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## A History of Ordinary People in France

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*‘How a family lived in their ordinariness for three centuries, and the mode of telling this story throws light on the “big events” in France from the pre-revolutionary era to the French Revolution and its aftermath.’*

The very ordinary have a history. This is one of the most important points to emerge from Emma Rothschild’s original and densely researched book. Her approach is different from what is known as “history from below” which, in the words of its most eminent practitioner, E.P. Thompson, attempted to rescue “the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the ‘obsolete’ handloom weaver, the ‘utopian’ artisan and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity.” It is different also from the history writing of Ranajit Guha who not only constructed the consciousness of Indian peasants from their acts of insurgency but also retrieved from obscurity the life and death of Chandra, an unknown peasant woman in rural Bengal.

Rothschild describes how a family lived in their ordinariness for three centuries, and her mode of telling this story throws light on the “big events” in France from the pre-revolutionary era to the French Revolution and its aftermath. Reading her book, I could not help but recall what Rabindranath Tagore believed to be the real substance of (Indian) history. Tagore wrote in 1941 that history could not be captured “in the image of a feudal order nor indeed any political order at all” but history lay in the “weal and woe of human life which, with its everyday contentment and misery, [which] has always been there in the peasants’ fields and village festivals, manifesting their simple and abiding humanity across all of history.”

### History of networks

Through her reconstruction of individual lives in the quotidian, Rothschild establishes a history of “networks”—networks of genealogy, kinship, marriages, friendships, of communication and so on. The study of “networks” is not new in history writing. It was pioneered by Lewis Namier in the early 20th century when he looked at the structure of politics at the accession of George III. Namier studied the biographies of the members of the House of Commons over a short time span and established who was linked to who through ties of family, patronage, factional identities and so on. Rothschild’s study of networks turns Namier’s method on its head. For one thing, she is not interested in the great and the good; and for another, she is not interested in a frozen time span but the *longue duree*. The networks she looks at are diachronic, they changed and evolved over historical time. Simple people leading ordinary lives were connected in innumerable ways; and in a digitally networked world those connections become infinite. Rothschild’s history has no finality, no full stop. She incites us to question the conventional notion of time within which historians practice their craft.

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Even though Rothschild’s book makes us look afresh about how historians think about history and about how they write history, her book begins with a document, the primary point of departure for any historian. For Rothschild, the concerned document is a prenuptial contract that was witnessed by 83 persons. The document was signed in the winter of 1764 in the small town of Angouleme located in southwest France. The document was occasioned by the marriage of the daughter of one Marie Aymard, an ordinary woman who was unable to sign her name, to the son of a tailor. That 83 persons signed the document is already suggestive of networks. Angouleme had a history: it was notorious as a place of disquiet and countless legal-financial “affairs”. Balzac in his novels, written two generations later, described the society of Angouleme as being marked by “the most fatal immobility”.

Perhaps, Balzac had somewhat overemphasized the “immobility”. For a few weeks before the signing of the document just noted, the same Marie Aymard had presented a power of attorney, drawn up by a notary in the town, to which she attested “into the fate of her late husband, a carpenter who emigrated to the island of Grenada, and who had become the owner, or so she had heard of ‘a certain quantity of Negroes’.”

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The historical record that Rothschild unearthed revealed that in June 1753 Marie Aymard's husband, Louis Ferrand and another carpenter signed a contract to work for two years in Grenada for 500 livres per annum plus expenses of food, lodging and laundry. Louis Ferrand thought that he was going off to make a fortune. But there was no pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Sometime before May 1760, Marie received the news of her husband's death.

The person who engaged Louis Ferrand was one Alexandre Cazaud who had settled in Angouleme (he was born in Guadeloupe) and was an aspiring planter and was married to the daughter of a silk merchant of Angouleme. Cazaud's father-in-law signed the contract on his behalf. This father-in-law would later become "the principal 'capitalist' in the most notorious of the legal-financial affairs in the town, or the 'revolution' in commerce that began in 1769." Already the "immobility" is fraying at the edges: an individual has moved to Grenada and another would come to be implicated in the world of emerging capitalism. Rothschild notes that the lives of the people who lived in Angouleme were "a scene of continuing social and economic change". The church and the royal administration were the two main sources of mobility and many of the 83 signatories and other individuals were connected by various ways to overseas trade and also linked to the outside world by "flows of individuals, of commodities, and also of credit, contracts, information, inheritance and expectations." Moreover, in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the lives of the inhabitants of Angouleme were affected by the Seven Years' War.

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This mobility—not just of individuals but also of trade and commerce—brings Rothschild's many stories to the intersection of "historical time and family time". The people of the small town were involved in family life, in work and in romance but these could not remain isolated from the historical events of late 18<sup>th</sup> century France. One such event was the legal-financial affair or the "revolution" in commerce. It was to use Tocqueville's evocative phrase an "inner shuddering". Individuals caught in it found their lives "agitated". This mini *cause celebre* was an offshoot of a series of interconnected and larger trends: the remarkable expansion of financial activity in the last decades of the old regime; the economic expansion associated with public prosperity and overseas exchanges through the construction of roads, canals and the growth in manufactures and commerce; the problem of taxation at a time when the monarchy was in dire financial straits and unable to raise taxes. In these various intertwined ways, the legal-financial affair in Angouleme complemented what historians regard as the economic origins of the French Revolution. It was a period of intense volatility as all the people of France and in a micro way the inhabitants of Angouleme were entrapped in the interface between the *ancien regime* and the revolution.

### The French Revolution and after

The French Revolution when it did engulf France left Angouleme relatively unaffected, the events there were less dramatic and less bloody compared to its neighbours. The *cahiers de doléance* that were prepared before the first meeting of the national assembly were concerned with administrative institutions related to the credit crisis, the local college and seminary and the affairs of the tax office. The revolutionary transformation brought changes across France in the ownership of property, the future of the church, in taxation, in the way the military forces were organized and in the registration of births, marriages and deaths. The inhabitants of Angouleme could not escape these changes. It was in this context that ordinary people like Marie Aymard's children and grandchildren lived, survived and died. Marie Aymard herself died in 1790 just as the tumultuous events of the revolution were gathering momentum.

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Members of Marie Aymard's family did not figure in the revolution. Rothschild writes, "They were almost invisible in the world of the printed word": their lives and activities were not "important enough to be recorded in newspapers or books or the bulletins of tribunals." They appeared only very fleetingly "in the ocean of papers that the revolution invented", their appearances were like the surf in an ocean. But Rothschild from the invisible manages to depict "a family in changing times". We catch glimpses of some of Marie Aymard's sons and of the bride in the marriage contract of 1764. Even some of her grandchildren make appearances. The reader thus becomes familiar with the ordinary lives of ordinary people when all around them extraordinary events were taking place. Family time marched in its own rhythm which was different from that of historical time. The seemingly unchanging co-existed with momentous changes affecting all of France, all of Europe and some parts of the world. It was perhaps this that Balzac was pointing to when he wrote about the immobility of Angouleme.

The forces of history propelled the children and grandchildren of Marie Aymard into the modern world that was ushered in by the French Revolution. In Rothschild's words, they "made their way, over these years [from 1764 to the end of the Napoleonic Empire], into the (restless) time of political history ... they move[d] on into the time of economic history or of the history of economic life --- the slow, interminable transition of modern times." However, no member of Marie Aymard's extended family was a part of the modern economy of the 19th century in the sense that none of them were ever a part of those industrial sectors that drove the modern economy—cotton, coal, steel and textiles. Notwithstanding this, Rothschild emphasizes the important point that all of them in another significant way were part of the modern (Rothschild adds somewhat problematically "or universal")—the "desire of bettering our condition".

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Rothschild deliberately does not search for all the descendants of Marie Aymard. To do so would be to enter the "bad infinity (Hegel's 'uninterrupted flitting over limits') of information." She reiterates the point that hers is "a history with the family at its centre, and not a family history. Marie Aymard's family is one network among many: "a network of information over time, just as relationships to friends and neighbours are networks of information in space." Rothschild's book and its infinitesimal connected stories explores with enviable skill both contiguities in time and in space.

### **The novels of modern times**

To leave Rothschild's book here would be to ignore another innovative dimension she brings in. Angouleme, the small and ordinary town, and the stories of some of its inhabitants had an interface with another unique feature of European modernity: the novels of modern times. The Place du Murier in Angouleme, the scene of great activity in Balzac's *Les illusions perdues* was at the centre of the lives of Marie Aymard's extended family. The lives of some of the characters that recur in the pages of Rothschild's densely packed book "were a replica," in Rothschild's own words, "of the imagined lives of Zola's novels of the Second Empire." *An Infinite History* like the naturalist novel is a book of "observation and analysis" (the quoted words are Zola's and are quoted by Rothschild).

The direct invocation of Balzac and Zola has prompted some very eminent scholars to comment that Emma Rothschild's book reminded them of the craftsmanship and the innovativeness of Zola and Balzac. The deep recesses of my memory churned up a passage from a very different kind of novel written in the 18th century. The novel is *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* by Laurence Sterne, who gets a mention or two in Rothschild's book, but not this particular novel. The passage that came to mind occurs in volume 1, chapter xiv. The passage runs: "Could a historiographer drive on his history ... straight forward ... without ever once turning his head aside either to the right hand or to the left, ... the thing is morally impossible. For, ... he will have a fifty deviations from a straight line to make with this or that party as he goes along, which he can no ways avoid ... he will moreover have various accounts to reconcile: anecdotes to pick up: inscriptions to make out: stories to weave in: traditions to sift ... there are archives at every stage to be look'd into, and rolls and records, documents and endless genealogies, which justice ever and anon calls him back to stay the reading of: In short there is no end of it ..."

That about sums it up if an infinite history can ever have a summing up.