

RODERICK PHILLIPS. — *Family Breakdown in Late Eighteenth-Century France: Divorces in Rouen, 1792-1803*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980. Pp. vii, 244.

This compact and interesting study is a model of thoughtful and thorough exploitation of a single source. It also suffers from the shortcomings of its method. Phillips' major source is the records of divorce petitions and hearings (in the *Tribunaux de famille* and *Tribunal civil*) in Rouen during the Revolutionary period (1792-1803) when the liberal divorce law of September 1792 was in effect. He provides a political context for this material in a discussion of Revolutionary politics, a temporal dimension through a comparison with cases of *séparation de corps et d'habitation* from the immediate pre-Revolutionary period, 1780-89, and a socio-economic connection through use of the concept of family economy.

The first section of the book examines how the law worked and focuses on the demographic characteristics of the persons involved. Here Phillips shows that although the law saw the *Tribunal de famille* as a gathering of family members chosen by the husband and wife as *arbitres*, in practice both friends and lawyers were *arbitres* more often than were kin; further, over time, lawyers were much more commonly nominated and served. Divorces under the newly available law were unevenly distributed over the years studied; forty-three percent of all of them were decreed in the first three years. Phillips believes this is in no way indicative of any sudden breakdown of marriages, but of the legal regularization of "numerous *de facto* separations and *désunions*" (p. 46). Other findings in the first section are that women were seventy-one percent of the petitioners for unilateral divorce (as opposed to divorce by mutual consent); that couples who divorced were somewhat younger than a matched sample of couples who married at the same time and did not divorce; and that two-thirds of petitioning couples had no minor children.

Phillips' comparison of urban and rural divorce rates leads him to his most developed discussion of causes. Despite the temporal correlation of high rates of divorce with the radical period of the Revolution, he correctly rejects any connection of higher urban divorce rates with the greater political agitation in cities. He reformulates the other argument put forward by scholars — the decline of religiosity in cities — to emphasize "social practices and pressures, and to suggest that traditional attitudes to the family — especially the superiority of the husband and father — persisted longer in rural areas" (p. 95). The authority structure in rural families was still "traditional", i.e., the husband was dominant. Just as importantly, the rural family economy, with its interdependence of husband and wife, made it difficult for a woman to choose divorce even if it were legally open to her. The urban economy, especially the greater availability of wage labour, offered a potential for independence to both wives and husbands. He concludes that the "social changes in the eighteenth century, mediated through the family economy, do appear to have favoured a degree of autonomy on the part of women who were able to take advantage of them" (p. 104). The study of divorce, in his opinion, "tends to support the hypothesis proposed by Edward Shorter" (fn. 67).

He does not restate Shorter's hypothesis, which goes well beyond any notion of choice to withdraw from an unhappy marriage and posits women's emotional and sexual emancipation based on their experience of a capitalist labour market. Phillips is more modest in his generalizations but he assumes change and the causes for it, as does Shorter. Phillips' evidence cannot tell us what the incidence of marital strife and breakdown has been over a long period in the city. He assumes that the industrial organization of work in the city makes wages available to women and thus makes it easier for them to exit from marriage. True, compared to rural areas, the family economy was less common in the late eighteenth century. But is this a matter of social change in the city? Phillips has not examined to what extent this

was a development tied to the industrial separation of home and work and to what extent it had been long a characteristic of the urban labour market, with its much larger component of individual wage labour.

The second section of the book deals with the social expression of marital discord and causes of strife. Phillips makes no claim that his evidence is representative of family life, but simply that it "indicate[s] the limits of acceptable behaviour" (p. 108). He illustrates with rich descriptive material the pervasiveness and acceptability of (some) physical violence, sexual disputes, financial struggles, and the unequal material consequences of divorce for men and women (women lost all but their personal belongings, bed and bedding, and sometimes they had to go to the law in order to recover these).

Phillips' conclusions move away from divorce to the social context of divorce. He believes that there were weak bonds among family members, and that this was one of the reasons why the Revolutionary divorce legislation failed "to establish a form of intimate familiar justice" (p. 202). He also concludes that neighbourhood was an important community of reference, and possibly, "a moral community in which women in particular developed a strong sense of solidarity" (p. 203). This possibility, he admits, could be simply a consequence of the fact that women, more often than their husbands, worked in the neighbourhood where they lived.

The sources Phillips has used do not really address the question of family breakdown, but that of marital discord or strife. They do not tell us much about parent-child relations, for example, except at moments when the couple is struggling. They tell us about kin relations only for those kin who could be or were called on to act as *arbitres* or *témoins* or those who sheltered divorced persons. That such kin were often unavailable tells us as much about rural to urban migration and urban social relations as it tells us about family breakdown. The interrelationship of family and community needs to be studied with documents that tell us about the community as well as those that focus on the couple. Phillips has done an excellent job with the sources he chose to examine in depth. Answers to the broader questions he has raised must await studies which make the community as well as the couple problematic.

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R. S. NEALE. — *Class in English History, 1680-1850*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981. Pp. vi, 250.

The title suggests a survey or review of the development of classes in England from 1680 to 1850, including of necessity some theory of what "classes" are. What the book really is, however, is a contribution to the debate currently raging between Marxists and others, and even more fiercely among Marxists, about the proper place of theory in historical work. Neale insists on the necessity of correct (in his view) Marxist theory, in the light of which he looks at the ways other historians have used the idea of class. He does so, however, with enough idiosyncrasies that even the unconverted may find the process interesting.

The first chapter, the cornerstone of the book, is a careful analysis of Marx's theory of class, which, to this non-Marxist non-expert, seems to be fair and accurate. (*Class* used in this sense he always italicizes, leaving the un-italicized form for