
H-France Forum, Volume 6, Issue 3 (Fall 2011), No. 2

Ruth Harris, *Dreyfus: Politics, Emotion, and the Scandal of the Century*. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2010. xvii+542 pp. Illust., notes, bibliog., index. \$35.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-312-57298-3; \$28.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN10: 0-312-57298-0

Review Essay by Willa Z. Silverman, The Pennsylvania State University.

Launching a memorable salvo in 1978 with his assertion that “la Révolution française est terminée,” François Furet called on historians to repugn the prevailing Marxist interpretation of the central event in modern French history and reexamine the Revolution dispassionately, even at the risk of tarnishing the image of “greatness” that the historian Albert Soboul, for one, ascribed to Maximilien Robespierre and other heroes of the Revolution.[1] While admittedly writing in a significantly altered ideological landscape from the one that shaped Soboul and Albert Mathiez, in her richly-detailed, highly readable study of another crucible of French history Ruth Harris argues that the “orthodox interpretation” (p. 5) of the Dreyfus Affair now also warrants reexamination and, in the end, rejection as overly idealized and triumphalist. The provocative thesis of Harris’s revisionist history of the Affair—in essence, that “l’Affaire Dreyfus est terminée”—represents an important contribution to the historiography of the Dreyfus Affair, yet one whose controversial implications merit questioning.

The Dreyfus Affair, as Harris notes in her preface, has generated a monumental body of scholarship. Some of it—including Joseph Reinach’s multivolume history of the events in which he engaged himself so prominently—was concomitant with the Affair itself.[2] More recently, the centenaries of watershed moments in the Affair—Alfred Dreyfus’s arrest and first court-martial in 1894, his ultimate exoneration and reintegration into the army twelve years later, and the journalistic bombshell of Émile Zola’s “J’Accuse...!” in 1898—have occasioned numerous publications, some drawing on a wealth of unpublished archival material. At the same time, these anniversaries have witnessed the launching or revival of public debates in France on the import of the Affair, as evidenced by the ultimately unsuccessful 2006 initiative to Pantheonize Dreyfus. The restoration to the Affair that bears the name of Alfred Dreyfus himself, long a maligned or simply omitted figure in the *cause célèbre* set in motion by his conviction for treason, has been achieved masterfully in biographies by Michael Burns and Vincent Duclert, belying Harris’s assertion that the Affair “has too long been confined to the more familiar terrain of conventional military, political and social history”(p. 8).[4] Within the past two years alone, the publication by American commercial presses of Louis Begley’s *Why the Dreyfus Affair Matters* and Frederick Brown’s *For the Soul of France: Culture Wars in the Age of Dreyfus* suggest the continued fascination exercised by the Affair for both its riveting narrative—one scholar views the paucity of fictional representations of the Affair as the measure of the unsurpassable drama of the historical event itself and its recording in the daily press[5]—and the continued relevance of the range of political, ideological and ethical debates it ignited.[6] I was thus eager to learn what Harris’s lengthy volume, arriving after the commemorative ‘moment’ of 1994–2006, would contribute to scholarship on the Affair by virtue of new evidence or a novel retelling or interpretation of amply-recorded events.

Harris’s “reinterpretation” (p. xiii) of the Dreyfus Affair rests on a bold critique of a number of the sacred cows comprising its historiography. Foremost among these tenets of the Dreyfusard vulgate is the “virtual sanctification” (p. xvi) of intellectuals in a history, Harris contends, written largely by the

ultimate victors in the Affair, beginning with Joseph Reinach. Rather than indulging in an uncritical Dreyfusard hagiography whose espousal as recently as 2006 by Jacques Chirac makes for “good rhetoric but poor history” (p. 5), Harris sets as her task to present the Dreyfusards as “men and women with acknowledged prejudices, violent feelings and deep-seated fears [who] overcame—even if temporarily—these negative impulses to create the Dreyfusard coalition” (p. xvii). Perhaps the most troubling of the “acknowledged prejudices” of some Dreyfusards was their anti-Semitism, apparent to varying degrees in the private musings and public declamations of Colonel Georges Picquart, Senate Vice-President Auguste Scheurer-Kestner, and the polemicist Bernard-Lazare.

As Harris argues convincingly, motivating and ultimately offering a partial explanation of the ideological untidiness that is one of the Affair’s salient characteristics was a proteiform force rarely analyzed systematically in histories of the Dreyfus case: emotion. For Harris, the abstract “emotion” signaled in her book’s title was both an individual and collective phenomenon, as well as a mode of expression. “Emotion” encompassed the deeply-felt sentiment palpable, for example, in a letter by Scheurer-Kestner, writing of “this humiliation, this heart-break... [this] patriotic grief” (p. 91) he felt in the wake of the 1871 annexation to Germany of his native Alsace. “Emotional dynamics” (p. 46) decisively bound or divided pairs or small groups—Alfred Dreyfus and his brother Mathieu, the Reinach brothers. In its collective dimension, “emotion” in Harris’s analysis bears relation to *mentalités* in their definition by Robert Mandrou as “visions du monde,”[7] although not necessarily rooted in differences between social classes. Contrasted with individual expressions of sentiment, collective “emotions” during the Affair belonged to the realm of fantasm and myth, of anti-clerical or Jewish conspiracy for example. Such hysterical worldviews fed the “deep hatreds [that] evoked primal biblical scenes” (p. 35) enacted at Dreyfus’s degradation, in the streets of Paris during the Zola trials, and in the murderous slogans constituting the Monument Henry. But such passionate creeds also fueled the “messianic fervour” (p. 254) that led to the founding in 1898 of the Ligue des droits de l’homme.

Emotion also prescribed and constituted a mode of expression evident in both the journalistic polemics of Bernard-Lazare and Édouard Drumont and the sentimental, Romantic model of history writing reminiscent of Jules Michelet, which for the Dreyfusard glassmaker Émile Gallé infused the “poetry” (p. 166) of Joseph Reinach’s writing. Dramatic emotivity characterized the “performative” nature of the widely-publicized antics of Gyp and the marquise Arconati-Visconti, two of the Affair’s leading *salonnières*. As a mode of representation, Harris notes perceptively, emotion generated its own lexical fields. Most striking among these, and constituting a discourse appropriated by Dreyfusards and anti-Dreyfusards alike, was religious language, including a martyrology that glorified both Alfred and Lucie Dreyfus and the notorious forger Colonel Hubert-Joseph Henry. Harris draws frequently on private correspondence, some of it rarely cited, by both the protagonists of the Affair and its lesser-known participants—among them the many French citizens who wrote letters of support to both Lucie Dreyfus and Colonel Henry’s widow, Berthe—to convey the depth and range of passions that the Affair stimulated. The often intimate nature of private correspondence, as these letters amply reveal, encouraged an impassioned style. Yet Harris does fully consider the epistolary codes of self-presentation, of disclosure and restraint, which also dictated the forms and tenor of emotion that nineteenth-century letter-writers may have expressed or repressed.[8]

Harris’s emphasis on the centrality of emotion in the Affair supports several of her arguments. It casts the Affair as an “emotional adventure” (p. 372), a human drama—enlivened by Harris’s forceful style—during which great friendships were forged (and sometimes shattered), duels fought, and identities remade. Further, Harris’s interpretation provides an alternative to dialectical, often Manichean accounts of the Affair that present it as a battle between two Frances: Republicans v. anti-Republicans, rationalists v. irrationalists, good against evil. In part because of the emotional volatility of the Affair, Harris argues, the Dreyfusard and anti-Dreyfusard camps were far from monolithic but fraught with fractures and contradictions that constantly threatened their unity, as became painfully evident during the period separating Dreyfus’ pardon in 1899 by President Emile Loubet and his ultimate exoneration

in 1906. Further complicating the incongruities within each camp were the affinities between them. Echoing an argument advanced by Venita Datta, “radically different positions on the Affair,” states Harris, “could derive from remarkably similar emotional yearnings and intellectual preoccupations” (p. 161).^[9] Emotional, if not political bedfellows were therefore made of the young Léon Blum and Maurice Barrès, of Bernard-Lazare and Edouard Drumont, and of the *salonnières* the marquise Arconati-Viconti and Gyp, the latter both “great haters” (p. 295), troubled aristocratic women who directed their shared vitriol at differing opponents. The lines between Dreyfusards and their opponents were further blurred by a widespread, diffuse fascination at the *fin de siècle* with science and religion, encompassing both the pseudo-scientific race theory of Jules Soury and the ‘positivist’ approach to religion associated with Ernest Renan. Harris notes, correctly, that Mathieu Dreyfus and Maurice Barrès shared an interest in the spirit world, but in making this equivalency she downplays the much longer, sinister history of the extreme right’s relationship to occultism.^[10]

Finally, Harris suggests, the sometimes aleatory, emotion-driven, and contradictory nature of individuals’ choices during the Affair rendered particularly problematic the channeling of the Dreyfusard and anti-Dreyfusard mystiques identified by Charles Péguy into durable political movements or institutions, with the possible exception of the Ligue des droits de l’homme. Although anti-Semitism was to Charles Maurras a “providence” as both explanatory system and means of social and political cohesion,^[11] it did not prove sufficiently solid to bind together the members of Paul Déroulède’s Ligue des patriotes, whose members’ attitudes towards Jews varied widely. The ideological incoherence of anti-Dreyfusard leagues, for Harris, disproves another prevailing argument in Dreyfus Affair historiography, which casts these leagues and other institutions as models for those of the proto-Fascist right between the two world wars and the 1890s, more generally, as a dress rehearsal for the 1930s. Uncovering the feelings of ambition, passion, loyalty, and anger that initially united the Dreyfusard coalition, finally, also helps elucidate its demise and in the end the retrenchment of most of the Affair’s actors on both sides of the divide behind the institutions of the Republic as a type of negative common denominator, the form of government that, as Adolphe Thiers declared in 1872, “divides us least.”

Harris therefore succeeds in marshaling a wealth of evidence that underscores the Dreyfusards’ “mixed motives and actions” (p. xvii). She considers as ultimately less decisive, in shaping Dreyfusard or anti-Dreyfusard positions, the influence of social networks and sociability, for example in the cases of both the “Alsatian connection” (p. 73) and the habitués of particular salons. Largely eschewing sociologically-oriented approaches that analyze the logic of position-taking by writers and *salonnières* during the Affair as determined by their relationships to the field of power, Harris argues that individual engagements were rarely predictable.^[12]

What does this awareness of Dreyfusard, and to a lesser extent of anti-Dreyfusard, contradictions, though, contribute to an understanding of both the unfolding of the Affair and its significance? First, Harris’s analysis clarifies the arduousness of the road to revision of Dreyfus’s initial conviction and establishes that at no point was it a foregone conclusion. Had Georges Picquart not been a man who “wanted to serve his conscience and his ambition simultaneously” (p. 81), one who on several occasions held on to evidence favorable to Dreyfus longer than necessary; had Auguste Scheurer-Kestner not lost out on opportunities because of his own timidity; had Bernard-Lazare been less rash and polarizing in his early pronouncements on the Affair; had Zola been less of a “difficult man to have as an ally” (p. 113) due to his tendency to romanticize the Affair and his own involvement in it; had tensions not continually simmered between Jewish and non-Jewish Dreyfusards over making anti-Semitism a centerpiece of their involvement in the Affair, the Dreyfusard coalition might have acted earlier and more decisively to reverse the course of events.

Dreyfusard contradictions thus at many points imperiled the outcome of the Affair. Yet perhaps even more troubling for posterity, suggests Harris, is the “legacy of intolerance” (p. xvii) bequeathed by the presumptive heroes of the Affair. Beneath the Dreyfusard mystique, clothed in the rhetoric of Truth and

Justice, Harris identifies a “repressive vision of Republican orthodoxy” [xvii]. The contemporary avatar of the ferocious anti-clericalism that marked the post-Rennes phase of the Affair, during which the left “threatened to [both] undermine ethnic and religious pluralism” (p. 384) by repressing Catholic religious orders and deepen the divide between believers and non-believers, is the current anti-clericalism of “some members of the left” (p. 385), in company with the usual suspects on the extreme right, in its support of legislation banning the wearing of headscarves in French public schools. Harris’s point, made somewhat elliptically on the last page of her book, is valid, and supports her premise that there is no “facile moral template” (p. 12) regarding the Affair. However, the author’s tendency towards relativism, towards tarnishing with the same brush—in asserting for example that “Lazare shared many aspects of Drumont’s anti-Semitism” (p. 51)—gives pause when considering the Affair in the context of subsequent history. Harris’s goal—“[to do] everything possible to comprehend [anti-Dreyfusard] fears and to do justice to the positions they took” (p. 12)—is legitimate, even admirable. Yet it should obscure neither the crucial, pernicious influence of *La France juive* on the later anti-Semitic movements in Austria and Germany nor the recognition that, both during and after the Affair, it was the Dreyfusards who occupied the moral high ground. The deaths of the sons of both Joseph Reinach and Mathieu Dreyfus during the First World War and of Alfred Dreyfus’ granddaughter Madeleine at Auschwitz, movingly rendered by Harris, provoke a pain and indignation that the trial, conviction for collaboration, and life imprisonment of an elderly Charles Maurras simply do not.

In demystifying the image of “spotless heroism and purity that was built around [the Dreyfusards’] advocacy after the Affair was over” (p. 384)—in ways that recall a similar interrogation of left-wing intellectuals by Tony Judt^[13]—Harris admits that her work may be deemed transgressive, “undermining a vision of French history that has galvanized French men and women alike to oppose oppression” (p. xvii). But the Dreyfusards themselves, as Harris notes, might have welcomed such a scrupulously critical approach to their actions and legacy. In the end, Harris concludes, the Dreyfusards had the “flaws, inconsistencies, and occasional cruelties of ordinary people” (p. 384). Mathieu Dreyfus also acknowledged this in a particularly lucid comment on the complexity of human emotion: human beings, he wrote in 1901, are “complicated machines, animated by good and bad sentiments;” “the love of principles, the thirst for an ideal, when they are the exclusive motivation of action, are the attributes of only a few” (p. 344). The assertion of these seemingly simple, self-evident facts complicates, paradoxically, the interpretation of the Affair and its aftermath. It remains to be seen through future research whether position-taking during the Affair by the “ordinary” women and men was as changeable and contingent on emotion as that of the protagonists.^[14] The Dreyfus Affair may not be over yet.

Notes

[1] François Furet, *Penser la Révolution française* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978); and Albert Soboul, “Robespierre and the Popular Movement of 1793-4,” *Past and Present* 5 (May 1954): 54.

[2] Joseph Reinach, *L’Histoire de l’Affaire Dreyfus*, 7 vols. (Paris: Fasquelle, 1901-11).

[3] A representative but far from exhaustive bibliography of these titles includes, for 1994: Jean-Marc Berlière and Pierre Birnbaum, eds., *La France de l’affaire Dreyfus* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), Pierre Birnbaum, *L’Affaire Dreyfus: La République en péril* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), Michael Burns, *Histoire d’une famille française, les Dreyfus : l’émancipation, l’Affaire, Vichy*, trans. Béatrice Bonne (Paris: Fayard, 1994), Michel Drouin, ed., *L’Affaire Dreyfus de A à Z* (Paris: Flammarion, 1994), Vincent Duclert, *L’Affaire Dreyfus* (Paris: La Découverte, 1994); for 1998: James F. Brennan, *The Reflection of the Dreyfus Affair in the European Press, 1897-1899* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), Venita Datta and Willa Z. Silverman, eds., *Intellectuals and the Dreyfus Affair*, special issue of *Historical Réflexions/Reflexions historiques* 21.1 (Spring 1998), Roselyne Koren and Dan Michman eds., *Les Intellectuels face à l’affaire Dreyfus alors et aujourd’hui Perception et impact de l’Affaire en France et à l’étranger* (Paris/Montreal: L’Harmattan, 1998), Philippe Oriol, *J’Accuse...!: Emile Zola et l’affaire Dreyfus* (Paris: E.J.L., 1998), Alain Pagès, *13 janvier 1898:*

J'Accuse...! (Paris: Perrin, 1998); and for 2006: Jean-Denis Bredin, *Dreyfus, un innocent* (Paris: Fayard, 2006), Vincent Duclert, *Alfred Dreyfus: L'Honneur d'un patriote* (Paris: Fayard, 2006) and Vincent Duclert, *Dreyfus est innocent: Histoire d'une affaire d'état* (Paris: Larousse, 2006)..

[4] Michael Burns, *Dreyfus: A Family Affair, 1789-1945* (New York: Harpercollins, 1991); and Duclert, *Alfred Dreyfus*.

[5] See Susan Suleiman, "The Literary Significance of the Dreyfus Affair," in Norman L. Kleeblatt, ed., *The Dreyfus Affair: Art, Truth and Justice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 124.

[6] Louis Begley, *Why the Dreyfus Affair Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); and Frederick Brown, *For the Soul of France: Culture Wars in the Age of Dreyfus* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010).

[7] Robert Mandrou, *Introduction à la France moderne, 1500-1640: Essai de psychologie historique* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1961), passim.

[8] On the social codes pertaining to letter-writing in nineteenth century France, see Roger Chartier, Alain Boureau, Maryvonne Pérez and Caroline Rimbault, eds., *La Correspondance: Les Usages de la lettre au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 1991); Cécile Dauphin; Pierrette Lebrun-Pézerat and Danièle Pouban, eds., *Ces bonnes lettres: Une correspondance familiale au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Albin-Michel, 1995); and Danièle Pouban and Pierrette Lebrun-Pézerat, eds., *La Lettre et le politique : actes du colloque de Calais, 17-19 septembre 1993* (Paris : H. Champion; Genève: Diffusion, Editions Slatkine, 1996).

[9] See, for example, Venita Datta's discussion of organicist discourse during the Affair in *Birth of a National Icon: The Literary Avant-Garde and the Origins of the Intellectual in France* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 183-203.

[10] See Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism: Secret Aryan Cults and their Influence on Nazi Ideology: The Ariosophists of Austria and Germany, 1890-1935* (New York: New York University Press, 1992).

[11] "L'Exode moral," *Action française*, 28 March 1911.

[12] See, for example, Christophe Charle, *La Crise littéraire à l'époque du naturalism: Roman, Théâtre, Politique* (Paris: Presses de l'Ecole normale supérieure, 1979); and Anne-Marie Thiesse, *Le Roman du quotidien: Lecteurs et lectures populaires à la Belle Epoque* (Paris: Le Chemin Vert, 1984).

[13] Tony Judt, *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals 1944-1956* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

[14] See Willa Z. Silverman, "The Dreyfus Affair in the *Cahiers* of Henri Vever," *Historical Reflections/Réflexions historiques* (forthcoming).

Willa Z. Silverman
The Pennsylvania State University
wzs1@psu.edu

Copyright © 2011 by H-France, all rights reserved. H-France permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. H-France reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Forum* nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

ISSN 1557-7058

H-France Forum, Volume 6, Issue 3 (Fall 2011), No. 2