

The radical bourgeoisie

The Ligue de l'enseignement
and the origins of
the Third Republic
1866–1885

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	page ix
INTRODUCTION: BOURGEOIS RADICALISM AFTER 1848	1
1 DEFINING THE ALTERNATIVE SOCIETY: <i>LES MOEURS RÉPUBLICAINES</i>	20
Clericalism, the enemy	22
The New Man, <i>pur et dur</i>	31
Women: "He who holds the woman holds all"	38
School, the new church	46
2 ORGANIZING THE ALTERNATIVE SOCIETY	49
Jean Macé, <i>organisateur, vulgarisateur</i>	49
The three opportunities	56
The Ligue de l'enseignement, "school of decentralization"	76
Provincial organization	95
3 ESTABLISHING THE REPUBLIC	123
The communes and their schools, 1870–3	123
The defense of republican schools	135
"An arm of the party," 1873–7	144
CONCLUSION: THE REPUBLIC <i>ENRACINÉE</i> : SECULARISM AND SOLIDARITY	161
<i>Notes</i>	178
<i>Bibliography</i>	222
<i>Index</i>	235

Introduction: bourgeois radicalism after 1848

*We are dealing with a people who belong in the marrow
of their bones to the Revolution, who marry, by tradition,
fear of the word with a profound love of the thing.*

Jean Macé, *Les Origines de la Ligue de l'enseignement, 1861-1870*¹

MOST RESPECTED WRITERS AGREE that in 1848 the bourgeois revolutionary ceased to exist. The term became, as “bourgeois gentleman” had once been, a ludicrous oxymoron. Confronted with the violent literalism of the poor, bourgeois radicals abandoned fraternity for repression and enlightened criticism for pious cant. The heirs of 1789, men of the commercial and industrial classes, free professionals, and peasant proprietors, found that talk of liberty and equality threatened their privileged positions; and so, it is argued, they relied upon authoritarian devices – the central administration, the church, and a Bonaparte – to keep order on their behalf. This, of course, was Marx’s analysis of the collapse of the Second Republic. Tocqueville, similarly contemptuous, saw republicans as poseurs playing at revolution rather than continuing it; Flaubert’s *Sentimental Education* told, unforgettably, the story of their disenchantment and capitulation and of the convergence in the “party of order” of the established and those who aspired to be established. Jules Michelet, describing the bourgeois as “liberal in principle, egoist in application,” had even earlier anticipated the caricatured Radical of the Third Republic – with his heart on the left and his wallet on the right.²

Modern scholars have tended to concur with nineteenth-century commentators. In his monumental contribution to the *Oxford History of Modern Europe, France 1848-1945*, Theodore Zeldin has gone so far as to say, “It could be argued that after 1848 politics ceased to be a major preoccupation.”³ His view is shared by many, including the American political scientist Nicholas Wahl, who wrote that “in France the workers and the middle classes broke irrevocably in 1848. From then on they became the most violent enemies; consequently all hope was lost for associating the French worker with a ‘reasonable’ reformist movement led by the liberal bourgeoisie.”⁴

The bourgeoisie is said to have turned then to the more mature pleasures of money making, and Emperor Napoleon III so judiciously man-

The radical bourgeoisie

aged a policy of repression, concession, and social-overhead investment that nothing more was said of revolution until an accident, the surrounding of the emperor by the Prussians at Sedan, caused the imperial machine to collapse. Adolphe Thiers hastily substituted republicans at the head of the machine, largely because of the manifest incapacity of the pretender, Henry V; and thus the "accidental republic" was born of an understanding between Thiers and Otto von Bismarck, created by a German victory in 1870, and overthrown by another German invasion in 1940.

Historians have accepted as true this description of France: light-mindedly insurrectionist in revolutionary times, careerist in eras of administrative calm. Political scientists have elevated the narrative into a paradigm of alternating legislative and executive rule, a model of ideological politics unsupported by the aggregation of interests. Anglo-American moralists have found here a deplorable fable of the citizen and the deputy – incapable of voluntary association, powerless before the functionary, mired in *immobilisme*, and ready to welcome the Bonaparte or Bonaparte-surrogate who would deliver them.

That familiar interpretation, plausible as it may seem, remains incomplete and misleading. This book challenges it and asks a question that has, alas, not ceased to be pertinent: What do progressive people do when revolutions fail (as they so often do), or when they succeed most incompletely? Many, of course, do not survive to be perplexed by reaction. Happy, Stendhal said, the heroes dead before 1804, when Napoleon Bonaparte made himself emperor.⁵ Some withdraw from politics in despair or revulsion. Others, trimmers or men horrified by the atrocity of civil war, opt for the blessings and emoluments of peace. However, there are – everywhere, perhaps, but certainly in France – people with democratic principles and cheerful dispositions who refuse to accept their defeat as definitive. They find comfort in their most obvious shortcomings: Failure so conspicuous must be corrigible. Jean Macé and those who, in association with him, organized the circles of the *Ligue de l'enseignement* were just this sort.

Historians who neglect Macé and others like him cannot account for the ceaseless activity of provincial republicans in the 1860s, nor for their success in municipal and departmental elections and in the general elections of 1869. Further, they are unable to explain either the increasingly pronounced radical character of the Third Republic in the seventies or the commitment of generations of French citizens, stalwarts of the Center and of the Left, to free, compulsory, secular education. They cannot bring themselves even to notice the many civic projects voluntarily undertaken in the 1860s and 1870s or, if they do admit them, to acknowledge their significance.

Introduction

I contend that it was precisely in this period, the last decade of the Second Empire and the first decade of the Third Republic, that politics – reformist and increasingly radical republican politics – assumed national importance. In fact, it can be argued that far from marking the end of the radical persuasion, the events of 1848 initiated its most fruitful period, a period characterized by an extraordinary congruence of thought and action. French democrats, after repeated failure to create a republic, came to understand that success would come only when all citizens – peasants, workers, and women, as well as bourgeois men – believed themselves to be heirs of 1789. They also had the sense to see that propaganda alone would not accomplish this. Republicans had learned from 1848 that seizure of power was empty unless it gave expression to changes in the mores and self-definition of the people.

Those who laid the foundations of the Third Republic in the 1860s and 1870s seemed to work as people can when they look to the past, or a part of their past, for inspiration and to their posterity with hope. More elegant and persuasive statements of radical themes may have come earlier, in the upstart brilliance of the philosophes, or later, assured and definitive, from professors of the republican University like Emile Durkheim, Alain, Georges Lefebvre, and Marc Bloch; but this generation connected the aspirations of the eighteenth century with the institutions of the twentieth. The career of the tawdriest opportunist cannot be understood adequately without sympathetic consideration of the ideals he invoked, the ends with which decent contemporaries credited him or, at any rate, allied with him to accomplish.

It was the revolutionary society – egalitarian, secular, and civic – that radicals struggled throughout the nineteenth century to realize. They remained faithful to the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen of 1789: Indeed, the promiscuous circulation of this document was one of the improprieties cited by the prefect of the Somme when, in 1873, he dissolved the Ligue de l'enseignement in his department (as described in Chapter 3). Their principles were those upon which an earlier generation had proposed to reconstitute France: "*Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be based only on common utility (Article I)*" and "*No body or individual may exercise authority which does not emanate from the nation expressly.*" (Article III)⁶

Radicals understood freedom and equality to be inseparable, logically and constitutionally, from popular sovereignty. They were fiercely anticlerical, not from principled hostility to Catholic doctrine alone, but chiefly because they insisted that legitimate authority could not derive from supernatural, any more than from hereditary, pretensions. *Ni Dieu, ni maître*. They claimed the right of all to participate in governing; and,

The radical bourgeoisie

as heirs of the third estate, they rejected monopolies of public office conferred by birth or sacrament.

Radicalism continued to define itself as the antithesis of feudal Christianity. Radical ideology, as it developed during the nineteenth century, served to emphasize the differences between traditional and modern societies and to vindicate the movement away from one and toward the other as progress. Jules Michelet, the great republican historian and polemicist, pitted the old regime, which was based upon Arbitrary Grace – ascriptive hierarchies reigning according to *bon plaisir* – against a new society grounded in Necessary Justice.⁷ Michelet's antinomies resemble others that are perhaps more familiar to English-speaking readers, such as Tönnies's *Gemeinschaft-Gesellschaft*, Sir Henry Maine's status-contract, or the American abolitionists' irrepressible conflict between slave-holding and free nations, and anticipate later French typologies created by republican scholars as engaged in the politics of their day as Michelet was in his own. Emile Durkheim, with audaciously counter-intuitive use of the terms "mechanical" and "organic solidarity," assigned the frank pejorative "mechanical" to the unquestioned and unchosen groupings of traditional society while appropriating for modern associations all the flourishing warmth of the corporal metaphor.⁸ Marc Bloch also, writing almost a century after Michelet, cast his *Feudal Society* in implicit antithesis to the most valued aspects of modern life: Political sovereignty was fragmented and capricious, economic life incalculable, the cosmos unintelligible. Society and nature alike repelled human reason and evaded human control.⁹

Above all, radicals repudiated passive or involuntary subordination. They believed in the free individual and the democratic nation, and these two fidelities underlay their *civisme*. Concern for solidarity marked them no less than secularism. They were not individualists, nor indeed, liberals, in any simple sense. None imagined that society could be maintained by the transactions of self-regarding actors. Most assumed, with metaphors like Rousseau's general will or Durkheim's collective conscience, a common culture prerequisite to social life; and although both writers have been vilified for the supposedly totalitarian implications of this insight,¹⁰ there is nothing of tyranny in it. Tocqueville, whose commitment to liberty cannot be questioned, took it for granted that "society can exist only when a great number of men consider a great number of things under the same aspect, when they hold the same opinions upon many subjects and when the same occurrences suggest the same thoughts and impressions to their minds."¹¹

Radicals understood that a political community remained to be accomplished in France. They recognized that people differed, but their main concerns were profoundly egalitarian: At the same time that their

Introduction

ethics attempted to distinguish the legitimate consequences of individuals' diversity from the illegitimate ones, their politics contrived situations in which men would encounter each other as fellows, as *semblables*. Thus, their preoccupation with schools and clubs, the radical effort to educate and uplift the nation (*instruire et moraliser*), that is much scorned today as an effort to discipline the vagabond poor for factory labor, might reasonably be seen as their determination to empower citizens. Their militant rationalism, too, is better understood if it is not regarded as insensitivity to metaphysical questions, but as an attempt to fashion a language of civility with no privileged speakers. Tireless *vulgarisateurs*, they believed that their truths were demonstrable; and in their lectures and popular libraries one sees, zealous and unabating, the philosophes' horror of the esoteric. Denis Brogan, who has great sympathy for the radicals, thoroughly understands this. His reservation is a sensible one: Radicals, like Catholics, "too often forget . . . that people do not always believe what they are taught."¹²

The radicals never expected schooling alone to produce civility: Continuous association for common causes, the enterprise of voluntary associations, must complete civic education. A positive flowering of such joint endeavors marked the 1860s and 1870s in France. Men in industry and commerce and in the learned professions, in concert with republican workers, assumed social responsibilities, creating for themselves public roles in countless associations, some of which were philanthropic and cultural, others avowedly political: industrial associations and chambers of commerce, free trade and protectionist lobbies, trade unions, cooperatives, mutual-aid societies, popular libraries, evening courses, lecture series, workers' choral societies, masonic lodges, circles for the *belles lettres*, animal husbandry and agronomy groups, and innumerable organizations for the protection of working women, nursing mothers, apprentices, and factory children.

Ample evidence exists to substantiate these activities. National, departmental, and municipal archives contain police dossiers on republican militants, and more decorous dissidents can be traced in the applications of numerous charitable and educational groups for the legal status of "public utility," a designation that conferred legal personality and the right to acquire property. Inquests pursuant to these demands required scrutiny of by-laws and membership lists including the names, addresses, and occupations of adherents and, sometimes, verbatim minutes of meetings. Although these data are formal and obviously could be falsified easily (one can imagine compelling reasons for inflating or minimizing membership) they give some sense of a group's tendencies. Furthermore, the liberalizing law of June 10, 1868, which permitted public meetings, made available more precise information; indeed, the

The radical bourgeoisie

hope of better gauging the opposition's strength may have been the law's primary intent. The prefect or his deputy might attend any authorized meeting to report on its size and temper or to adjourn a gathering judged to threaten public order. The new legislation further required that every meeting be underwritten by two or more sponsors, who would be legally liable for its consequences. Willingness to undertake this statutory responsibility attested stronger commitment than mere dues-paying membership, yet sponsors were never lacking for a wide range of political and cultural gatherings.

Evidence of sustained gregariousness is so overwhelming that "bourgeois sociability" has itself become an object of study. Maurice Agulhon, its most suggestive interpreter, contrasts the bourgeois *cercle*, a frankly political masculine society of equals meeting in a public place, with the aristocratic salon, where guests defer to a host and to the presence of ladies before whom certain topics would not be broached. Agulhon rightly supposes a link between the "structural democracy which constitutes the new sociability and the political democracy which constitutes the liberal, then the republican left which finally gains a majority for the middle classes." He maintains, with admirable clearheadedness, that this development was an improvement and frankly celebrates "those aspects of democratic progress which were not deplorable." He proposes also, and the research on which this book is based entirely concurs, that "mass politics" would consist in placing "an echelon of liaison" between preexisting groups: A party emerges not as a gathering of individuals but of circles.¹³

The Ligue de l'enseignement was just such a concatenation. Indeed, it was the most ambitious and influential one. Founded by Jean Macé in 1866 to "encourage education" and to "seek through legal means to change laws and practices incompatible with the freedom of conscience and the equality of citizens,"¹⁴ its work is properly seen as the response of diverse progressives to the failures of 1848 and the subsequent inability of Left Bonapartists to hold the emperor to reformist policies.

The league acted as an umbrella for secular, popular, republican, radical, and simply charitable groups. It united, loosely, Protestant philanthropists, Saint-Simonian millionaires, members of the International, future communards, cooperative artisans, provincial teachers and professionals, entrepreneurs, and journalists. It drew upon existing, more conservative Parisian societies as well as upon provincial groups and, while professing to be a "school of decentralization," gave a unified thrust to activities that had previously been isolated, desultory, and apolitical. In defining free, compulsory education as the overriding national necessity, it set forth the social nostrum of the Third Republic. The organizers of the league deliberately set out to establish a secular

Introduction

voice and organization in French politics, a presence in every commune and department that would urge the existing government in a "modern" direction and provide an alternative to a society based on the Catholic Church. To ignore the Ligue de l'enseignement and its scores of affiliate and corresponding groups is to ignore the infrastructure of the Third Republic, the cadres patiently but actively preparing themselves to govern.

Certainly, much in the politics of any nation is contingent. If the emperor had not suffered military defeat, he would not have been deposed by freethinkers' circulating libraries in concert with the chambers of commerce. There was no historical necessity for the capitulation of Napoleon III or for his gratuitously stupid acceptance of the war that led to his downfall.¹⁵ Nevertheless, I do believe that the character of French politics in the first decades of the Third Republic was determined, not uniquely but necessarily, by the ascendancy of men whose political positions had been strengthened and, sometimes, established in the secularist voluntary associations of the 1860s.

To be sure, there remain questions about these men and their radicalism. First, what connection should be supposed to exist between the opinions of any intellectuals and the notions, feelings, and conduct of other Frenchmen? Second, was radicalism, whatever its practical influences, itself coherent? Was it a set of miscellaneous prejudices or a body of thought able to sustain a tradition of moral reasoning? Finally, was radicalism perennially significant, or was it a disposition that was once liberating but had ceased to matter – or worse, had become positively obfuscatory? Was it an ideology in the vulgar sense that permitted bourgeois democrats to be, as Marx charged, "liberal with regard to the Middle Ages"?¹⁶ In his weighty books, *Ambition, Love and Politics* and *Intellect, Taste and Anxiety*, Theodore Zeldin shows scant regard for the radicals. He does not conceal his distaste for them and puts forth for all three questions condemnatory answers, but his learned, puckish replies must not become canonical, because they are grievously inadequate.

Zeldin holds, first, that "intellectuals were essentially abnormal in their attitudes" and indeed, triply aberrant – "self-conscious, . . . unable to tolerate the contradictions of life," and disposed to seek "solutions of universal scope, and of an abstract nature."¹⁷ Second, he dislikes radical intellectuals, in particular, on grounds of inconsistency: "They seemed to incarnate so many of the ambivalences in French society . . . They claimed to speak in the name of reason, logic, and principle, . . . but they were constantly allying with their supposed enemies, temporizing, compromising, and muddling through."¹⁸ He also finds them hypocritical¹⁹ and "much more elitist" than the Catholics,²⁰ and lastly, of course, he

The radical bourgeoisie

judges their politics, like all politics, largely nugatory after 1848. Nevertheless, another interpretation argues for a radicalism that was influential, coherent, and of continuing importance.

As to the first question, the suggestion that the zealotry of its intelligentsia imposed on France quarrels that the country might have been spared is an old one – some people thought Voltaire had caused the Revolution – and it is one that is often taken up by English critics of France. Zeldin's disdain does not compare to Burke's excoriations: "Happy if they had all continued to know their indissoluble union and their proper place! Happy if learning, not debauched by ambition, had been satisfied to continue the instructor and not aspired to be the master."²¹ Zeldin's analysis, however, similarly misconstrues the relation between politics and belief, ideas and action. Unless it evokes more general experience, a writer's crotchet or the animus of a coterie will not resonate. Tocqueville, who attached considerable importance to the writings of the philosophes and physiocrats in his account of the Revolution, understood, nonetheless, that propaganda alone does not suffice. Thus, he explained, the ethical intuition of human equality, "the firebrand that set all Europe ablaze in the eighteenth century had been easily extinguished in the fifteenth."²² People cannot act upon an idea unless the circumstances of their lives permit them to comprehend it.

Furthermore, radical ideas were not limited to a few rancorous pedants. Zeldin admits that the mischievous intellectuals were not all "highly educated; on the contrary, the autodidact, the bookloving artisan, the village pharmacist were much more typical of rank-and-file intellectuals."²³ Significantly, it was precisely such men who everywhere supported the *Ligue de l'enseignement*. Opinionated politics was peculiar to no occupation, class, or region. It was, on the contrary, ubiquitous and intrinsic to France.

Most important, one should not forget that ideas unite as well as divide. Sense cannot be made of French politics, or of any politics, if contemporary self-consciousness is not taken into account. To ignore the conceptions through which people defined themselves and identified friends and adversaries is not to be objective but to be, literally, impertinent. The *Ligue de l'enseignement*, like the revolutionary clubs of the 1790s whose aims it helped to realize, did not merely reflect social groupings, but hoped to establish "a new pattern of association."²⁴

Eventually, the radicals' resolute sociability triumphed. For the social basis of republicanism became a reality, created over time by diverse men bound subjectively by memory and hope. As Zeldin himself recognizes, the republican clubs, circles, and electoral committees posed, finally, an alternative to the aristocratic clientele: Political affinities underlay the practices of doctors, lawyers, and notaries, the followings of print-

Introduction

ers, pharmacists, and veterinarians, the disbursement of charity, the weekly encounters of the market towns; and radical associations, in the second half of the nineteenth century, made possible the organization of French society on some basis other than the patronage of the chateaus and bishoprics.²⁵

A radical point of view was, then, sufficiently apt and accessible to command broad popular assent. If it was not irrelevant, was it nonetheless shamefully flawed? Zeldin puts the radicals in difficult straits: if they refused to compromise he calls them doctrinaire and when they did strike bargains, opportunist. In fact, the radicals, who were neither rigid nor naive, were and remained meliorists convinced that concerted human action could make society more just and more free; and to that end they entered, characteristically, into two rapprochements (see Chapter 2). Procedural and substantive goals pressed radicals in two directions: With constitutional monarchists they shared a concern for civil liberty and parliamentary government; but it was the Left Bonapartists, those somewhat authoritarian modernizers, whose social programs they generally approved. In the 1860s this tension was evident as Thiers, speaking for the liberal opposition (who in the next decade would be "conservative republicans"), requested the "necessary liberties" of speech, press, and assembly while the young Jules Ferry demanded "necessary destructions" of those powers in society that thwarted democratization.²⁶

The liberals, following the *thèse nobilaire*, tolerated privilege as an obstacle to tyranny and were disinclined to leveling. Their caution made many radicals, like some Jacobins before them, reluctant to separate themselves entirely from the emperor.²⁷ Many believed that his net effect, so to speak, might be or might be made to be progressive; and because the constitution made provision for amendment, the radicals could insist that their espousal of change not be interpreted as subversive. Many maintained a pragmatic fidelity to Napoleon III. A well-developed sense of the lesser evil prompted them to consolidate their gains or, at any rate, not jeopardize their *droits acquis*.²⁸

The radicals' realism and flexibility have been often underestimated, often attacked. Some decry mindless tergiversations; others, like Peter Stearns, credit the bourgeoisie with a more instrumental confusion: "Suppleness, even polarity on leading issues, coexisted with common bonds - a clear formula for success and one that still dominates capitalist society."²⁹

It is true that radicalism did encompass contradictions; but this testifies not only to the thoroughness with which it gauged its political chances, but also to a larger inclusiveness. Its richness seems the best refutation of Zeldin's other allegation that only rather odd people took its slogans seriously. Radicalism appealed broadly: Its coherence was not

The radical bourgeoisie

of a closed or syllogistic character. The power it continued to exercise over reason and imagination are better grasped if it is understood to be a persuasion, a sensibility, a tradition; and because it was a tradition, it could accommodate many dispositions and tendencies. It presented, as does any culture, antinomies, sets of poised opposites such as Lévi-Strauss finds basic to society and to thought. These are proof, not of duplicity or self-doubt, but of vitality, a power to appeal at many levels and to many people. No tradition is monolithic: Christianity, for example, can be fruitfully interpreted in terms of "the eternal combat between grace and law, . . . hierarchy and liberty, predestination and free will,"³⁰ as Michelet did in his *Jeanne D'Arc*.

So radicals were, at once or alternately, skeptical and enthusiastic, rational and mystic, libertarian and solidarist, nationalist and cosmopolitan, egalitarian and meritocratic, feminist and patriarchal, opportunistic and incorruptible. Each radical was, perhaps, unique and cleaved to an individual configuration of these elements; in various contexts, faced with new adversaries, individual radicals might arrange them in different hierarchies of importance: One might emphasize liberty or equality, peace or the civilizing mission, the greater absolute freedom of the modern individual or the different modes of his affiliation, but these disagreements were family quarrels (see Chapter 1). Radicals themselves explicitly defended the paradox of a "revolutionary tradition": "What is progress if not the intelligent furthering of an intelligent tradition."³¹

Zeldin would trivialize the radicals. Sanford J. Elwitt, though mightily suspicious, takes them more seriously, yet he, too, lacks an imaginative sympathy with them. One cannot fail to be amused that a professed Marxist deplores "comments on the morality of priests bordering on the salacious,"³² when so many others have found the phrase "opiate of the people" itself lacking in respect.

Nevertheless, Elwitt, a good historian, understands that ideologies must be objectively plausible and, on many issues – railway expansion, education, and the rights to organize and to strike – he presents radical (or "petty bourgeois") solutions as, in their time, effectively progressive.³³ His chief failing is judging nineteenth-century bourgeois radicals by the proletarian standards of "advanced industrial society."³⁴ Were he to let socialist contemporaries speak for themselves, he would have to show them either in full accord with the radicals or similarly divided on major issues.

On the subject of the railroads, for example, Elwitt wishes to indicate that radicals were concerned with the creation of a national market – as, of course, many were. However, he shows them also to have been consistently opposed to monopoly, if uncertain (like socialists of the period) about specific remedies. Some favored increased competition;

Introduction

some proposed regulation; some urged a form of nationalization, government repurchase of principal lines. They took, in fact, every conceivable leftist position except that of advocating accelerated capital concentration to hasten the system's decay, a formulation that also eluded French socialists.

On agricultural protection, interests diverged; and, with the Méline Tariff of 1892, the republic chose to exclude foreign foodstuffs, protecting peasant producers to the great disadvantage of the urban worker. Elwitt makes sense of the policy in this way: French industrialists chose to keep peasants on the land, preferring "to sacrifice the depressive effect on wages produced by a reserve army of labor in favor of conditions which appeared to sustain the social order."³⁵ The bourgeoisie is damned if it does enclose, damned if it doesn't.

Were the men who invoked the "principles of '89," then, poseurs, elitists, and hypocrites, or was there something authentic in the almost infinitely ramified web of sympathy and common judgment that kept like-minded men of the Center and Left in perennial alliance? I shall advance three arguments for the radicals.

First, the failure of republicans to transform France into a free and fraternal community does not prove they did not wish to do so. Those who fail to accomplish all they set out to achieve are not necessarily hypocrites: They may be thwarted by resistance stronger than any they could have imagined. Furthermore, if reformers identify wrongs that they are powerless to correct, they have still done something of importance, because an abuse cannot begin to be corrected until it is recognized as an abuse, not granted as a prerogative.

Second, the program of the Ligue de l'enseignement, the radical agenda – political democracy, secularization, education, and meritocracy – was, in the context of nineteenth-century France, plausible enough to be advanced in good faith by intelligent men. Moreover, it was a great deal more egalitarian than any proposals advanced by Catholics and was understood to be so by an overwhelming majority of French workers and by virtually all their political leaders. The radicals did not fabricate threats of reaction – monarchist and, later, fascist – to cow workers into moderating their economic demands: Rather, the logic of French politics forced the democratic Center and Left continuously to reach out to each other.

Last, even if radicals had deluded themselves or sought to delude others with revolutionary verbiage in which they had ceased to believe, one would still need to know what it was they said. Although their understanding of France and their proposals for its development need not be accepted as the only diagnosis or the only prescription, and although their generally flattering estimation of themselves and their

The radical bourgeoisie

achievements cannot be the last word, neither can they be disregarded: The subsequent history of France, which they greatly influenced, was, in large part, shaped according to their appreciation of their role and their task. Central to that self-understanding, and prerequisite to the considerable political success they eventually enjoyed, was an interpretation that was neither elitist nor self-congratulatory of their humiliating failures during the years from 1848 to 1851.

Unlike the Bourbons, republicans remembered their mistakes and learned from them. After the collapse of the Second Republic, French radicals developed – and many practiced – a secular ethic of participation and solidarity, *les mœurs républicaines*. Both their organization and their ethic were created in conscious response to the debacle of 1848 and enabled them to take and hold power, to shape the Third Republic in the face of repeated coups of the self-proclaimed Moral Order. Their earlier inadequacies, excessively familiar as the subject upon which Tocqueville, Marx, Michelet, and Flaubert agreed, were no less amply clear to the republicans themselves. It is ironic that they are defined for modern readers by those very failings they themselves acknowledged and struggled to correct.

The political interpretations of Tocqueville, Marx, and Michelet differed in important ways, but each expressed a longing shared by many Frenchmen for a public life, for a sphere in which citizens met one another in recognized fraternity. Their positions indicate the range of opposition to the Second Empire, and their writings anticipate its common themes. They expressed, in the most profound and self-conscious forms, the judgments of many active, practical men.

Tocqueville's constitutionalism influenced liberals like Edouard Laboulaye and Prévost-Paradol, and other, more jacobinical men, found his writings on civic culture suggestive. Tocqueville's witty and vituperative *Recollections* of 1848 was not printed until 1893, but its essence was available in his earlier writings and in speeches he had made in the Chamber of Deputies during the winter of 1847. He regretted an absence of genuine politics, of social intercourse, and of liberty: "What was most lacking, especially towards the end of the July Monarchy, was political life itself." He believed that by limiting participation, the exclusiveness of the *pays légal* impoverished even the notion of the public interest. The difficulty did not result from venality alone (although that certainly contributed to the "revolution of contempt"), but from a political solipsism. Limited to the experience of one social class, parliamentary debate lacked "passion and originality." Unfortunately, radicals knew the country no better. Reform proposals came, "nocturnal and precipitous," from febrile meetings in Parisian newspaper offices.³⁶ Poli-

Introduction

ticians had no real links to the nation, and the Second Republic did nothing to establish these bonds. Ignorant of their fellows, the French had been unable to conduct a free government. Radicals felt the justice of Tocqueville's censure.

Similarly, it was not only French socialists like August Vermorel and Gustave Lefrançais who found Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire* convincing. Jules Ferry, then a journalist and lawyer, prepared a voter's manual for the general election of 1863 that closely followed Marx's social analysis. "Persigny rests," he wrote, "upon the peasants and the functionaries," and he attacked the apolitical bourgeoisie, "that argumentative class which believes itself to be independent."³⁷ Prévost-Paradol, an Orleanist academician, echoed the regret that whereas in England the wealthy were public spirited and refractory, in France a man became timid as he grew rich.

Bourgeois liberals and radicals came to understand, with Marx, that the regime had acted to ensure that "every common interest was straightway severed from society . . . snatched from the activity of society's members." They saw perpetuated in the Second Empire the fatal asymmetry between the powers of the president and those of the National Assembly that Marx had seen in the constitution of the Second Republic: The executive retained the most crucial of royal prerogatives, for it alone disposed of a half-million offices. The center of an immense bureaucracy, it controlled patronage, administration, and thus, effectively, policy. Furthermore, the president, acting with the consent of his council of state and indifferent to the will of the legislature, might dissolve any elected municipal or general (departmental) council and replace it with a "commission" of his nominees. Republicans recognized that no parliamentary force could hope to exercise power in France until it "let civil society and public opinion create organs of their own, independent of government power,"³⁸ and in increasing numbers they came to consider a secular civic morality a prerequisite to republican government. Thus, the common critique of 1848 became the premise of republican self-criticism and revival.

Contemporary progressives drew several lessons from their acknowledged failure. First, they recognized that the victory of the united opposition in February 1848 had been deceptively easy. Louis Philippe had not contested the battle and had withdrawn before an uprising in Paris. Jubilant throngs had proclaimed the Second Republic and trusted in *la force des choses* to protect their victory, but this ready, nearly unanimous adherence obscured only briefly "the terrible originality of the facts"³⁹ – that workers and peasants understood their interests differently and would pursue them.

Second, the republicans learned that legal measures alone were insuf-