



Poverty, Charity, and Motherhood: Maternal Societies in Nineteenth-Century France

Christine Adams

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This far-reaching study of maternal societies in post-Revolutionary France focuses on the philanthropic work of the Society for Maternal Charity, the most prominent organization of its kind. Administered by middle-class and elite women and financed by powerful families and the government, the Society offered support to poor mothers, helping them to nurse and encouraging them not to abandon their children. In Poverty, Charity, and Motherhood, Christine Adams traces the Society's key role in shaping notions of maternity and in shifting the care of poor families from the hands of charitable volunteers with religious-tinged social visions to paid welfare workers with secular goals such as population growth and patriotism. Adams plumbs the origin and ideology of the Society and its branches, showing how elite women in Paris, Lyon, Bordeaux, Rouen, Marseille, Dijon, and Limoges tried to influence the maternal behavior of women and families with lesser financial means and social status. A deft analysis of the philosophy and goals of the Society details the women's own notions of good mothering, family solidarity, and legitimate marriages that structured official, elite, and popular attitudes concerning gender and poverty in France. These personal attitudes, Adams argues, greatly influenced public policy and shaped the country's burgeoning social welfare system.

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