The Barristers of Toulouse in the Eighteenth Century
(1740-1793)
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The outstanding achievement of recent French historiography has been the vast extension of our knowledge about the popular social groups, both urban and rural. The methods developed to accomplish this—case study, quantification, and interdisciplinary analysis—have been applied fruitfully to the study of the aristocracy as well. However, the careful examination of the middling social categories, which Professor Labrousse proposed over twenty years ago, has yet to materialize. To be sure, historians like Alfred Cobban and George V. Taylor have advanced important and challenging theses about the values, goals, and interests of propertied commoners in 1789; but their stimulating ideas demand further research and amplification.

A case study of eighteenth-century barristers (avocats) seemed particularly appropriate in this regard. The barristers were strategically positioned to express both the aspirations and the discontents of their milieu. Moreover, they were incumbents of many significant social roles: lawyer, commoner, landlord, social climber, social critic, local notable, and revolutionary officer, to name but a few. I have endeavored to explore the major social, cultural, and political movements of the century as they impinged on the nearly 300 Toulousan barristers. All too frequently, lack of documents or of personal knowledge restricted the examination of certain areas. I was especially troubled by the absence of documents relating to the advocates’ professional lives; and to claim that the Toulousan barristers were necessarily “typical” of their entire profession or social stratum would involve more speculation than fact at this point (though there is no prima facie reason to consider them an aberrant case). My hope, despite these limitations, is that the reader might gain some useful insights into the structure and functioning of Old Regime society by examining it from the vantage point of the Toulousan bar.

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