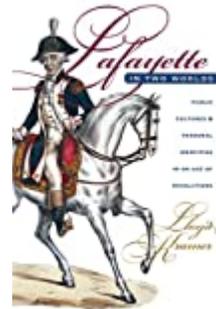




Lloyd Kramer. *Lafayette in Two Worlds: Public Cultures and Personal Identities in an Age of Revolutions.* North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1996. xii + 354 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2258-6.



Reviewed by John Dunne (University of Greenwich, London)

Published on H-France (October, 1997)

A Lafayette for our times

This ambitious, complex, and important work is unlike anything else in the vast body of Lafayette literature. For a start, as its subtitle suggests, it is not in the normal sense a biography. What once would have been called Lafayette's "formative years" are dispatched in a dozen or so lines of a two-page biographical summary contained in the Introduction. Neither are we offered the customary pen picture or character sketch of the subject, though he does feature in many of the thirty-one contemporary paintings or prints which accompany the text. As a result, when at the beginning of Chapter One the nineteen-year old marquis lands in the New World to serve in George Washington's army, he is almost as unfamiliar to us as he must have been to his American hosts.

Nor is the book a study of his political life. The high points of a public career spanning nearly sixty years—his involvement in, respectively, the American and French Revolutions and the Revolution of 1830 in France—are each the subject of a chapter. Surprisingly, his active support at a safe distance for the failed Polish nationalist rising of 1830-31 is similarly singled out for spe-

cial attention. However, the prominent part he played in the events of the "Pre-Revolution" in France, which resulted in the breakdown of royal absolutism and the calling of the Estates-General for 1789, is passed over in complete silence, while the account of his activities as republican king-maker to Louis-Philippe in 1830 is not prefaced with an investigation into his behaviour in the escalating political crisis which brought down Charles X. Other episodes such as his cautious return to public life during Napoleon's Hundred Days, or during the Restoration his lead role in the liberal opposition up until the loss of his seat in the Chamber of Deputies in 1824, simply form the backdrop to the book's other four chapters.

Three of these—variously titled "Lafayette and Liberal Theorists," "Lafayette and Romantic Culture, 1814-1834," and "Lafayette and Women Writers"—consist of excursions into his relations with friends or acquaintances in intellectual and artistic circles. In the first case, these are with the liberal political theorists Destutt de Tracy, Benjamin Constant, and Jeremy Bentham; in the second, with the writers Lady Morgan and Fenimore Cooper, and the opera singer Maria Malibran; and in the third,

with the writers Germaine de Stael, Fanny Wright, and Cristina Belgiojoso. The odd one out of this quartet of chapters takes the occasion of Lafayette's triumphal tour of the United States in 1824-25 as the opportunity not so much for an account of the extraordinary reception given him by the American people on his spiritual homecoming, as for a comparison of Lafayette and Alexis de Tocqueville as interpreters and shapers of an emerging American national identity.

Faced with such a puzzling and apparently disjointed collection of essays, the cynical or—in Kramer's terminology "ironic"—reviewer may be tempted to see it as a pragmatic response to historiographical circumstances: that is, either an attempt to plug gaps left by other writers or else a case of simply following where the sources lead. Certainly, the overall concentration of the book on the post-1800 period, not covered in Louis Gottschalk's six-volume biography (1935-72), and the prominence given to Lafayette's dealings with women intellectuals are partly justified in the former terms. In fairness, though, it has to be said that Kramer is as much concerned to render the better known aspects of the Lafayette story less familiar as the reverse. Probably the exigencies of his sources have had a greater influence on the final shape of the work. Although issues surrounding the selection and handling of source material are given remarkably little coverage, it is safe to infer that Kramer's heavy reliance on Lafayette's correspondence contained in several collections of private papers has much to do both with his general preoccupation with Lafayette's friendships, and his choice of those to feature in the book's cast list. Most conspicuous among the absentees is Adrienne, the wife he married at sixteen, who after his capture by Austrian troops chose to share his imprisonment, and whose portrait, we are told, he worshiped every day after her death in 1807.

Kramer's ambition, however, is not to find a place within the existing historiography, but to transcend it. His purpose is in two senses to provide us with "a Lafayette for our times." First and foremost, this entails a methodological project: to bring to bear on an individual life the insights and methods of the new cultural history more usually deployed in the study of the mentalities of groups or political culture. Kramer has made elsewhere the general case for a new cultural approach to history founded on an awareness of "the active role of language, texts, and narrative structures" (see his essay "Literature, Criticism, and Historical Imagination: The Literary Challenge of Hayden White and Dominick LaCapra," in Lynn Hunt (ed.), *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley, 1989: 97-

98.). Here he justifies his project more in terms of the bankruptcy of traditional biography, based as it is on outmoded notions of the transcendent self and the autonomy of the individual actor. For Kramer "individuals can never be separated from the social, cultural, and symbolic world in which they act and construct an identity for themselves" (p. 2). This was all the more so in Lafayette's case since as a well known public figure on two continents for the best part of sixty years, "his life became inseparable from the public narratives about his life" (p. 8). Accordingly, the historian's task is not to read through these narratives, but quite simply to read them. Naturally this task of metaphorical textual criticism calls for the skills and techniques of the literary specialist.

In place then of an impossible search for the real Lafayette, this work offers us a series of essays in "the dialectics of identity" in which our hero is both subject and object. Each chapter examines how in a particular political or cultural context his identity was shaped, reshaped, and sustained through his interactions with other individuals, movements, and national cultures, and how in turn he helped these "others" find meaning and identity. So, for example, the first chapter "America's Lafayette and Lafayette's America: A European and the American Revolution" looks at, in Kramer's phrase, the "identity-forming exchange" whereby, on the one hand, the young marquis becomes symbolically transformed into the hero of two worlds, and, on the other, America's emerging national identity is reinforced and given respectability by association with its high born visitor.

Given that, in comparison with traditional biography, the logic of this post-modern or literary critical treatment de-centres the subject in a number of ways—for example, privileging the times over the life—it is surprising to learn that *Lafayette in Two Worlds* seeks at the same time, in a sense, to "re-centre" its subject in the historiography. For the book's second over-riding purpose is to combat modern accounts of Lafayette's life which have minimised his historical importance and worth. In Kramer's view Lafayette has been one of the great casualties of the "ironic" assumptions and debunking tendencies of twentieth-century scholarship which have transformed the Romantic symbol of disinterested idealism into a popularity-hunting, political mediocrity. Rather than a systematic refutation of the charges contained in this historiography, Kramer prefers to deconstruct it initially and then to offer his own alternative, "post-ironic" readings of Lafayette's career and significance.

How far does the book succeed in this enormously

ambitious undertaking? In my view, the rehabilitation of Lafayette is no more than a qualified success. Indeed, it can be objected that the exercise is not as necessary as Kramer maintains. His claim that Lafayette has been badly treated by modern historians involves a partial reading of the American historiography. Firstly, it rests on associating Louis Gottschalk, the greatest figure in the twentieth-century scholarship of Lafayette, with his detractors. True the picture which emerges from his various works is of the “warts and all” variety, but to attribute this to the malign influence of “the structuring ironic assumptions of modern historiography” (p. 4) rather than the obligations of critical scholarship, is surely open to question. Secondly, it ignores—for this purpose—the contribution of Kramer’s own mentor and since Gottschalk’s death, the leading living authority, Stanley Idzerda, who has consistently represented Lafayette as a uniquely moral force in politics (see, for example, his essay “Character as Destiny: A New Look at Lafayette’s Career” in *La France et l’esprit de 76: Colloque du bicentenaire de l’Independance des Etats-Unis ...*, Universite de Clermont-Ferrand II; nouv. ser., fasc. 1, 1977).

Compared to Idzerda, Kramer offers a broader, more balanced and also—mercifully—more restrained defence. But its very moderation is a source of weakness as well as strength. His argument that Lafayette was a more effective political actor than widely supposed is made in part through directing attention from the moments when he was at the centre of the political stage to his work behind the scenes for an endless list of civil rights campaigns. Yet even here Kramer is forced to admit in terms of tangible results that his record was not terribly impressive. Writing specifically of his efforts on behalf of Italian liberals in prison and exile, he acknowledges that “Lafayette’s public campaign ... met with the small successes and large disappointments that characterised so many of his political causes” (p. 176).

On the largest and historically most important of these disappointments Kramer can do no little more than plead mitigating circumstances. Rather than the result of a lack of political skill or nerve, his ultimate failure in the French Revolutions of 1789 and 1830, when as commander of the National Guard he appeared to hold the reins of power, was due to forces beyond his control. Indeed in view of the difficulties he faced and the conflicting demands and interests of the various groups which made up his power base, the wonder is he was able to stay on top as long as he did.

This analysis may or may not be correct—I find it more persuasive in the case of the events of 1790-91 than 1830—but without any consideration of the range of theoretical political options open to him, it remains unconvincing. Furthermore, in the case of 1830, the appeal to what almost amounts to a culturalist version of historical inevitability is somewhat undermined by the acknowledgment that Lafayette’s moral scruples—his refusal to resort to “historical tricks that no honest leader could perform” (p. 251)—further circumscribed his room for manoeuvre.

It is perhaps a tacit admission of the comparative weakness of this part of the argument that in the end Kramer rests his case on Lafayette’s importance as an enduring political symbol rather than as a historical actor. Although he argues with his customary subtlety and eloquence for Lafayette’s continuing relevance today—his optimistic idealism and faith in the democratic process as an antidote to the prevailing scepticism and disillusionment within contemporary Western (perhaps in view of the recent elections in Great Britain and France, this should just be American) political culture—the basic point was surely never in dispute.

Such reservations about the novelty of Kramer’s conclusions can be extended to the work of as a whole. Undoubtedly it repays reading not just for its interest and importance as an experiment in method and genre, but also for the ready supply of incidental insights and sidelights on both period and its central figure. Yet in neither area do these, I think, quite add up to the “new readings” promised at the outset. Indeed, to confine discussion to the man rather than his times, it is surprising that the picture of Lafayette which emerges from Kramer’s “cubist” treatment is not more complex and varied. Certainly the accounts of both his dealings with his friends and his involvement in a host of “minority” political movements suggest a more sympathetic and to some extent adaptable individual than is often allowed. Small wonder that someone who lavished such attention and hospitality on his friends and their friends, and was always ready to “*rendre service*,” was so appreciated by them. Equally his readiness to take on new radical causes—often indirectly, as in the case of Fanny Wright’s anti-slavery farm project, through the support of his activist friends—should free him from his unfortunate association with nineteenth-century liberalism of the stern, unbending sort. Overall, though, what comes across most strikingly is the sheer consistency, almost predictability, of his aspirations and actions through the ups and downs of his long career. In addition to Lafayette’s celebrated love of liberty and liberal causes, Kramer finds another unifying theme in the

story of his life: within and between the various overlapping worlds in which he moved, he continually assumed the role of “cross-cultural mediator.”

P.N. Furbank has argued persuasively and entertainingly in the pages of the *New York Review of Books* (11 July 1996, pp. 50-52) that the fundamental problem with Kramer’s book derives from the unpromising nature of his subject: quite simply, Lafayette had no hidden depths for the historian–post- modern or otherwise–to reveal. No doubt there is much in this view, but it is not a conclusion we can reach on the basis of Kramer’s work since it offers no explicit exploration of its subject’s inner life. Ironically, in discarding the study of motive and intention presumably as unwanted baggage of old-style biography, he has left this field of interpretation in the possession of the debunkers. More positively, there are other ways in which Kramer’s strategic choices both in terms of methodology and subject matter may have inadvertently worked to the detriment of his subject. All come back ultimately to his decision to work with Lafayette’s own narrative of his life rather than challenge or problematise

it. Two of the most intriguing and obscure episodes of his career—his flirtation with Caesarism in 1791 and with the insurrectionism of the Carbonari—which might possibly have subverted the smooth flow of this linear narrative are simply by-passed. Equally, if Kramer’s epistemological stance makes it impossible for him to confront Lafayette’s text of his life with the historical reality behind it, surely his literary critical approach should allow and enable him to offer alternative readings of it. Yet his decision to base his work principally on Lafayette’s correspondence with friends and admirers has deprived him of one obvious source for such a reading. As a result, by way of a final irony, a work which is conceived as a radical break with traditional biography exhibits to some degree one of its notorious failings: namely, a tendency to take its subject at his or her own estimation.

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Citation: John Dunne. Review of Kramer, Lloyd, *Lafayette in Two Worlds: Public Cultures and Personal Identities in an Age of Revolutions*. H-France, H-Net Reviews. October, 1997.

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