understanding of character that breathes life into his historical descriptions. In this book he portrays three diverse groups in post-Revolutionary France and claims that all of them were motivated by an “invisible code” of honor. Building upon three essays which he published previously, Reddy examines requests for marital separations in Versailles, civil servants in the ministry of the interior, and journalists.

The court records of petitions for marital separation in post-Revolutionary France (there was no divorce at that time) reveal a society guided by the idea of honor—that is, by a desire to avoid public shame. Judges were not willing to intervene in the private lives of married couples, for example when a husband beat his wife. But when private problems brought public dishonor, such as when a husband beat his wife and the neighbors found out, then the court would intervene to protect the wife’s honor. These cases show that nineteenth-century Frenchmen believed women had a sense of honor and a right to live honorably. Even proletarian women, whose petitions constitute 22 percent of Reddy’s sample of court cases in Versailles, spoke of their need to maintain their honor by escaping from a situation that brought them shame.

While Reddy maintains that honor was the principal motivating factor behind these petitions, he also notes

that most of them had to do with money. In France a married woman had no control over her own fortune, but a legally separated woman could manage her personal property. To his credit, Reddy does not try to disentangle economic motivation from motives based on the sentiment of honor.

When Reddy turns to investigate another group, he changes the meaning of the word “honor”. Petitioners for legal separation saw honor as escape from shame. Civil servants in the ministry of the interior saw honor as advancement in rank. Once again, there were economic as well as sentimental reasons why they wanted to be promoted. A supernumerary might serve a two-year apprenticeship without pay before becoming a scribe at 600 francs a year, then a *redacteur*, who edited the notes of the assistant bureau chief at 1,200 francs a year, then an assistant bureau chief at perhaps 3,500 francs a year, and then bureau chief earning possibly 8,000 francs a year. Promotions could thus improve a man’s pocketbook as well as his self-esteem, and Reddy shows that employees were not shy about asking for raises in pay as long as they could justify them in an honorable manner by pleading that they had families to support, children to educate, and so on. A civil servant who wished to acquire professional honor would often find that he had to jeopardize his personal honor. Ideally, a bureaucrat was

pledged to serve his government and his country. Actually, he served only his superiors. Indeed, government jobs in post-Revolutionary France were based on patronage even more than they had been before. Under the Old Regime, ministers had been forced to hire top-level civil servants from a short list of elder sons of privileged families. After 1789 ministers had a much wider choice of whom to hire, and this wider labor pool enabled them to insist on a higher degree of personal loyalty among their subordinates. Personal connections became more important than ever, and merit was of minor importance at best and, in some cases, it could harm a man's career. Promotions and honors came to those who, like Gilbert and Sullivan's admiral, were most expert in polishing up the handle of their bosses' front door.

Journalists, like civil servants, fell far short of their ideals. Just as few bureaucrats were truly civic-minded public servants, few journalists were vigilant critics defending the public interest. They were, instead, money-grubbing mercenary soldiers of the pen. Newspapers were weapons wielded by political cliques which shamelessly contended for power with little regard for the national interest. Journalists seldom talked about issues and concentrated instead on slandering political rivals, and for this service their editors paid them 5 francs a column.

Reddy asserts that these journalists were motivated not by self-interest but rather by a hidden sense of honor. Once a mercenary journalist had sold his pen, he was honor-bound to defend his employer by using all the weapons at his command: slander, innuendo, satire, and falsehood. Like the Scottish mercenaries in Sir Walter Scott's *Quentin Durwood*, which was enormously popular in France, his honor demanded that he defend a dishonorable cause.

No doubt Reddy, given the sources, could also have described with style and flair the honor among thieves, and he is right to remind us that even criminals have their own code of conduct. But this code of conduct is not "honor" as the word is generally understood and as Reddy defines it in his introductory chapter. As Reddy shows, many journalists believed that they were violating the honor code of their profession. Honor demanded that they be independent and sincere, but they were mercenary and mendacious. Their code of conduct, which Reddy calls "honor", needs another name.

Indeed, the word "honor" is used in this book to mean different things. In the case of petitioners for marital separation, it meant respectability. For the civil servants, it meant an increase in rank. For the journalists, it meant

political success and personal fame. Thus, there were several "invisible codes" which motivated human behavior in post-Revolutionary France, and they were mixed, among other things, with material self-interest. In the end, we are left with three different portraits of humanity which are as complex and as difficult to analyse as life itself.

An especially valuable chapter in this book explores how the ideal of honor was taught in nineteenth-century France. Students learned from Cicero, Jean Racine, and Marie de Sevigne that men and women must repress their personal sentiments in favor of the needs of their family and their country. Reddy should be commended for describing the importance of the Classical model in forming the identity of European society before World War II.

I have a few rare quibbles with this wide-ranging and erudite work. One is with Reddy's claim that Victor Hugo, son of a general, was a self-made man "who rose from nothing" (pp. 22-23). Also, his description of France 1814-48 as an open, laissez-faire society does not take into account either the continuing power of government or the existence of traditional working-class corporate organizations like those described in the work of Cynthia Truant, Jean Briquet, and Michael Sibalis, and in the autobiographies of workers like those studied by Mark Traugott and Mary Jo Maynes (H-France review, Sept. 1996).

Finally, Reddy's assumption that the Revolution had wrought fundamental changes in the sentiments of French society needs some discussion. He might, for example, have addressed Francois Furet's contention that French society in the July Monarchy was almost identical with that of the Old Regime, and David Higgs' and Arno Mayer's claim that post-Revolutionary French society was still dominated by its nobility. Was honor, as Reddy says (pp. xii, 22), a sentiment which reached the middle class only after the Revolution? One thinks of the members of the Third Estate in Versailles in May 1789 risking arrest to defend their honor and of Voltaire challenging a member of the nobility to a duel. Even peasants of the Old Regime would carry out riotous charivaris against anyone who, in their opinion, had brought shame upon their community. Reddy is dealing here with eternal, universal sentiments, and not with sentiments that had been democratized by the Revolution. He correctly points out the error of Karl Marx, Rene de Chateaubriand, and Alexis de Tocqueville, who said that honor belonged to the feudal past, whereas their own nineteenth century was guided by material self-interest (p. 19).

If pride is a sin, then we are all forever sinners. Reddy's work contributes important new evidence of how important our universal sense of honor is in motivating human actions and of how many forms it can take. His interpretation reminds us of the complexity of post-Revolutionary France in particular and of people in general. They married and separated, worked for the government, wrote for newspapers, and acted out of sentiment, economic self-interest, and honor. Reddy's re-

search into the details of French life and his skillful comparison of real-life documents with literary stereotypes have charted a worthwhile course in the field of cultural history.

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