

Politics and Economies of Reputation

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What's in an individual once under the public gaze? Building on recent academic trends, two books – one in English, one in French – explore the historical construct of the self in the context of eighteenth-century France.

Reviewed: Jean-Luc Chappey, *Ordres et désordres biographiques: Dictionnaires, listes de noms, réputation des Lumières à Wikipédia* (Seysssel: Champ Vallon, 2013)

Clare Haru Crowston, *Credit, Fashion, Sex: Economies of Regard in Old Régime France* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013)

Historians of eighteenth-century France have become increasingly interested in the 'individual'. Inspired by the conceptual framework of such theorists as Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, research on identity, self-fashioning and reputation has in recent years become bound up with the study of historical processes (social mobility, rising consumption, public opinion) that reveal a historically unstable and contingently produced 'self'. The two monographs under consideration here investigate these themes, especially the problem of 'regard', that is, how individuals saw and assessed each other. Although the authors analyze different phenomena – biographical notices for Jean-Luc Chappey, fashion and credit for Clare Haru Crowston – both explore the practices that developed in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries for representing and managing reputations.

To be sure, the use of print and fashion to assert one's standing in society had existed for centuries. Two developments, however, altered their importance in the eighteenth century. First, the consumer revolution, which made print and fashion increasingly accessible. This revolution offered new means for understanding the world (print) and expressing oneself (fashion). Second, the rise of a critical public sphere in which moral assessments about individuals – what they wrote, for example, and what they wore – became increasingly difficult to control. Struggles over social standing took place in an increasingly competitive world, where textual accounts of one's life and work (Chappey) and sartorial strategies (Crowston) became vulnerable to the vicissitudes of market forces and public opinion.

Biographical dictionaries and 'biocratie'

Although Chappey's subtitle suggests that his analysis of biographical notices will stretch from the Enlightenment to the present, most of the book focuses on the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The author follows a partially regressive chronology, beginning with the early nineteenth century, receding to the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, before returning to the early nineteenth century,

then leaping to the early twenty-first. The story really begins with Chapter Two, which shows how the genre of biographical notices became a vehicle for Enlightenment critique. Whereas biographical sketches before the Enlightenment aimed to glorify the heroic deeds of princes, nobles and religious figures, those of the Enlightenment altered these norms in several ways. First, they introduced alphabetization, ordering entries according to name spelling rather than rank, an innovation that undermined social and political hierarchies. Second, they celebrated not only the heroic actions of ‘hommes puissants’ (powerful men) but also the intelligence and skill of ‘grands hommes’ (great men), whose literary, artistic or scientific talents were seen as contributing to the public good. Merit thus gained importance over birth, and civic actions over courage on the battlefield. Third, biographical dictionaries began including notices on the living and not only on the dead, creating a new field for struggles over reputations. Fourth, and most crucially, Enlightenment biographical dictionaries contained assessments, often critical, of the actions and works of individuals. Framing these assessments in historical terms, these dictionaries tried to fix individual reputations into durable legacies.

These developments took place in a publishing context that saw periodic deregulation. Negative criticism of an individual and his oeuvre in one dictionary might be countered by positive criticism in another, especially as Enlightenment philosophes and anti-philosophes battled each other in print between the 1750s and the Revolution. While the editors of these dictionaries and their increasingly large teams of contributors saw themselves bringing order and norms to literature, art and the sciences, their judgments were often regarded as calumnious. Throughout the Old Regime, the monarchy played a mediating role in reputational politics, according titles, privileges and honors to those deemed of merit. Even the approbation of the censorship might be construed as a badge of honor in the Republic of Letters. But the financial strains of the late 1780s deprived the monarchy of the means to continue playing this role. Reputations were left to the vicissitudes of print markets and public opinion. This development undermined ‘the political authority of the king, who seemed no longer capable of playing his “natural role” of making society legible.’ (p. 169).¹

Historical dictionaries virtually disappeared during the French Revolution, as collective imaginations turned away from French history and towards classical antiquity and a mythic present. To manage reputations, contemporaries took to making lists. Who was electable? Who was a good citizen? Who was a counterrevolutionary? Chappey argues that lists were blunt, Manichean instruments. Electoral lists, lists of suspects, lists of émigrés – all such lists tended to divide the world into the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’, those to be honored and those to be reviled, and even executed.

Despite the proliferation of lists, narratives about individuals persisted in the Revolution in what Chappey refers to as *biocratie*: biographical sketches furnished for judicial or administrative purposes. Suspects during the Terror would often write brief biographies to justify their actions and sentiments. Access to honors, pensions and

¹ «[...] l’autorité politique du roi qui ne semble plus être capable de jouer son rôle «naturel» consistant à rendre lisible la société.»

political assemblies and clubs often required explaining who one was and why one merited such access. ‘Biographical writing became an important tool of individual promotion’(p. 203).² In the first decade of the nineteenth century, biographical dictionaries returned, as did battles over reputations. Often at stake was determining an individual’s role in the Revolution and complicity in its horrors. The tightening of print regulations under Napoleon and the emperor’s active intervention in drafting lists, bestowing honors and publishing reports on the state of the sciences, arts and letters kept tensions over reputations under a certain degree of control. After 1814, however, dictionaries with different political slants proliferated, as did battles over reputations.

Not all biographical dictionaries were partisan, however. In Chapter One, Chappey discusses the *Biographie universelle* (1811-1828) published by the frères Michaud, who managed a team of more than three hundred contributors with various political convictions (mostly royalist and liberal) from a wide array of institutions and professions: members of royal academies, journalists, censors, and other well-placed administrators. Chappey argues here that ‘the need to sell volumes by subscription to the broadest possible reading public seems to have limited the taking of strong or radical positions, prompting the editors to maintain a certain degree of moderation or restraint.’ (p. 33)³. In Chapter Six, which covers the same period, Chappey describes a more contentious world. Biographical dictionaries with different political views battle against each other. Among them, we find pro-royalist ones, including one published by the frères Michaud. Their *Biographie des hommes vivants* (1816-1819), a complement to their more neutral and compendious *Biographie universelle*, adopted a far less neutral tone. Chappey argues that the *Biographie des hommes vivants* provided the brothers a means to consolidate their position within the Restoration regime. Further reflection by the author, however, about how we should make sense of the contradictory agendas of the frères Michaud – moderation and diverse political views in the *Biographie universelle*; royalist partisanship with their *Biographie des hommes vivants* on the other – would have been helpful. If the frères Michaud were exploiting moderation in the former to finances partisanship in the latter, what does that say about the development of standards of accuracy and neutrality in the genre of biographical dictionaries in the nineteenth century? Did not their partisanship in the *Biographie des hommes vivants* undermine their credibility as neutral (or at least pluralist) in their *Biographie universelle*?

Chappey races through the latter half of the nineteenth century and the entire twentieth century in a few pages, ending the book with an analysis of biographical notices in Wikipedia. He focuses on the squabbles among historians and the editors of Wikipedia over the webpages concerning controversial figures of the French Revolution. The entry ‘Robespierre’, for example, proved to be especially contentious, prompting repeated modifications. Eventually, two historians, at odd with each other’s interpretation, revealed their identities (Wiki contributors generally remain anonymous) in attempts to leverage their professional reputations to gain

² «L’écriture biographique devient un outil majeur de la promotion individuelle.»

³ «la nécessité de vendre des volumes par souscriptions à un public de lecteurs le plus large possible semble encore constituer une limite aux prises de position politique trop marquées ou trop radicales, obligeant les maîtres d’œuvres de l’entreprise à conserver [...] une certaine modération ou réserve [...]».

credibility. More reflection on the differences between Wikipedia and the biographical dictionaries of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries would have been welcome. One surmises that Wikipedia's incentive to enforce neutrality – entries are expected to present the debate on a historical figure, if there is one, rather than take sides in it – differs from the incentive guiding the authors and editors of the biographical dictionaries of the early nineteenth century. Whereas the frères Michaud sought to avoid alienating potential consumers, Wikipedia seeks to keep peace among producers.

Ultimately, Chappey's study serves to illuminate a genre of literature that historians have frequently consulted but have rarely analyzed. The next step may be to situate the importance of biographical dictionaries within a broader range of reputational strategies. Was a negative notice merely a pinprick or a gaping wound in the honor of the person depicted? What contexts and what kinds of stakes might lead to lawsuits? How were biographical dictionaries read and by whom? Did battles between dictionaries have a broader impact beyond the texts themselves? These questions point to the problem of reader reception and are indispensable for measuring the degree to which biographical dictionaries contributed to, and were not merely symptomatic of, the social and political struggles of the period.

Fashion and multiple forms of credit

Crowston also analyzes the reputational politics of the Old Regime. Her study links the production and consumption of high fashion to multiple forms of credit: social, cultural, political and financial. The author begins by assessing contemporary uses of the term 'crédit'. Mining online text collections for instances of the term's usage, she finds that it referred to the ability to access money and merchandise but also to the ability to command respect and deference. She observes the transferability of these different types of credit. Good standing at the court in Versailles, for example, might facilitate access to financial credit. Success in the republic of letters might open doors to *le monde* (high society) and vice-versa or lead to obtaining a position in an academy. Pursuing credit was often thought to be zero-sum: one person's gain was another's loss. Individuals therefore pushed on all fronts, seeking to accumulate and leverage credit in its myriad forms.

Women's role in Old Regime credit networks was vexed, but changes in perceptions about it are discernible over the course of the Old Regime. In the late seventeenth century, women credit brokers were recognized as a fact of life. Their role in these networks could be seen positively or negatively, but the relevant criteria for assessing it was a woman's particular allegiances or her religious or political agenda. It was also understood that women brokered different kinds of credit all at once: moral and economic. After the John Law debacle, however, women's role as credit brokers in public affairs became seen as unnatural and corrupt, a view reinforced by writings on politics and political economy, which tended to frown upon it or efface it entirely, presenting credit and public affairs as essentially controlled by men. Women continued to have influence in credit networks, but this influence was increasingly seen to epitomize the regime's corruption and debauchery. The use of sexual favors in credit networks was especially – and sensationally – highlighted and denounced. Whereas Louis XIV's mistress and secret wife, Madame de Maintenon,

was disliked in her day for the nature of her religious influence on her husband. Louis XV's mistresses, Madame de Pompadour and Madame du Barry, and Louis XVI's wife, Marie-Antoinette, were all vilified for their 'unnatural' influence in combining and trading various kinds of credit (economic, political, social, cultural) that were now expected to be kept apart. Combining them was increasingly seen as corrupt.

Having established the importance of 'crédit' and the rise of arguments against women as credit brokers in public life, Crowston turns to the late Old Regime fashion industry. She shows how various forms of credit figured in its daily operations. Credit lubricated the whole chain from production to consumption and was indispensable in an industry in which few customers paid for their goods in a timely manner. A fashion merchant might wait up to three years to be paid, and even then, the customer might force the merchant to accept a lower price. The suppliers of fashion merchants (mostly men) were generally willing to extend credit generously to fashion merchants (many of whom were women), but their patience depended on the perceived solvency of those further along in the chain. Rumors of financial troubles on the part of wealthy customers or a financial merchant might prompt demands for payment and lawsuits.

The chapters on Marie-Antoinette and her fashion designer, Rose Bertin, show how credit and fashion fused with politics at the end of the Old Regime. Research on Marie-Antoinette has become something of a cottage industry lately, especially among Anglo-American historians. Many of these studies focus on representations of the queen. Crowston's analysis, however, weaves representation together with practice. Marie-Antoinette's poor sexual relations with Louis XVI was a source of embarrassment for her, and fashion became a vehicle for asserting her 'credit' at court. She collaborated closely with Bertin, and, together, the two set fashion trends in Paris and across Europe. Bertin benefited from her association with the queen, which gave her both financial and social credit. As her business boomed, she invested in property and became something of a socialite, dining with ambassadors and members of *le monde*.

There was a tragic side to Marie-Antoinette and Bertin's collaborations. Although they succeeded in bolstering their credit in various ways – Marie-Antoinette at court, Bertin in business and *le monde* – the two women were castigated in public opinion for their perceived superficiality and excesses. The mid-century attacks on women as credit brokers wielding influence over public affairs grew into a misogynistic crescendo by the 1780s, as the queen and Bertin were accused of plunging the monarchy, not to mention the many families who sought to keep up with their fashion trends, into bankruptcy.

Bourdieu and 'Diachronic' Challenges

Both books engage with theory in sophisticated ways. Paul Ricoeur, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jack Goody and Gabriel Tarde, among others, are woven into analysis. The theorist who looms largest, however, is Pierre Bourdieu. Chappey and Crowston draw on Bourdieu's theory of distinction and social capital to conceptualize the politics and strategies of reputation management. Chappey summarizes his objective in Bourdieusian terms, stressing synchronic over diachronic analysis: 'The main aim of this work has been less to analyze the modalities and

transformations of the biographical notice than to study the stakes of a corpus, comprised mostly of historical dictionaries, which occasioned political qualifications and disqualification and functioned as tools for making the social legible. (p. 353).⁴ While the Bourdieusian framework allows Chappey to discern the strategies of qualification and disqualification in each of the periods he studies, it does not help him explain change over time. What, precisely, does Wikipedia owe to the historical dictionaries of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and how does it differ from them?

For her part, Crowston draws from Bourdieu's tripartite heuristic categories of economic, social and cultural capital. She explicitly equates 'credit', the term contemporaries used and that she uses as an analytical concept, with Bourdieu's concept of 'capital', treating the two as synonymous. This conflation might be questioned. Whereas 'capital' is a store of value that can be spent, 'credit' represents one side of a two-faced 'debt/credit' coin and thus points to the vexed problem of social obligation. As David Graeber has brilliantly observed in his *Debt: The First Five Thousand Years*, status and coercive power are key aspects of credit/debt relations. Whereas the colossal debts of elites might function as assets and translate into power, the smaller debts of commoners and the poor weigh heavier in social relations and can lead to further disempowerment and impoverishment. Arguably, shifts in how social status was perceived in the eighteenth century (it was often effaced in treatises on political economy, replaced by conceptually commensurate 'individuals') were bound up with shifts in how credit and debt were perceived as well.

Notwithstanding this relative lack of conceptualization of 'debt' in relation to 'credit', Crowston offers an ingenious adjustment to Bourdieu's tripartite heuristic framework. She eschews his view of economic capital as 'the disguised root of the other forms of capital [social and cultural]' (p. 14). She argues that the tendency to bracket off the 'economic' as a distinct and privileged sphere of social activity emerged in the period she investigates. Mid eighteenth-century tracts on political economy, which denied women a legitimate role as mediators of various kinds of credit involving public affairs, also contributed to the perception of the 'economic' as autonomous. Ultimately, then, she tells a diachronic story but not the one readers might expect. Her diachronic story is not so much concerned with changes in the fashion industry or in the credit operations underpinning it. She observes that, in fact, there was much continuity in those areas between the late eighteenth century and the Restoration. Rather, her story about change focuses on the implications of the separation of economic credit from other forms of credit: political, social, cultural. This separation became so complete over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that theorists such as Gabriel Tarde and Bourdieu, who drew connections between them, saw themselves as pioneering new views. According to Crowston, however, they merely revived an understanding that contemporaries of the late seventeenth and eighteenth century would have grasped intuitively: that each of these forms of credit (or capital) could be leveraged, traded or transformed into another.

⁴ «L'objet essentiel de cet ouvrage porte moins sur l'analyse des modalités et des transformations du récit biographique, que sur l'étude des enjeux d'un corpus constitué principalement par les dictionnaires historiques considérés comme des instances de qualification ou de disqualification politique et des outils de lecture du social.» (p. 353).

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