

Foucault Studies

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ISSN: 1832-5203

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22439/fs.vi30.6260>

Foucault Studies, No. 30, 80-83 June 2021



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REVIEW

Nancy Luxon (ed.), *Archives of Infamy: Foucault on State Power in the Lives of Ordinary Citizens*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019. Pp. 400. ISBN: 9781517901110 (paperback).

Archives of Infamy: Foucault on State Power in the Lives of Ordinary Citizens, edited by Nancy Luxon, is a 'scholarly companion' to Arlette Farge and Michel Foucault's 1982 publication, *Disorderly Families: Infamous Letters from the Bastille Archive*, which was recently translated into English and published by the University of Minnesota Press. The long overdue publication of their collaboration is now usefully accompanied by the publication of *Archives of Infamy*, introducing readers to the historical context and the intellectual stakes of Farge and Foucault's collaboration. Both books centre on the *lettres de cachet*, an institution in eighteenth century France through which ordinary citizens submitted written requests to the King to ask for justice. *Disorderly Families*, first published in English in 2016, and also edited by Nancy Luxon, presents ninety-four of these letters written by ordinary families to the king of France in the eighteenth century. *Archives of Infamy* offers a series of reprinted essays, reviews, a radio broadcast transcript, and new scholarship which examines the political and historical contexts of those letters, Farge and Foucault's collaboration, as well as various thematic, historiographic and theoretical perspectives on power, justice and politics.

As Nancy Luxon's introductory chapter, 'Policing and Criminality in *Disorderly Families*', shows readers, the Archives of the Bastille, stored in the Bibliothèque de l' Arsenal, holds hundreds of letters written by ordinary citizens in the eighteenth century. The *lettres de cachet*, or 'letters of arrest', written by the King of France, in response to ordinary citizens' letter of complaints, or *placets*, offered source materials for Foucault and Farge's publication. These complaints were written about the 'disorderly' conduct of loved ones - husbands, wives, children - and asked for their imprisonment. In these letters we find everyday matters of justice. Readers are led to understand that these letters, exchanged between ordinary citizens and the king of France, provide evidence of how mechanisms for exercising power were popularly called upon in the eighteenth century. The *Disorderly Families* collaboration between Foucault and the historian, Arlette Farge, began in the late 1970s. However, Foucault had previously been aware of the importance of this archive. While writing *The History of Madness* in the 1950s, Michel Foucault was already thinking

through the importance of these letters in his analysis of sovereignty, the state and power. By the late 1970s, Arlette Farge, a historian specialising in the eighteenth century, began working with Michel Foucault to curate a selection of these letters in a book originally published as *Le Désordre des familles: Lettres de cachet des Archives de la Bastille au XVIIIe siècle* (1982).

Archives of Infamy: Foucault on State Power in the Lives of Ordinary Citizens includes fourteen chapters, four of which were newly written for this volume. The other chapters are either reprinted or have been translated into English for the first time. The chapters are wide ranging in scope, topic and mode of analysis. Moving from chapter to chapter, the articles touch upon the motivations and considerations behind Farge and Foucault's collaboration, while also exploring the historical contexts of the letters through discussions of families and public order in the eighteenth century, gender, homosexuality, state and police power, sovereignty, urban space, epistolary practices, as well as punishment and justice. Nancy Luxon's introduction offers a detailed and well-considered analysis of Farge and Foucault's collaboration, as well as generously outlining relevant background details about the *lettres de cachet*. It makes the case for the contemporary relevance of this project as "Readers do not have to reach too far to find resonances between its letters and more recent events" (47). The introduction outlines today's conjunction of power, justice, policing, race, gender, economics, and state violence, whilst also setting out the contemporary reception of *Disorderly Families*.

The rest of the book is divided into two parts. The first part is titled 'Archival Materials: Audiences and Materials'. This part includes four texts from the late 1970s and early 1980s, and explores the relation between Foucault's 'anthologies of existence', Farge and Foucault's collaboration, the selection and curation of the letters as source materials, and the contemporary reception of their publication. Chapter 1 is a reprinting of Michel Foucault's 1977 essay, 'The Lives of Infamous Men'. Although Foucault scholars will be familiar with this essay, its inclusion in this companion usefully emphasises the importance of Foucault's notion of "poem-lives" and the relation between discourse, history and writing. Chapter 2 is a newly translated transcript of a 1983 radio discussion between Farge, Foucault, the historian André Béjin, sociologist Roger Chartier and historian Michelle Perrot. The roundtable discussion offers a fascinating series of indications and digressions about the authors' approach to composing the *Disorderly Families* collection as well as emphasising the popular appeal of royal power that is made so evident in the letters.

Chapter 3 is a 1983 review of *Disorderly Families* by Jean-Philippe Guinle, published in *La Nouvelle Revue Française*. It offers a short commentary and a key observation about the collection of letters: "We no longer consider *lettres de cachet* to be nothing more than the symbol itself of royal arbitrariness" (127). According to this review, these letters were a means for "regulating family conflicts" (128). The last chapter in the first section is a book review, titled 'Denunciation, a Slow Poison', by Michel Heurteaux. Published in 1983 in *Le Monde*, Heurteaux compares the Bastille letters to other systems of denunciation, such as police informants, alerting tax inspectors to fraud, and anonymous messages to human

resource managers. As Heurteaux writes, “Informants and power, a pair that has often made good bedfellows—and sometimes still does” (132).

The second part of the book is titled ‘Letters and Events: From Composition to Contestation’ and considerably extends the theoretical, political and historical axes of the *Disorderly Families* project. This part begins with a reprinting of Foucault’s ‘The Order of Discourse’ inaugural lecture to the Collège de France in 1970. This sets the theme for the rest of the book, helping readers to understand how Foucault traced the relations between speech, text and the event. This is followed by an essay by Roger Chartier (1990), titled ‘The Public Sphere and Public Opinion’. This extends the discussion by describing the role that the large scale circulation of printed texts took in the emergence of the public sphere. Chartier sets out how political representation, secrecy and judicial procedures related to form ‘publics’. The next two chapters offer reflections on historiography and the event. Chapter 7 is Pierre Nova’s 1970 essay, ‘The Return of the Event’. This newly translated essay examines Foucault’s new direction in historiography, his departure from the Annales school, and the treatment of the event as a revolutionary force. Arlette Farge’s essay, ‘Thinking and Defining the Event in History’ (2002), further examines the event in Foucault’s historical project. In thinking the event, Farge touches upon its vision, construction, emotion, memory, and meaning. She writes:

“The event, of course, is endlessly reconstructed, in multiple ways, varying according to the era in which it is being received. Elsewhere and at the same time, the memory of the event among those who lived it, even in the distant past, can assist the historian with her most difficult task: rediscovering the emotional, social, or political manner by which others reconstructed the event, or identified with, or rejected it inexorably” (225).

Stuart Elden’s essay, ‘Home, Street, City: Farge, Foucault, and the Spaces of the *Lettres de Cachet*’, newly written for this volume, offers an overview of the *Disorderly Families* project by mapping spaces and urban landscapes. Elden reflects on the compositional forces that instantiate homes-streets-cities, while offering an account of the ‘spatial concerns’ of the lives behind the letters. Michel Rey’s 1985 essay, ‘Parisian Homosexuals Create a Lifestyle, 1700-1750’, extends this urban focus by examining practices of homosexuality through the reports written by agent provocateurs about intimate matters. Chapter 11, ‘Sovereign Address’ by Elizabeth Wingrave, foregrounds an understanding of the *Disorderly Families* project through the relation between sovereignty and epistolary practices. Nancy Luxon’s second written contribution to the volume, ‘Gender, Agency, and the Circulations of Power,’ asks about the role that gender plays in a political order during a historical era which recomposed *households* into *families*. Luxon describes the emergent relation of the family as a “field of exchange”, an intermediary between “state and society, between literature and oral cultures, between commercialising economy of producers and consumers” (295). The final chapter, ‘Foucault’s Rhythmic Hand’ by Lynne Huffer, brings queer thought to bear on the letters, allowing for a reading of the letters as scars and poems. In doing so, Huffer proposes a form of “poetic genealogy”. She writes, “Poetic genealogy can only signal queerly, through its own fragmenting cuts, without pretending to

redeem the violences of history or even to directly expose the masking of violence that is history writing” (354).

Thinking through the volume, readers will find a series of vantage point to search and identify the stakes at play in the *lettres de cachet*, as well as Farge and Foucault’s *Disorderly Families* project. The book should be of interest to Foucault scholars, political scientists, historians of eighteenth century France, as well as general readers. Each of the chapters shifts the terms of discussion from state power to spatial composition, agent provocateurs to epistolary practices, poetic genealogy to editorial decisions, and each contribution multiplies the perspectives, intensities and histories that can be brought to bear on the letters. The quality of the individual chapters, and the exceptionally informative commentary found in Nancy Luxon’s introduction, firmly establishes the overarching historical and political importance of the letters and provides richly rewarding scholarship about both Foucault and Farge’s collaboration and the letters. Readers unfamiliar with *Disorderly Families* will undoubtedly want to then turn to the original source materials. Readers familiar with *Disorderly Families* will undoubtedly want to return.

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