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Republiek op drift? Le Petit Journal, Le Temps en de republikeinse kritiek op de Franse democratie, 1887-1893

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Summary

After suffering military defeat at the hands of Prussia and its allies in the Franco-Prussian war (1870-1871), the French Second Empire (1851-1870) collapsed. A Government of National Defense or *Gouvernement de la Défense Nationale* was formed and France, for the third time in its own history, became a republic. In February 1871, after general elections were held by universal manhood suffrage, the government was replaced by a new one, headed by Adolphe Thiers, who later was to become the first officially elected President of the Third Republic. His government awaited significant challenges, the most important of which was striking a peace deal with the newly found German Empire. Not long after this was achieved, a socialist uprising broke out in Paris, also known as the Commune. But even following its brutal repression, the political situation remained unstable.

Although the republic had been proclaimed on September 4th 1870, it had been regarded as provisional, and the majority of its newly elected representatives were conservatives (monarchists). These monarchists however were not a homogeneous group. There were the so called *légitimistes*, who emphasized tradition and the role of the Catholic Church and nobility, and who strongly advocated monarchic rule in France by a member of the Bourbon family. Pro-monarchy as well, the *orléanistes* were more liberal and advocated monarchy personified by a member of the house of Orléans. The bonapartists, unstirred by the poor performance of 'their' empire in the war against Germany, were convinced that only a member of the house of Bonaparte could lead France.

The monarchist majority however did not lead to a restoration of monarchy itself. Instead, the republic lasted. But it took a political compromise between republicans and *orléanistes* for the Third Republic (1870-1940) to gain its official existence. This happened by way of the constitutional laws or *lois constitutionnelles* of 1875, by which the Third Republic was recognized and parliamentary supremacy established. In 1876 republicans gained a majority in the House of Representatives or *Chambre des Députés* and in 1879 also in the Senate. In the beginning of that year a political crisis had forced Thiers' successor, the conservative president Patrice de MacMahon, to resign. He was replaced by a moderate republican, Jules Grévy. But even though their Senate victory had left them in control of the three chief bastions of political power, republicans could not sit back and enjoy their victory.

Although the Third Republic and institutional democracy had been established, the republic still faced more than a few enemies, who notwithstanding their differences all

considered it a historical aberration, lacking proper legitimacy. These monarchist and bonapartist parties all endeavored to frustrate republican politics and, in one way or another, to force a return to monarchy. Conservatives intent on regime change however were not the only problem republicans had to face. Largely due to their own internal divisions, pitting the more moderate group of governmental republicans or *opportunistes* against the more progressive *radicaux*, the Third Republic was notorious for its governmental instability: in the years 1880-1914 some sixty governments saw the light, often featuring the same politicians.

While the idea of popular sovereignty was at the root of French democracy, in practice the representative system was elitist. Ordinary people felt increasingly dissatisfied with institutional democracy and the immobilism and ineffectiveness it came to be associated with. In some cases, disappointment grew into action, the most infamous example towards the end of the 1880s being the populist political movement called boulangism. This centered on former War minister and decorated general Georges Boulanger, and among other things advocated an end to parliament's institutional dominance. This was to be achieved by strengthening the position of the president of the republic, who was to be directly elected by the people. To enable this, boulangists promoted constitutional change, which to ruling (and later many other) republicans seemed a rather thinly disguised plan for Boulanger's personal dictatorship.

Both in terms of his popularity as in terms of his smooth and modern political campaign organization, Boulanger presented an enormous challenge to the republican establishment. His political success was fueled by a corruption affair involving president Grévy's own son-in-law, Daniel Wilson. Only with a prodigious effort were republicans able to stave off the threat to their power and positions. But boulangism was not the last major crisis that befell the young republic. Just a few years after the dust had settled, in the fall of 1892, the next one occurred. This crisis, the politico-financial corruption affair also known as the Panama scandal, evolved around a number of parliamentarians who had been bribed on behalf of the Panama company in order to grant it permission to issue bonds with a lottery attached to it. For the second time in five years, the parliamentary system was under attack.

The premise of this dissertation is that especially in such times of political upheaval, fundamental public debate will take place. Given the broad array and the tenacity of the Third Republic's foes, and the general sense of discontent its institutional democracy generated, one should not be surprised to find much criticism of the parliamentary system in it. Much less self-evident – and for that reason all the more interesting – was the fact that political criticism also came from the republican side. Precisely that criticism is the topic of this PhD- thesis.

With the waning influence of political salons, public debate occurred for a large part in newspapers. For that reason, the political commentaries in two key republican-leaning but temperamentally different (daily) journals have been studied in the years 1887-1893: years which include the boulangist and Panama crises. Selected titles are *Le Petit Journal*, a widely sold and distributed exponent of the mass press aimed at the common man, and *Le Temps*, a high-end intellectual journal that was extensively read among the Parisian republican ruling elite.

Again, even for the chronically unstable politics of the Third Republic, Europe's first parliamentary democracy based on universal manhood suffrage, the years 1887-1893 count as an especially turbulent time, in which fundamental debates about the political system took place. Although it was constitutionally safeguarded, that system was certainly not accepted by all those who participated in the political arena.

Boulangism and the Panama scandal both triggered critical public debates. At the hand of these episodes, this thesis has looked at a relatively unknown part of late nineteenth century French public debate: political criticism from within the republican camp. At the same time, the uncovered criticism tells us something not only about fin-de-siècle France, but about democracy in general, for the Third Republic in a sense served as a laboratory for institutional democracy and the counter-reactions it elicited.

In that democracy strong emphasis was placed on the ballot as a concrete expression of popular sovereignty, while political parties were absent in their modern form, and other means of democratic participation such as direct democracy were shunned. The resistance French institutional democracy met and the language in which that resistance was expressed is undisputedly related to the – frequently populist – criticism and opposition in our own time aimed at institutional democracy in Europe and the United States. Simply put, to the counter-reaction that organized democracy still prompts, due to a perceived lack of representation, and that therefore transcends the case-study of Third Republic France.

The introduction of this dissertation outlines the general political situation of that republic in the 1870s and 1880s. It emphasizes the endemic political turbulence. It also discusses populism, not only because boulangism is considered to be Western Europe's first populist movement, but also because the political criticism of especially *Le Petit Journal* at times revealed populist features. Specifically, a distinction has been made between a type of populism that emphasizes protest, or *populisme protestataire*, and one that underlines identity, *populisme identitaire*. The first form stresses the gap between the ordinary people and the political elite, while the term 'people' is considered to be a geographical construct. In

populisme identitaire, the idea of a threatened shared identity, of which ethnicity is a crucial component, is underlined.

The first chapter further treats the political context. The focus is placed on the French constitutional structure and political landscape, as well as on the key political actors, including Boulanger and his movement. Chapter two addresses the French press and identified its three main flaws: a profound polarization, a general corruptedness and antisemitism. Furthermore, it characterizes the selected journals in a more detailed fashion. The third chapter discusses *Le Petit Journal's* political commentaries in the years 1887-1889, a period that encompassed the rise and demise of boulangism. Chapter four deals with *Le Temps*. After an intermezzo on the origins of the Panama scandal in chapter five, chapters six and seven discuss the political commentaries of the journals in the years 1889-1893. The last chapter (eight) analyzes the uncovered political criticism in greater depth.

Le Petit Journal's political critique was largely directed against the disfunctioning of the *Chambre des Députés*. It contrasted the *Chambre* and French representatives regularly with *le peuple* or the people, and it lamented the absence of a coherent and robust governmental policy that upheld French honour. The journal did not perceive Boulanger and boulangism as a threat, but rather as warnings, and as logical products of the political incompetence of the republican establishment. According to *Le Petit Journal*, fundamental change was required. Political scandals such as the Wilson and Panama scandals only affirmed this, for the journal considered them first and foremost as symptoms of a widespread corruption within the parliamentary regime and of its decline. The Panama scandal particularly triggered an antisemitic, nationalistic hate campaign. Here *Le Petit Journal's* commentaries show overlap with *populisme identitaire*.

Le Temps also denounced the disunion, agitation and rivalries in the *Chambre des Députés*, but the journal blamed those on French political immaturity. In this vision, politicians and the French people both lacked proper democratic *moeurs* or habits. The journal repeatedly stressed that the perceived problems were not ingrained in or engendered by the institutional structure, and that changing that structure would not improve anything. On the contrary: boulangism was a recipe for dictatorship. As was the case with *Le Petit Journal*, *Le Temps'* attitude towards the Panama scandal reflected earlier criticism. Instead of the corruption, it emphasized political incompetence (and thus the political immaturity) of the republican politicians in the government and parliament. For *Le Temps*, whereas Panama was chiefly a judicial affair, political scandals as such pertained to all times and all regimes, and were attributable to political ineptness. If individual mistakes had been made at all, they

merely concerned the persons who had committed them and certainly not the republican regime itself. One thing was above discussion: only the liberal democratic, parliamentary regime could ensure gradual democratic progress while preserving liberties. In the meantime, democracy would (have to) learn.

The exposed political critique of *Le Petit Journal* and *Le Temps* demonstrates to what extent republican political debate was peppered with criticism. This makes plain the intrinsic connection thereof with institutional democracy. But it also seems to touch upon two theoretical frictions that were inherently present in French democracy: on the one hand between its aspiration to be socially inclusive while making rational decisions in the general interest, and on the other hand between the need for unity and the theoretical indivisibility of sovereignty versus the practical need to accommodate sectional or partial interests.

General Georges Boulanger sought to remedy France's ills by changing the constitution. For him the constitution was more than merely a thorn in the side: the substantial parliamentary power it had established was the alleged cause of all problems. In this vision, constitutional adjustments were required in order to enable a politically powerful president, directly chosen by universal manhood suffrage, to lead the country. For *Le Petit Journal* and *Le Temps* however, direct democracy was a bridge too far: the journals did not trust the people *that* much. But they were confident it could elect a new, better Chamber. For the journals, national elections were the only feasible way out of the troubles.

The studied political criticism of *Le Petit Journal* and *Le Temps* also points towards something else: the fact that they both apparently considered their own institutional democracy to be able to absorb their criticism. The journals thus implicitly demonstrated how robust that democracy ultimately was.