

### **The Origins of Republican Discourse, 1885-1914**

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This paper sketches a hypothesis which is beginning to emerge from my research into republican rhetoric in the Third Republic: “classic” republican patriotic discourse did not develop in a straight line from the Revolution; rather it was (re-)constructed in the 1890s following the triumph of the Republic in the 1870s and the development of Déroulède’s authoritarian nationalism in the 1880s. What I am calling “classic” republican patriotic discourse characterised republican and socialist speech and writing in the Belle Epoque, the quarter century before the Great War. It was built upon a sub-text of interlocking values that resonated with the very word “France,” which was synonymous with the Republic and with liberty. Let me give two examples of this discourse. First, a group of socialist and republican deputies calling in 1894 for a cleansing of parliament after the Panama Affair:

We must have [a great clean-up], so the Republic will be the true Republic, that for which our elders fought and died: a Republic of honesty and empowerment.

We must have it, so that great and generous France regains the free disposition of herself, the avant-garde position that she so long and so gloriously occupied in the world.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [Délégues founding Ligue d’Action socialiste], “Le Panama: Un Manifeste,” *La*

Second, the conservative socialist or progressive republican Francis de Pressensé in the midst of the anti-clerical struggle in 1904. De Pressensé denounced those “who would deliver the soul of the country of the Revolution to the doctrines and ideas of the counter-Revolution!” He evoked and equated “France,” “the spirit of the Revolution,” and “her role of avant-garde.”<sup>2</sup>

We can hear in these examples two key rhetorical tendencies that were common to republican discourse of the period. The first is the deployment of “country”—“pays,” “patrie,” “France,” and, more rarely, “nation,”—and “République,” in which each of these terms evokes the others and indeed is virtually synonymous with them. The second is the way in which the Revolution is the locomotive behind these terms, pushing and defining them, at the same time as it provides the yardstick used to measure the accomplishments and failings of the actual Republic in power.

By the twentieth century, this rhetoric was deeply imbricated in republican speech and writing. It was perfectly accepted and understood by listeners (and indeed used by those listeners in their own discussions, so far as we can judge). They automatically supplied the sub-text, hearing behind each key term its resonances with the other key terms and concepts. We can therefore speak of this rhetoric as a discourse, the discourse of French republicanism.

Historians have assumed that this discourse was constructed in the Revolutionary period, that it was then passed down through the nineteenth century to resurface after the fall of the Second Empire, when it was used by Gambetta and other great orators to construct the Third Republic, and that it then became a staple of the Republic, challenged by the Boulanger, Panama and Dreyfus Affairs, but sustained into the twentieth century and the “union sacrée” of 1914. As Robert Tombs puts it, historians “present the ‘triumph’ of the Republic as the natural, logical, and even inevitable conclusion of the Revolution and the embodiment of the ‘values of 1789’” carried in a consistent rhetoric developed out of the Revolution.<sup>3</sup>

When I began to look for the origins of this republican discourse, however, I found that it was not the product of continuous development from the Revolution to the twentieth century. Republican rhetoric of the Second Republic is not the subject of this research, but I suggest that we need to consider carefully to what extent it was revived or resurrected and to what extent it was actually the product of new circumstances, given that the republicans in power were terrified of seeming like the Jacobins of 1793. In any case, that rhetoric was effectively repressed by the Second Empire after a brief and difficult three years.

How much can we speak the rhetoric of ’93 persisting past the Second Empire? While a self-consciously Jacobin rhetoric characterised some of the Communards, the Commune of 1871 did not signal a revival of Second Republic

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*Petite République*, 13 January 1894, 1. “Il le faut [un grand nettoyage], pour que la République soit la vraie République, celle pour laquelle ont combattu et sont morts nos aînés : République d’honnêteté et d’affranchissement. Il le faut, pour que la grande et généreuse France retrouve avec la libre disposition d’elle-même, la place d’avant-garde qu’elle a si longtemps et si glorieusement occupée dans le monde.”

<sup>2</sup> Francis de Pressensé, “La Réaction masquée de Patriotisme,” *l’Humanité*, 19 November 1905, 1. “Qui livrerait l’âme du pays de la Révolution aux doctrines et aux idées de la contre-Révolution.” “La France ... l’esprit de la Révolution, ... son rôle d’avant-garde.”

<sup>3</sup> Robert Tombs, *France 1814-1914* (London and New York, 1996), 435-6.

rhetoric. Moreover, this Communard rhetoric disappeared with the repression of the Commune. During the 1870s, republicans under Gambetta's leadership faced new circumstances and their rhetoric responded to these circumstances. They sought to build the Republic without rousing fears of bellicose or radical republicanism. The republican rhetoric so characteristic of the mature Third Republic was developed during the 1880s and forged into shared discourse during the 1890s. It *followed* upon the success of the conservative Republic and the need to reaffirm the Republic's patriotic vocation after the development of the new authoritarian nationalism in the 1880s.

This paper focuses on this discourse in *La Petite République*, the republican newspaper founded in 1876 by Léon Gambetta, the founding father of the Third Republic, and in *l'Humanité*, the socialist newspaper founded in 1904 by Jean Jaurès, the charismatic founder of the French Socialist Party. My research assistants and I have gone through these newspapers systematically, reading every sixth issue to ensure that we get a mix of days of the week. We chose these newspapers because each of them was at the heart of a key evolution of republicanism. *La Petite République* mobilised republicans against monarchists in the 1870s. Gambetta and his friends began *La Petite République française* on 13 April 1876, when censorship was lifted.<sup>4</sup> "Petite" referred to the newspaper, not the Republic. Unlike *La République française*, Gambetta's first newspaper, it was in a proto-tabloid format and sold for five centimes (one *sou*), a price designed to make it affordable to workers.<sup>5</sup> It reached the astonishing circulation of 140,000 by the end of 1877.<sup>6</sup> It thus offered to the mass of republicans a new language suitable to the new republicanism as the republicans triumphed over the monarchists and installed the triumphant Republic.

With Gambetta's death in 1882, the party and the newspaper were maintained by the now dominant mainstream republicans. In the face of the new nationalism in the 1880s, the newspaper further developed a rhetoric of a peace and prosperity republicanism. And during the 1890s it provided the forum in which future socialists such as Jaurès evolved from republicanism to socialism. *L'Humanité*, to which I shall turn shortly, mobilised republicans with a social agenda into the unified socialist party and provided the advance guard of republicanism before the Great War. It thus offered the final formulation of "classic" republican rhetoric before the Great War.

The development of this rhetoric is best understood in the context of the emergence of the new nationalism, with its trenchant challenge to republican values. Republicanism had been associated with militant patriotism. Gambetta succeeded in fudging his policy of entente with Germany, largely because of the prestige he had acquired as a result of his effort at all-out war in 1870. With his death, republicans were exposed to the challenge of *revanche* as conservatives (or more precisely anti-republicans) re-grouped around a new authoritarian nationalism, in which anti-Semitism came to play a significant role. *La Ligue des patriotes* was founded in 1882. Its first President was the republican historian Henri Martin. The moving force behind it was the journalist Paul Déroulède. For Déroulède, the way to rebuild the nation was to inculcate obedience among the people and authority among their leaders. Individualism had caused the defeat; the Nation must be supreme. In 1885 Martin resigned as president, writing to Déroulède, "you are an authoritarian patriot, I am a

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<sup>4</sup> J. P. T. Bury, *Gambetta and the Making of the Third Republic* (London, 1973), 304.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 307.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 309 & n.

liberal patriot.”<sup>7</sup> In 1888, the remaining republicans split off, leaving Déroulède in charge. He lost half the 200,000 members, but united those who remained around a shared authoritarian ideology, which many historians call the “new nationalism.”

A volume edited by Robert Tombs in 1991 opened a major debate between Zeev Sternhell and William Irvine about the nature of this new nationalism. Sternhell argued that it was, culturally at least, of the left; Irvine showed that it was based, socially in any case, among those who had always opposed the Republic.<sup>8</sup> This debate has not yet been brought conclusively to a close. One key to the debate has been Sternhell’s argument that “classic” republican rhetoric suggests continuity between Déroulède’s authoritarian nationalism and republicanism. I argue that, at the very time that the new nationalists were turning against the Republic: 1) the republicans were developing a new, more radical rhetoric based on the evocation of the great Revolution; 2) a mass republican culture was emerging against the new nationalism; and 3) this rhetoric was distinct from that of the new authoritarian nationalism. In particular, it was pacific while that of the new nationalism was bellicose. If I am correct, then a major strut of Sternhell’s argument disappears.

The Republic was a hidden, almost clandestine ideal during the later Second Empire, as Philip Nord has shown.<sup>9</sup> After the Commune of 1871, republicans followed Gambetta’s lead in speaking of the Republic as the only practicable mode of reconciliation. Sanford Elwitt’s classic *The Making of the Third Republic* was right: Gambetta and Thiers converged on an Orleanist Republic. Republican discourse emphasised this conciliatory, moderate Republic, neither the Revolutionary Republic nor the radical democracy of Gambetta’s famous 1869 Belleville Programme.<sup>10</sup>

Gambetta and the republicans of the 1870s sought to conciliate their republican clientele with that of the Orleanist bourgeoisie. In Gambetta’s words:

France cannot be governed against the bourgeoisie; ... [but they] must not be allowed to predominate to the total exclusion of labouring people. The Republic alone can achieve the harmonious reconciliation of the legitimate demands of workers with respect for the sacred rights of property, ... teach the bourgeoisie to cherish democratic government and ... the people to have confidence in their elder brothers [the bourgeoisie].<sup>11</sup>

The kind of discourse we found in the early twentieth century *followed* upon the success of the conservative Republic. It was not the product of a continuous stream of

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<sup>7</sup> Jean-Francois Sirinelli, *Histoire des droites en France* (2 vols; Paris, 1992), 1, 72.

<sup>8</sup> William D. Irvine, “Royalists and the Politics of Nationalism,” in Robert Tombs, ed., *Nationhood and Nationalism in France: From Boulangism to the Great War, 1889-1918* (2nd edn.; London, 2001), 108-120; Zeev Sternhell, “The Political Culture of Nationalism,” *ibid.*, 22-38. Cf. William D. Irvine, *The Boulanger Affair Reconsidered: Royalism, Boulangism, and the Origins of the Radical Right in France* (New York, 1989); Zeev Sternhell, *Neither Right nor Left: Fascist Ideology in France*, trans. David Maisel (Berkeley, 1986).

<sup>9</sup> Philip G. Nord, *The Republican Moment: Struggles for Democracy in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge, MA, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> Sanford Elwitt, *The Making of the Third Republic: Class and Politics in France, 1868-1884* (Baton Rouge, 1975).

<sup>11</sup> *Mémorial des Deux-Sèvres*, 3 September 1870, quoted in Elwitt, 57-9.

development which can be traced back to the Revolution; it was (re-)constructed afresh during the 1880s and 1890s. Republican rhetoric during these decades was resolutely didactic, which suggests that republican leaders used this rhetoric in the awareness that they were training and converting their listeners to be active republicans, bringing them to a level of shared discursive awareness. In the current climate, in which the social gains of a century and indeed the rights developed over hundreds of years are being rolled back, it is instructive to consider how republicans in the late nineteenth century mobilised their troops and tropes to preserve and extend the conquests of the Revolution.

The real change in discourse is found in the evocation of the Revolution: how much it is evoked and in what terms. During the 1870s, republicans avoided any reference to the Revolution, even implicit. During the 1880s, they gradually reintroduced it into their speeches and writings, portraying it as the basis of the stability and prosperity they claimed the Republic was bringing to the country. And during the late 1880s and 1890s, they perfected this discourse against the “new nationalism” manifested in the Boulanger, Panama and Dreyfus Affairs.

They did not, to be sure, just develop rhetoric:

1° they introduced widespread primary and secondary education;

2° they encouraged a whole new official republican history through lucrative textbook development (think of Lavissee and Seignobos not as historians but as entrepreneurs!), and they crowned this work by founding the Chair of the History of the Revolution at the Sorbonne in 1885;

3° they built the 1889 Exposition Universelle not only around the Eiffel Tower but also around the centenary of the Revolution, so that the 32 million visitors were subjected, at home in the provinces and during their visit to Paris, to an explosion of republican rhetoric. One sub-prefect “glorified the festivals of the Centenary [of the Revolution] and of the Exposition....The entire universe is rushing to contemplate, at the Exposition of 1889, the marvels born of 18 years of peace and hard work.”<sup>12</sup> For the Exposition, the city of Paris installed a statue of Danton on the Boulevard Saint-Germain, strategically located between the Latin Quarter and the Saint-Sulpice neighbourhood, heart of the Church’s intellectual activity.

4° they developed an official republican visual imagery. Jules Ferry initiated a period of commissions for edifying republican painting. Busts of Marianne were installed in town halls, statues erected in town and village squares (as Maurice Agulhon noted), many with didactic inscriptions, such as this one from a village in the Alps: “The three Republics must be the object of our eternal gratitude. The First gave us the Land, the Second the Vote and the Third Education.”<sup>13</sup>

In 1885, the republicans crowned this work with a symbolic attack on the hated Sacré-Cœur, installing just in front of the Basilica a statue of the Chevalier de la Barre, who had been tortured and executed in 1766 for refusing to remove his hat before a religious procession.

Beneath all this, of course, was the tangible development of railways and schools in a climate of prosperity. At the same time, however, republicans were interpreting all this development as the fruits not only of the Republic, but also of the

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<sup>12</sup> *L'Indépendant de Saint-Claude*, 11 May 1889.

<sup>13</sup> Maurice Agulhon, “Attitudes politiques,” in Georges Duby and Armand Wallon, eds., *Histoire de la France rurale*, 3, Maurice Agulhon, Gabriel Désert, and Robert Specklin, eds., *Apogée et crise de la civilisation paysanne de 1789 à 1914* (Paris, 1976), 517.

Revolution. Republican rhetoric re-introduced the Revolution as the source of all this good work. By the 1890s, during the crucial affairs which threatened the Republic, this rhetoric had become a shared discourse, and the Revolution became in itself a basis for the nation and a measuring stick against which to judge.

To mobilise the people against a resurgent anti-republican threat, based as it was among significant sections of the people (one thinks of today's shock jocks and Murdoch press), republicans had to re-construct, almost to develop anew, a rhetoric that would resonate with the people: compromise was no longer the solution. This rhetoric was developed in the Chamber of Deputies and in *La Petite République*, which not only contained columns by leading republicans, but also reproduced all their major speeches. This rhetoric was honed in the Boulanger, Panama and Dreyfus Affairs, and as it was honed and developed, it became a shared discourse.

The Revolution, to which few republican speeches referred in the delicate political climate of the 1870s, now became the great mobilising trope. Whereas in the 1870s the task had been to reduce the hostility of elites, in the 1880s the task was to convince republicans that the triumphant Republic was the fulfilment of the Revolution and no further Revolution was required. So, from the 1880s, the new rhetoric often built on anti-clericalism. When the new papal nuncio was greeted in accordance with Vatican ritual, a columnist in *La Petite République* complained, "What's this! The obsolete ceremony is deployed in 1891 in the country of the Revolution!"<sup>14</sup> Gambetta himself had, of course, invented modern anti-clericalism, but he had not invoked the Revolution as authority. What was new was the evocation of the Revolution in positive terms as the basis of the nation.

By the mid-1890s, in the brief interlude between the Boulanger and Dreyfus Affairs, revolution became a common trope, not only the Great Revolution but also the Commune, which now was evoked in positive terms in radical republican and socialist rhetoric. In the 1890s, revolutions and revolutionaries were no longer embarrassments but certificates of authentic republicanism. Paule Mink, the veteran of the Commune, sought to counter the nationalists by reminding her readers that it was only during the Commune that "everyone was united in the idea of defence of the Republic, of the country [fatherland]." She went on to remind her readers that "Blanqui, our venerated and our beloved Master Blanqui, was the first to push for total resistance."<sup>15</sup> Mink was maintaining the association in the popular mind of Auguste Blanqui's name with the revolutionary struggle.

By the mid-1890s, even moderate republicans were invoking Blanqui's name because of this association. René Viviani, a conservative socialist/radical republican, wrote in 1898 (on the 27<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Blanqui's death), that Blanqui "loved above all things the French fatherland [patrie], the radiant hearth of the Revolution, a hearth whose fire has never gone out."<sup>16</sup> This example suggests, too, the way that republicans linked the Revolution with "la patrie."

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<sup>14</sup> Jean-Jacques, "Clercs et Laiques," *La Petite République*, 12 June 1891, 1. "Eh ! quoi ! ce cérémonial suranné se déploie en 1891 dans le pays de la Révolution!"

<sup>15</sup> Paule Mink, "Chronique: où ils étaient en janvier 1871," *La Petite République*, 11 January 1898, 1. "Vous étiez unis dans cette idée de la défense de la République, de la patrie." "Blanqui, notre vénéré et bien aimé maître Blanqui, était le premier à pousser à la résistance extrême."

<sup>16</sup> René Viviani, "Une tombe," *La Petite République*, 8 January 1896, 1. "aime par dessus tout la patrie française, le foyer éclatant de la Révolution, foyer jamais éteint."

The Revolution became the litmus test for republicanism. In the immediate aftermath of the Boulanger Affair, a leader in *La Petite République* claimed to speak for “all the groups which base themselves in France on the French Revolution and who have the tri-colour for their emblem.”<sup>17</sup> By 1890 this became the test that distinguished republicans from those who had followed Déroulède and Boulanger (which is not to say, of course, that some who now saw themselves as republicans had not been tempted in those directions). If this rhetoric helped build mass support for the Republic, it also provided ammunition for those who wished to go beyond the republican settlement of the 1870s. Many dissatisfied republicans used it, and many of them became socialists.

By the same token, the Revolution became the ideal against which the shortcomings of the existing Republic were measured as well as the framework within which and for which policy was formulated. In 1895, Gustave Rouanet, a republican on the way to independent socialism like Jaurès, referred to the need to augment “the freedom to think and to write, that conquest of the Revolution of which we boast so much.”<sup>18</sup> Thus he reinforced the invocation of the Republic. This was a continuing theme of his, used to defend the republican mission of the schoolteacher on many occasions.

This new base in the Revolution was developed, one might say, just in time for the Dreyfus Affair. Pierre Sorlin has shown how the Dreyfus Affair has an “amazing impact” on French vocabulary.<sup>19</sup> It certainly brought republican rhetoric to new heights, especially among those republicans who were moving to Socialism. Foremost among them was Jean Jaurès, the charismatic leader who embodied French republican socialism until his assassination in 1914. At the height of the Dreyfus Affair, Jaurès apostrophised the anti-Dreyfusards: “Kneel before France, swindlers [*coquins*] who have dishonoured her.”<sup>20</sup> Another writer proclaimed, “this is always the same France, always the nation where the people accomplish heroic things, despite their leaders [*en dépit de ses chefs*].”<sup>21</sup> The republican socialist Gérault-Richard argued in another piece, “We defend in the Republic the patrimony of liberty common to all the French,” and he recalled France’s “glory as an intelligent and generous nation.”<sup>22</sup> The anti-Dreyfusards “betray in one blow France, the Republic, and Liberty,” wrote another commentator.<sup>23</sup>

To the republican rhetoric of the late 1880s, the Dreyfus Affair added a new element of morality, equating the Republic and the Revolution with the people and the nation, eliminating the anti-republicans. If this rhetoric was successful, it was because it now found an echo in a substantial majority of the population: it was a shared

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<sup>17</sup> Jean-Jacques, “27 Janvier 1889,” *La Petite République*, 29 September 1890, 1. “tous les groupes qui se réclament en France de la Révolution française et qui ont le drapeau aux trois couleurs pour emblème.”

<sup>18</sup> Gustave Rouanet, “1895-1896,” *La Petite République*, 2 January 1896, 1. “La liberté de penser et d’écrire, cette conquête tant vantée de la Révolution.”

<sup>19</sup> Pierre Sorlin, “Words and images of nationhood,” in Tombs, ed., *Nationhood and nationalism in France*, 80.

<sup>20</sup> Jean Jaurès “Le Dossier Ultra-Secret,” *La Petite République*, 20 September 1898, 2, col. 3.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Zahori, “Comme au temps de Jeanne d’Arc,” *ibid.*, 9 October 1898, 1.

<sup>22</sup> Gérault-Richard, “Les Raisonners,” *ibid.*, 1; *idem*, “Défense Nationale,” *ibid.*, 4 November 1898, 1.

<sup>23</sup> “Henri Turot, “La Parole du Vieux,” *ibid.*, 13 October 1898, 1.

discourse. And on this foundation, republicans who wished to change the Republic, especially socialists, built their rhetoric.

In 1904, Jaurès and a host of socialist and republican intellectuals founded the great newspaper, *l'Humanité*, as soon as Jaurès had finished his seven-volume *Histoire socialiste de la Révolution française*.<sup>24</sup> And the next year they founded the unified socialist party, the Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière, which in its post-Mitterrand reincarnation exists today as the party of Ségolène Royal. The party reached a membership of 100,000 and in the 1914 elections obtained more than a quarter of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies. *L'Humanité* reached a large number of readers. It continued the lessons of *La Petite République* more than it preached anything resembling Marxist Revolution.

In the new socialist newspaper, the emerging leaders of the party perfected the rhetoric developed during the preceding two decades. They maintained the essence of the republican rhetoric, but they took a somewhat more strident note and increased the references to the Revolution. In 1905, the independent socialist René Viviani, on his way toward the centre, invoked "the fatherland [*patrie*]... , our inheritance from the Revolution, that immortal legacy to human civilisation."<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, Gustave Rouanet, now a socialist, refused to "deliver the France of the Revolution and of Justice to the parties of intrigue and the church."<sup>26</sup> He was defending a schoolteacher facing disciplinary charges for having spoken ill of the local priest. This rhetoric invoking the Revolution could be used on any occasion and it reinforced the nexus between the Revolution and the Republic.

One could indeed imagine, though I've not yet sought to test this, that conservative republicans (the opportunists) were in complicity with radical republicans and socialists in this. Conservative republicans invoked the Revolution so that people would feel that the Revolution had been accomplished and that no more change was necessary (Gambetta had given the lead in this); radical republicans and, *a fortiori*, socialists invoked the Revolution so that people would feel that more change was necessary. All, however, were constructing republican discourse.

If, as I have argued, the "classic" republican discourse based on the Revolution emerged only in the 1890s, following the shifts of the 1880s, then it may be possible to shift the terrain of debate about the new nationalism. Sternhell, looking at nationalist discourse, emphasised continuity of exclusionary nationalism. Irvine, looking at the social bases of 1880s politics, emphasised a shift away from exclusionary discourse among the emerging republican majority as it repudiated the new nationalism. I suggest that consideration of republican rhetoric overall suggests a more active development of a rhetoric based on affirming the value of the great Revolution and that, as republicans came to use the Revolution as their yardstick, they developed or re-developed a more open form of nationalism; indeed, the socialists moved into internationalist rhetoric which may be viewed as a precursor to Europe. What is certain is that we can be more cautious in the face of Sternhell's assertions that the bellicose rhetoric of the 1880s over-determined subsequent republican rhetoric.

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<sup>24</sup> Jean Jaurès, *Histoire socialiste de la Révolution française* (reprint of rev. edn; New York, 1973).

<sup>25</sup> René Viviani, "L'Idée de Patrie," *l'Humanité*, 4 May 1905, 1. "La patrie . . . , le patrimoine de la Révolution, ce legs immortel de civilisation humaine."

<sup>26</sup> Gustave Rouanet, "L'instituteur," *l'Humanité*, 2 September 1905, 2. "Livrer la France de la Révolution et de la Justice aux partis d'intrigue et d'église."