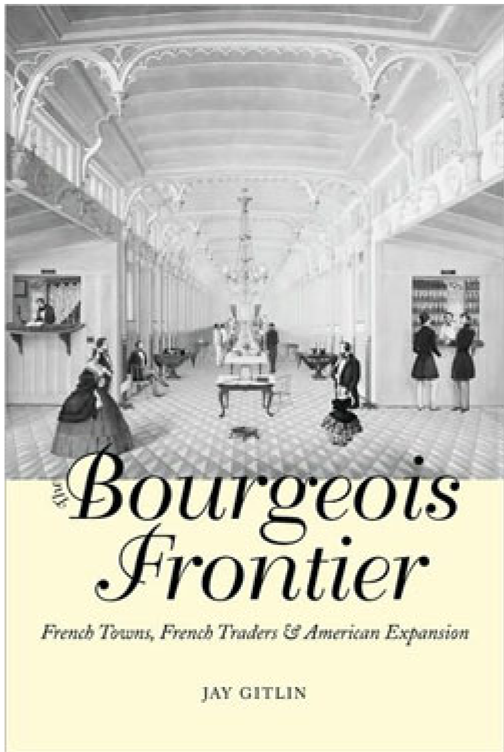
The French Connection

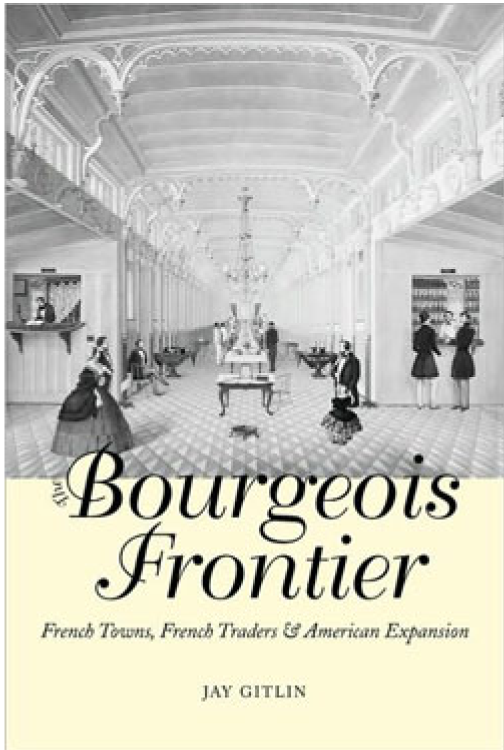


The Bourgeois Frontier trumpets the role of French merchants, as traders in furs and builders of towns, in the making of the American West. The last sentence of Jay Gitlin's book summarizes its author's bold ambition: "Move over Uncle Sam and make room for *Oncle Auguste*" (190). With this assertion, Gitlin leaves readers to ponder how the history of the United States, especially the course of its westward expansion, looks different when French entrepreneurs are placed alongside (and maybe even put in place of) the Anglo-American adventurers who have typically dominated histories of the American frontier.

Gitlin offers a number of reasons why American historians have failed to connect these French traders to the history of national expansion in the nineteenth century. Heading Gitlin's list is the pernicious legacy of Francis Parkman. More than a century ago, Parkman perpetrated the stereotype of French colonists in the New World as illiterate and primitive people. Few in number, French colonists, in Parkman's depiction, were a motley crew of farmers clinging tenaciously to medieval ways and traders mingling promiscuously with Indians. The backwardness of French colonists left them unable to compete after Americans moved in. Accordingly, their impact on American development effectively ended with the defeat of France in the Seven Years' War. Not so, retorts Gitlin. His portrayal emphasizes instead the "bourgeois" character of the French who settled in the interior of North America and set about developing the Mississippi Valley and the west beyond in the century after 1763. Putting the French in their rightful place in American history, Gitlin insists, requires "put[ting] Parkman behind us" (7).

In addition to blaming Parkman, Gitlin faults the east-to-west orientation that has long governed our historical vision for depriving the French of their rightful place. The world of the “interior French” in the middle of North America followed the flow of the Mississippi River and thus ran along a north-south axis. This region, which Gitlin dubs the “Creole Corridor,” was a crescent-shaped arc that stretched from Detroit to New Orleans. An inland archipelago of towns and villages, these amounted to a series of dots amidst a vast ocean of Indian lands. Part of the region came into the United States in the 1780s and 1790s, the rest transferred with the Louisiana Purchase. Yet many of the towns within the Creole Corridor and a good portion of the Indian countries around them retained a French twang well after Americans claimed control over the “Great West.” Gitlin acknowledges that the cultural hegemony of the French eroded during the first third of the nineteenth century. Still, he contends that this eclipse was less interesting than the “persistence” of French words and French ways “over so large a region for so many decades after the incorporation of that region into the United States” (1).

American historians have also failed to connect the French dots because the urban and cosmopolitan world of French entrepreneurs in the Creole Corridor stands at odds with the West of the American imagination. The firms, or “*maisons*,” that French merchants established had their base in towns and the “calculus of commerce” (27) that guided their operations and investments seemed to contradict the ideal of wide open spaces and the myth of Jeffersonian agrarianism that American historians long presumed defined the frontier. French merchants, most prominently Auguste Chouteau and his family, who hold the spotlight in Gitlin’s book, lacked the dashing qualities that Americans preferred in their pioneer heroes. That, though, should not diminish the importance of the Chouteaus of St. Louis or their like-minded French brethren in other towns within the Creole Corridor. “One might even claim,” proposes Gitlin, “that the Great West during this period was in many ways more an extension of Creole St. Louis than of Jefferson’s Virginia” (123).



Jay Gitlin, The Bourgeois Frontier: French Towns, French Traders, and American Expansion. London: Yale University Press, 2009. 286 pp., $29.00.

No doubt, many will scoff at Gitlin's revisionist propositions and dispute the *greater* importance of Creole St. Louis and *Oncle Auguste*. Some of Gitlin's points do come across as overstated and others as assaults on straw men. Consider his attack on Francis Parkman, which parallels the salvoes that "new western historians" launched against Frederick Jackson Turner in the 1980s and 1990s. But where Turner remained relevant to scholarly interpretations of western history, Parkman's shadow seems now to be a rather short one. Only specialists, and not many of them, read Parkman's colonial epics. Focus on the Atlantic World and continental approaches to early America have dislodged Britain's mainland colonists from the central place that Parkman assigned to them. Moreover, the French have gained new-found prominence, at least in colonial history courses. Thanks to Richard White, the middle ground, a co-creation of French and Indians, has emerged of late as the field's most influential paradigm.

If the middle ground has made the French more critical to eighteenth-century American history, it offers little to explain their continuing activities and what Gitlin sees as their enduring achievements in the nineteenth century. For White, the middle ground survived beyond the Seven Years' War (albeit in a bastardized form). Indians hoped for its true restoration, and some creoles wished for it too. But the French father did not return, and the middle ground, as conceived by White, suffered its final demise after the War of 1812. The disappearance of the middle ground as a political entity did not, however, end French influence in the Creole Corridor and across the Great West. To the contrary, in Gitlin's account, French Creoles prospered precisely because they were "steeped in the process of middle-grounding, of occupying a cultural and

social space of accommodation" (120). Their success rested as well on continuing creative adaptations and ongoing access to inside information. Not static enterprises, French houses profited first from the trade with Indians, then from the trade in lands made available by the dispossession of Indians, and finally from speculation in urban lots and engagement in the diverse portfolio of opportunities offered by the Great West, particularly to those who maintained the right connections.

Indeed, connections emerge here as the key factor. These included the traders' ties to multiple Indian groups and to government officials, often representing multiple, shifting, and sometimes competing regimes. Above all were familial connections. In contrast with their "situational" political allegiances, French merchants understood that "their ultimate loyalty was to family" (114), which represented the "cornerstone of both business and society" (187). These tended to be extensive and multi-generational. As Gitlin explains, the long-term "success of the Chouteaus" and other French houses depended on "the way in which they gathered relatives" as much as "the way in which they gathered furs" (135).

As many people as the Chouteaus and other trading families incorporated and employed, they composed only a fraction of the interior French population. French communities in the Creole Corridor, Gitlin reminds readers several times, were "not simple or homogeneous." The interior French included transplanted Canadians along with immigrants from "a variety of provinces and colonies in the Old World and the New" (9). Every settlement also boasted numbers of men, women, and children of African descent, slave and free, the exclusion of which renders any portrait of French culture in the region incomplete. But while Gitlin references the presence of diverse francophones, he pays only passing attention to them. The expectations and experiences of those who cultivated the soil, of slaves on plantations in Lower Louisiana and *habitants* on small farms in the Illinois Country, are not Gitlin's concern. His focus falls almost entirely on those whose incomes derived principally from commerce. And even within this select group, his eyes fix on those at the top of the house, not the larger number of workers below, whose economic and cultural horizons were far more limited than Auguste Chouteau's.

It is Chouteau and those most like him who are the principal subjects of *The Bourgeois Frontier*. That is fitting, because these men best make Gitlin's case. Their enterprises helped to make the West American, even if their own national affections were never so fixed or single-minded. Their ways of living stamped them as "bourgeois to the core" (9), even if their pursuit of profit was ever entangled with familial concerns. We should be careful, however, not to mistake the core for the whole or to make Auguste Chouteau into *Oncle Auguste* and treat him as a synecdoche for the interior French.

If not the whole story of the Creole Corridor, *The Bourgeois Frontier* is an essential contribution that challenges and changes the way we think, teach, and write about the French connection to American expansion. That is what books

that matter do, and *The Bourgeois Frontier*is certainly a book that matters.

Stephen Aron, professor of history at UCLA and executive director of the Institute for the Study of the American West at the Autry National Center, is currently working on a book with the tentative title *Can We All Just Get Along: An Alternative History of the American West*.