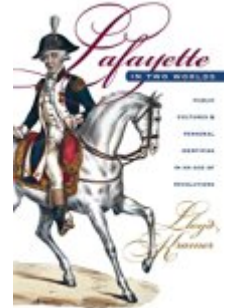


**Lloyd Kramer.** *Lafayette in Two Worlds: Public Cultures and Personal Identities in an Age of Revolutions.* North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1996. xii + 354 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2258-6.



**Reviewed by** Ruth Wallis Herndon

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Lloyd Kramer's *Lafayette in Two Worlds* is an intriguing and compelling study of one man and two cultures. Its rich content and innovative methodology make it an important book not only for historians of France and the United States, but also for historians interested in the practice of their craft. This sophisticated and thoughtful work reflects years of immersion in primary sources and secondary literature, and it offers a mature and valuable perspective on both the historical figure and the historical profession.

This is NOT a traditional biography of Gilbert du Motier de Lafayette, "aristocrat and political activist" (p. 1). Rather than supplying a linear narrative and analysis of Lafayette's life, Kramer identifies and explicates key themes that illuminate both Lafayette's character and the character of the French and American cultures in which he lived and moved. Kramer argues that Lafayette exemplifies "the culture, language, and conflicts" of France and America (p. 2). Because the man was important in both worlds, studying him leads to a better understanding of those cultures and their transition to modernism. And because has

been the object of much scholarly scrutiny, studying Lafayette's historians leads to a better understanding of the historical craft.

Kramer's principal methodology is to place Lafayette and his historians on a level playing field, to submit the texts of both to evaluation. Lafayette is presented as a public figure who self-consciously created a text of his life, shaping a narrative designed to secure his popularity in two cultures. Similarly, Lafayette's historians are presented as producers of texts that betray their cultural sensibilities and generational biases. Long before postmodern critical theories were articulated, a number of scholars had deconstructed Lafayette the hero, reducing him to a stupid and unimportant figure in both American and French history. Kramer's adroit deconstruction of those deconstructive historians produces (two negatives makes a positive) a re-constructed Lafayette who behaved intelligently and purposefully. In Kramer's rendering, the erstwhile hero emerges as a rescued underdog. This is no mean feat, casting a rich and powerful white male as someone

who needs rescuing from tyrannical historians, yet Kramer has done it.

Kramer's sources are wide and deep. He has read virtually all that exists of "Lafayette's mail," both sent and received over the course of a lifetime. He has read what contemporaries wrote about Lafayette and what historians have written about him in the 160 years since his death in 1834. In the end, he has concluded that Lafayette's creation of himself is only half the story; the other half is how others created Lafayette, leading to the provocative question: "Whose narrative is more persuasive?" (p. 7).

There is no one simple answer. In a deconstructive and iconoclastic era, few historians are willing to argue that the value of studying "great" figures in history lies in the representativeness of their lives or their pedagogical usefulness as "heroes." Rather, as Kramer has argued convincingly, the study of "greats" gives important perspectives and insights into the cultures that elevated them to prominence. Lafayette is hardly an everyman, but the way in which he was perceived by contemporaries and constructed by historians tells us a great deal about the early American republic, about revolutionary and post-revolutionary France, and about the historians of both.

Kramer's argument unfolds gracefully, in lucid and engaging prose that deploys specialized language sparingly, so that difficult concepts are made clear and accessible. The book is elegantly organized around eight thematic chapters anchored at beginning and end by cogent summary essays. The theme chapters, which move progressively from the 1770s to the 1830s, illuminate the two primary characteristics of Lafayette, as Kramer sees him: his devotion to liberal political ideas and his enduring capacity to understand and mediate between cultures. Chapter One paints Lafayette as a hero of the American Revolution, principally because he understood and appreciated American culture, despite his aristocratic old world origins. Chapter Two shows Lafayette

as an early hero of the French Revolution, but unable to adjust to the shifting ideologies and actions of more radical revolutionaries, and thus subsequently characterized as stupid and naive, the butt of contemporary jokes as well as of derogatory scholarly analysis. Chapter Three deals with Lafayette as an intellectual, shut out of post-revolutionary politics in France, but devoted to bringing together people and their ideas from both sides of the Atlantic. Lafayette's role as a supporter of Romantic culture by providing a haven and forum for theorists, artists and writers from Europe and America serves as the focus of Chapter Four. Chapter Five portrays Lafayette as a proto-feminist, encouraging gifted women of the upper class to take their abilities into the unofficial public sphere. Lafayette as a traveler and chronicler of America, whose respectful and flattering depiction of American exceptionalism stands in contrast to Alexis de Tocqueville's more acerbic analysis serves as the focus of Chapter Six. Chapter Seven deals with Lafayette as a middleman in France's Revolution of 1830, slipping from power because he allied with none of the factions struggling for control. Finally, Chapter Eight addresses Lafayette as a supporter of the Polish National Revolution, defending Polish political liberalism to French and American people.

I found the chapter comparing the American journeys and journals of Lafayette and Tocqueville to be the most satisfying: an intriguing and thorough analysis of two very different views of the American people by French aristocrats. Lafayette's greater admiration for and belief in American virtue and exceptionalism resulted in his account being more influential among the ordinary sort than Tocqueville's writings. Most problematic was the chapter on the American revolution, for Kramer is here least successful in portraying Lafayette as a figure who exemplified a culture and was embraced by it. Kramer uncharacteristically fails to provide a needed clarification of what he means by "Americans" and leaves unanswered the question of who exactly

welcomed and praised Lafayette as a hero of the fledgling nation and its cause of independence. Kramer elsewhere makes clear that Americans of all ranks and stations heaped praise on Lafayette during his 1824-25 tour of the country, but this was glory in retrospect, when nostalgia about the Revolution had begun to nurture a national myth about revolutionary origins. For the time of the Revolution, Kramer offers no insight into the common people's view of Lafayette, even ignoring the perspective of the American soldiers who might have had opinions about him. This leads to the impression that it was only the politically powerful who welcomed Lafayette to America and made much of him, and it undermines Kramer's larger argument that Lafayette illuminated American culture as a whole.

This problem aside, Kramer makes his case well. He clarifies his argument, defines his terms, and displays his evidence persuasively. Lafayette emerges as a man who loved liberty and liberal ideas, understood diverse people and cultures, and mediated purposefully between those people and cultures. He emerges as a man who self-consciously created a text of his life, who adopted symbols (both literary and artistic) that would show his understanding of another culture, and who virtually embodied aspects of cultures that he could then transmit from one group to another. Thus he becomes a figure who was able to "fuse" his own life text with that of the cultures in which he lived (p. 193), so that he came to stand for what was widely seen as virtuous and praiseworthy in America and France. Finally, those historians who have dismissed and despised Lafayette as naive and stupid emerge as scholars who have been so enmeshed in their own cultural prejudices that they have overlooked or misread evidence.

Kramer's analysis of Lafayette is solid, but even more compelling is his introductory essay on the way history is written. Here, in the first few pages of the book, I abandoned my initial reserva-

tions about reading biography, and political-intellectual biography at that. The great power and significance of this study comes principally from this masterful and persuasive introduction, in which Kramer discloses and analyzes his assumptions and biases, his methodology and evidence, his argument and themes. He disarms critics by anticipating their objections with complete candor, and by answering them. This is an extraordinarily self-conscious work that forces the reader to be self-conscious as well: to consider the agency of the historian in the process of historical writing, to recognize the cultural forces that shape assumptions and methodologies. This is a book that challenges any historian's claim to "objectivity." By compelling example, Kramer advises that scholars identify and make visible the hedge of cultural sensibilities that surround the practice of history. This book is a thoughtful explication of the ways all humans "create an identity for themselves" (p. 33) and strive to maintain that identity in the face of life's vicissitudes; it is a valuable work that not only informs but challenges historians to reflect on themselves as scholars. Kramer has persuaded me to take Lafayette seriously, just as he himself decided to do (p. 8). But more than this, I am persuaded to take Kramer's methodology seriously—to examine the way I do history with the same purpose and rigor that he has modeled in *Lafayette in Two Worlds*.

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