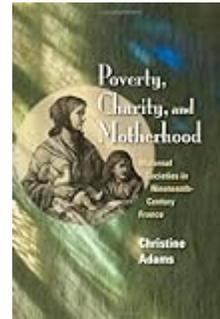




Christine Adams. *Poverty, Charity, and Motherhood: Maternal Societies in Nineteenth-Century France.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010. xi + 251 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03547-0.



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Toward a Deeper Understanding of the Long Nineteenth Century

Recently, a growing tide of tightly focused monographs on women and children have been appearing, and each brings us one step closer not only to truly understanding the nature of family life, childhood, and gender in the nineteenth century, but also to recasting our larger vision of that era in light of new information. This is one such monograph. It is richly detailed, well grounded in existing historiography, yet fully willing to challenge existing notions. H-Childhood readers should be forewarned that this book is more about motherhood than about childhood: it is less a book on children's history than one on women's history. Nevertheless, it necessarily deals extensively with attitudes toward children, childbirth, and child rearing that make it an important source for historians of childhood and youth. For those seeking to understand the larger issues of motherhood, social welfare, and the politics of charity and of gender, this is an essential read.

Christine Adams traces the politics of financial assistance to poor mothers and their children from the last years of the old regime in the 1780s into the twentieth

century, but the chief focus of the book is on the largest and most powerful of these charities: the Society for Maternal Charity (SMC). Founded in 1788 and first meeting in early 1789, the SMC was a model of Enlightenment social thought. It sought to ameliorate the problem of infant abandonment by giving poor mothers financial assistance, and therefore an incentive to keep rather than to abandon their newborns. Founded by enlightened nobles, and with Queen Marie Antoinette as the titular founder and protector, the new association seemed to have a bright future (p. 33). However, almost immediately, the organization found itself thrust into the political maelstrom of the French Revolution, and a key theme of the book is the continuing political struggles that the society faced as it tried to carry out its mission. After all, it was a powerful, national organization that counted many of society's elite among its members. It dispensed large amounts of cash and took in large donations, which resulted in intense government scrutiny of its activities, for fear that it might be engaging in clandestine political organization. Even though this clearly was

not the case, the SMC constantly struggled with interference from government officials as regimes changed, and as each new government sought to impose its own control and vision on the SMC while trying to take credit for its charitable work as a means of improving the government's popularity. This pattern continued throughout the nineteenth century: government interest (and interference) in the work of the SMC continually challenged its ability to perform its work, and ultimately resulted in its being reduced to a minor player in the social welfare scene. Nevertheless, Adams argues that the SMC's work paved the way for the modern social welfare state, particularly in the area of aid to families.

The basic tenets of the SMC were that infant abandonment was a major social ill; that mothers who breastfed their babies were more likely to develop sentimental attachments and keep them; and that some financial assistance contingent on breastfeeding was essential to encourage the mothers to first feed, then keep, their babies. Furthermore, the SMC's founders felt that only the "deserving" poor should receive assistance from the limited funds available, and this excluded unwed mothers. The SMC had strong religious principles, which worked in its favor for many years; trouble came once anticlerical republicans gained political power late in the nineteenth century, but for most of the century, the idea that a legitimate, religious marriage ceremony was a basic prerequisite for aid stood the SMC in good stead in its relations with conservative officialdom. For those tempted to think of the SMC as nothing more than an arm of conservative Catholicism, it is important to note that its fundamental ideas were extremely progressive. As Adams notes, there were two main sides to the debate about the causes of the eighteenth-century epidemic of child abandonment that spawned the SMC in the closing years of the Enlightenment. Many commentators "pointed to debauchery and indifference as the reason that so many mothers abandoned their children," while many others argued that it was poverty itself that was the cause. "It was this emphasis on the role of poverty in dulling, even extinguishing, maternal love and leading women to forget their maternal duties that led Madame de Fougere to found the Society for Maternal Charity" (p. 31). Indeed, while the SMC was an elite organization, founded by nobles and run primarily by notables with strong government assistance, there was an undeniably progressive, even potentially revolutionary, idea behind it: that the health and strength of the nation itself depended on the health and strength of France's poor families; and that some form of income redistribution, however limited

and contingent, was necessary to ensure that the nation would thrive. Adams shows that this potentially revolutionary idea never became actually revolutionary, and in fact shows that both government officials and business leaders often saw the SMC's work as an antidote to revolutionary sentiments. If the poor saw the wealthy as benevolent, kind, and generous, then workers should be more apt to be peaceful and to respect the established order. That many elite men explicitly stated this as a goal of government funding for the SMC speaks volumes about the motivation behind much of its funding.

Nevertheless, Adams makes clear that the women who formed and operated the society on a daily basis were motivated by more generous sentiments. Her assertion that this cross-class assistance was "predicated on the ideal of sisterly solidarity" is perhaps going too far, at least in some cases (p. 95). Many elite women were disgusted by the living conditions of their poor "sisters," for example, and many of the ladies who ran local branches refused to allow their charges access to them at their elegant bourgeois homes. Moreover, in at least a few cases, the wealthy ladies who ran local chapters engaged only in fundraising and administrative work, leaving the actual mingling with the unwashed to religious orders. Nonetheless, Adams makes it clear that in the majority of cases, the SMC's branches throughout France operated in a generous manner and that usually it was the wealthy women themselves who went out into the streets of the poorest neighborhoods, posting flyers, identifying the worthy poor, offering assistance, and keeping in touch with advice, surveillance, and if necessary, admonishments. She also argues convincingly that the intense and national efforts of these women established the precedent for the later establishment of professional female social workers, who used the methods of the SMC in their government work. On a broader note, Adams shows that the SMC provided an excellent school for citizenship for elite women, since they had to deal with government officials from kings, emperors, and presidents down to the level of local prefects and sub-prefects. They also had to organize, fundraise, budget, and spend large sums of money. Perhaps just as important, they had to study the ever-changing male political landscape and frame their ideals, goals, and bylaws in terms that were most likely to elicit elite male support while avoiding any hint that their activities posed a threat to the state.

Adams shows that this last goal was not always easy. The Revolution all but destroyed the SMC for a time, Napoleon I took it over and used it (rather unsuccessful-

fully) as a tool to increase his own popularity, and the July Monarchy harassed it in a paranoid effort to stifle the use of private associations as tools for legitimist propaganda. Moreover, once the Third Republic fell into the hands of radical anticlerical republicans, the SMCs essentially conservative, religious values placed it in direct opposition to the government's secular policies, and many local branches failed to adjust to this new and (to them) troubling political reality. As the SMC insisted on helping only married mothers (and often only those married in religious as opposed to civil ceremonies), the national government reduced funding and eventually took over assistance to families as part of a larger welfare state concept, thus ending the dominance of the SMC in that area.

At this point, we have to ask what is there in the book for the average H-Childhood subscriber. The book is without a doubt largely about women's history and about women organizing within the fairly rigid restrictions of gender roles and government control of associations in nineteenth-century France. Adams's thesis reinforces this idea: "I want to insist that the female members ... played a role in shaping the language and policies of maternalism and in providing a future model for the provision of social services. Maternalism—the notion that their familial experiences and special moral sensibilities made women particularly well-suited to help improve the lives of poor mothers and their children—was a potent ideology by the late nineteenth century and provided the key link between women's private family roles and public activities" (p. 27). Children appear in the book only as incidental objects rather than as agents of their own, and there seems no way around this since the SMC's mandate was to aid mothers with their children from birth through the first two years of life only. Adams tells us a good deal about French attitudes toward children and about how they changed over time, attitudes that range from those of poor mothers to elite women to top government officials. There are deep insights into the government's views on infant abandonment. Not surprisingly, the way each successive regime handled this problem throws light on its underlying values and motivations, and this

alone helps us understand not only the larger context of childhood in nineteenth-century France, but also the nature of the various regimes themselves. Historians of every stripe should read closely here and ask hard questions about what these regimes really stood for, based on their treatment of their weakest and most vulnerable citizens. There are also delightful tidbits, such as the custom of the *babymobile* that the SMC's founder designed and built to transport abandoned infants more safely and comfortably: a perfect example of Enlightenment ideals encountering the intractable problems of the real world.

Adams's book is therefore a strong addition to the history of families in nineteenth-century France, and a worthy addition to the literature on childhood, even if that is a secondary focus of the book. She writes well, she organizes the book effectively, and she is firmly grounded in the larger context of the secondary literature in both women's and children's history, as well as the more general threads of intellectual, social, and political history. On top of this, she uses primary sources well, and she chose a good cross-section of representative French cities for her intense local research, even while the focus of the book remains on the SMC as a national (and thus Paris-based) phenomena. Overall, her strong command of both the primary and secondary literature makes this book compelling, interesting, and insightful, even if several other historians have previously examined the SMC. What problems do exist are relatively minor. The book lacks a bibliography, which makes finding a particular source tedious, since the only possible method is to troll through the copious endnotes looking for the first full citation. Likewise, the index is brief, which could hinder researchers. The real essence of the book is that it is well researched, well argued, and well supported. For historians of childhood, this book provides a larger context to the child welfare debate of the nineteenth century, as well as interesting and sometimes fascinating snapshots of the efforts to help the poorest and youngest French citizens. Overall, this is an excellent monograph with applications in a wide variety of national and transnational historical fields, as well as in the study of the history of childhood.

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