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PART I

The origins of the Third Republic 1871–1898

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Preface to Part I

The Republic born on 4 September 1870 out of the collapse of the Empire became, after some years of uncertainty, the legal régime: the first republican régime to take root and survive. Further, the Republic resisted crises, found a place in the concert of great powers and extended the colonial domain of France. French society did not change much, but it emancipated itself from the influence of the Church and acquired a more democratic look. Parliamentary government, free, secular, compulsory education, cheap newspapers, railways, and obligatory military service for all, once established in the early decades of the Third Republic, became lasting acquisitions.

In the last fifteen years the history of this period has been largely rewritten. The archives are now accessible and thoroughly utilized, and the field of investigation has been enlarged. The evolution of the economy and of social groups, regional differences and the major crises of the régime have formed the subjects of important books. Nevertheless, considerable areas of obscurity remain: political history and the history of ideas, subjects of excessive discredit, remain neglected. This observation, equally valid for other periods of history, applies particularly to the opportunist Republic. What we know best is the start, and the story of the struggles which led from the 'Republic of the dukes' to the 'Republic of the republicans'. After that come those 'obscure times' of which Daniel Halévy spoke. The years from the 1880s to the beginning of the century – a key period in the history of contemporary France – are relatively neglected. This liberal, anti-clerical world, 'democratic in the old-fashioned way' (Louis Girard), does not seem attractive, and no doubt suffers from having been elevated into a myth and from no longer suiting the dominant currents of our time. Significantly, historiography in France and Germany gives a privileged place to the Catholic or socialist movements which rejected the liberal society. This is a legitimate rehabilitation of people excluded from 'republican' history. But it should not lead to an anachronistic view of a régime, of an age and of a society apt to be dismissed as 'bourgeois'. This epithet does not adequately describe their originality.

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We have tried to suggest the nature of this originality, while indicating the significance of the major events and the importance of the crises. An account of the general political history was all the more essential in so far as it must be rewritten with due regard to the contributions of social historians and political scientists. External policy and the colonial expansion have not been discussed *per se*, but have been tackled when they are linked to internal policy, in order to reveal the interaction, often unrecognized, between the two. The reader should not therefore expect to find the history of the colonial territories under French control, not even of Algeria. The colonial question only makes an appearance in connection with the attitudes adopted by metropolitan opinion or with international initiatives.

The story of the end of the notables and the victory of the republicans dominates the first chapter. Then follows a necessary picture of the economy and society of late nineteenth-century France. After recalling the work of the opportunist republicans, we were moved to enquire whether the values dear to the founders of the régime changed the spiritual and cultural world of the French. Around 1885 and in the following years the Republic seemed to be threatened by nationalism and socialism; the moderates seemed to have overcome those difficulties when the Dreyfus revolution suddenly appeared upon the scene . . .

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1

The end of the notables, 1871–1879

The Republic of M. Thiers: from the suppression of the Commune to 24 May 1873

After the disaster

Daniel Halévy, incomparable observer of the beginnings of the Third Republic, succeeded marvellously in *La Fin des notables* in conveying the atmosphere of the days following the defeat and the insurrection of the Commune:

> June 1871: what did Frenchmen feel? The Germans occupied their country from the frontier to Saint-Denis and Vincennes, and their dishonoured capital still smelled of blood and smoke. Lyon, Marseille, Toulouse, Bordeaux, Limoges, Périgueux were still armed and possibly primed to unleash a fresh explosion. Sadness, silence and stupor reigned everywhere. How was the order obtained by force to be fixed and stabilized? The precarious nature of the situation frightened people, and with the anguish and fatigue that they experienced was mingled a feeling of repentance.

Halévy assembles a number of different facts, over which we must linger briefly because of the tremendous effect long exerted by the double catastrophe of Sedan and the Bloody Week. The defeat, ratified, so to speak, by the annexation of Alsace and the Moselle, by the payment of an indemnity of 5,000 million francs, and by the presence of an army of occupation in some twenty departments, produced a common affirmation of patriotism and similarly a loyalty to the army, a 'sacred ark' kept beyond political arguments and worshipped by republicans and monarchists alike. On 29 June 100,000 men took part in a march-past at Longchamp; this was how Thiers acclaimed the rebirth of the army which had just crushed the Commune. The cry of 'Long live the Republic!' was mingled with that of 'Long live France!' The occasion created a rite in which both republicans and monarchists joined, unanimous in their desire to see the army strong again.

No doubt Thiers and the moderates, anxious to end a costly and hopeless war, were opposed to Gambetta and his friends with their obstinate pursuit of 'national defence'. In February 1871 the vast majority of the country had

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decided against the Gambettists. In Haute-Loire the friends of Thiers had clearly defined the available choice: 'Those who want war to the bitter end will vote for the Jacobin list, which ... wishes to have the last man killed and the last crown spent. Those who want an honourable peace will vote for the peace list.' One of the fundamental reasons for the conservatives' success in the elections to the National Assembly was that they had opted for peace. But this prudent realism went hand in hand with an intense patriotism which produced the desire to restore France and her army. The watchword of the régime in foreign policy was to be 'no bellicosity or provocation, but no pacifism or humiliation either'.

The words which best expressed the climate of the time were not only 'peace' but, equally, 'order' and 'work'. On this point, too, there was hardly any disagreement between republicans and monarchists. The most extreme republicans, even when they attempted to secure a reconciliation between Paris and Versailles, saw the Commune as an aberration or a utopia. Their conservative opponents strove in vain to make people see them as the allies of the communards; the country was not in the least deceived. In fact, the beaten Commune aroused only hostility and repugnance, and its supporters went into hiding. Public opinion was to favour those who, while asserting republican sentiments, knew how to keep their distance from the insurrection. Indeed, the Commune and its failure allowed the republicans to separate themselves from the revolutionaries, but the monarchist conservatives claimed to see in them the precursors of radicalism, socialism and communalism. On several occasions – for example on 24 May 1873 at the time of Thiers's fall, and on 16 May 1877 at the time of the dissolution of the Chamber – they tried to alarm public opinion and to play on people's fears. It has not been sufficiently remarked that such attempts did not have the expected consequences, probably because, as Gaston de Saint-Valry, a very clear thinker, noted at the time (*Souvenirs et réflexions politiques*, Paris, 1886), fear was quickly overcome – and far more quickly than after the insurrection of 1848. Then the social conflict had appeared to shake the ruling classes' system of values and had involved the optimism of the middle class. These do not seem to have been the feelings of the people – bourgeois, members of the middle classes, peasants – who were going to create the Republic. The will to found a republican order counted for more than fear. Their conservative opponents, on the other hand, though just as much attached to order, wanted a 'moral order'.

Here again we touch on one of the essential components of the spirit of the time. There was somehow or other a unanimous feeling in favour of establishing the reign, after the 'imperial holiday', of an austere, provincial morality. Such was certainly the tone of the first ten years of the régime. But, in the phrase 'moral order', 'moral' signified something quite different from morality. It was really a recall to a society dominated by religious

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principles; it asserted a desire for repentance, penance and expiation. Thus the apparently anodyne adjective which connoted the idea of order accepted by everyone brought in fact to the surface the line of division between two Frances, one republican, free-thinking and liberal, whose ideal was the secularized society that had emerged from the French Revolution, and one for which the Gospel was the guiding principle of societies and God the master of history. It is true that not all the conservatives were militant Catholics – far from it – but they all thought that the influence of religion was of capital importance for the destiny of societies and the defence of the social order. It is also true that there were irreconcilable differences between the intransigent Catholics, harbingers of the *Syllabus* and of papal infallibility, and the liberal Catholics, anxious for reconciliation with the modern world and regarded by their opponents as 'much worse than the communards'. But here again both sides shared the same picture of a France in which the Church would exercise a magistracy of influence and in which its precedence would be recognized.

Everyone in the conservative world strove to read 'the signs of the times'. Paris, they said, the modern Babylon, had surely expiated, in the flames of the siege and the civil war, the faults of sinful France. The hour of repentance had struck, and one might expect a regeneration which would see the return of France to religion and the restoration of the Christian monarchy. The time is approaching ... So spoke bishops and preachers. *Gallia poenitens et devota*: this return to the altar and the invitation to penitence are the normal accompaniment of great crises. But in 1871 the phenomenon benefited from the religious revival and the evolving spirituality of the 1860s. The religiosity which was asserting itself at the end of the Empire, with its sensitivity to the needs of the heart, its Marian piety, cult of the Sacred Heart and ultramontanism, blossomed after 1871. It was the time of pilgrimages to Lourdes, La Salette, Paray-le-Monial, and Pontmain, near Laval, where the Virgin had appeared in January 1871.

On the fringe of this great movement, but inseparable from it, came a spate of revelations, prophecies and miracles. In *Le Pèlerin*, only a few months after its foundation, Father François Picard, an Assumptionist, wrote in 1874:

> The supernatural and the marvellous have invaded society and are these days occupying the minds of those most recalcitrant to religious thoughts. From the prophecies of varying clarity which circulated in France throughout the war with Prussia to the apparitions of varying validity which are presently astonishing Germany and Alsace, everything reveals a new climate of society, everything demonstrates a positive fever for wonders and miracles.

Consequently the mouthpiece of the General Council for Pilgrimages (*Le Pèlerin* was in fact at first simply an information sheet), though it laid down

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prudent rules for guidance, was 'happy to echo the supernatural'. Things had gone so far that the cautious Mgr Dupanloup, Bishop of Orléans, thought it essential to publish at the beginning of 1874 a 'Letter on contemporary prophecies'. 'On all sides today, Gentlemen', wrote the Bishop, 'there is talk of nothing but miracles and prophecies', and he noted that a whole generation 'feeds on chimaeras'. This expectation of some sort of millennium was closely bound up with the hopes of a restoration of the comte de Chambord; it was an integral, if often forgotten, part of the mentality of the time.

To these observations on the state of mind prevailing in France of 1871 must be added one very important factor: the fluidity and mobility of public opinion. There is nothing surprising in this in a period of crisis, when people are as quick to forget as to enthuse, and full of contradictions. We shall meet many examples of it. For example, what a contrast between the elections of February to the National Assembly, which resulted in victory for the conservatives, and, some months later, the by-elections of July, which were a dazzling success for the republicans. What a contrast again between the discredit into which the Empire fell after Sedan and the victory of Bonapartist candidates at the by-elections in the spring of 1874, a victory that worried the Orleanist right so much that the result was the passing of the constitutional laws. Another surprise was the emotion of the people of Paris at the funeral of Thiers on 8 September 1877. Gambetta was amazed at 'this excited crowd of Parisians, bombarded, machine-gunned and bled white by M. Thiers six years ago, then finding in its rationality and patriotism the courage to pardon the victor and to award him an apotheosis'.

Thus in the confused period following the summer of 1871, success was to go to those who were able to respond to the successive waves of opinion.

The political forces

The elections of 8 February 1871 had taken place according to the provisions of the law of 1849, by simultaneous ballot for a list of names in each department. The campaign had been brief; the circumstances were dramatic. The conservatives had won a massive victory. The republicans, powerful in the east, the south-east and the big towns, were in a minority. Out of 645 persons elected[1] 400 were monarchists. The country people voted for the notables, whom they saw as guarantors of peace and order. Bonapartists numbered only about twenty. The membership of the National Assembly was new – only 27 per cent of the members had any previous experience of a legislative assembly – but hardly any more youthful; the average age was fifty-three. Nearly half those elected (250) were landowners. Thus it was certainly traditional France that returned

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to the helm. It was several months before the political physiognomy of the Assembly could take clear shape.

At the beginning of July 1871 two events – the by-elections of 2 July and the comte de Chambord's manifesto of the 5 July – were to give a clearer picture of the political forces at work and to make it possible to estimate more precisely both the relative importance of the different currents of opinion and the various attitudes to the fundamental question of the future of the régime.

Thanks to the multiple elections and to resignations, 114 seats in forty-seven departments had to be filled. More than half the country, including Paris, voted by simultaneous ballot for a number of names; the elections thus had a national dimension. The republicans were victorious in thirty-nine departments; they had about a hundred candidates elected, including thirty-five radicals, against twelve royalists. More than a third of the electorate abstained from voting. The republicans alone had fought an active campaign.

The country voted for the conservative Republic of Thiers, which gave the assurance of peace and order. But the ballot provided further lessons. It marked Gambetta's return to politics. He left Saint-Sébastien, where, resigning from his seat of deputy for the Lower Rhine, he had withdrawn after the peace preliminaries, and where he had remained silent during the Commune. On 26 June, in Bordeaux, where a few months earlier Jules Simon had divested him of his powers, the former head of the Delegation called on the republican opposition to be patient. The republican party, he said, must be a 'party of government', 'the enemy of chimaeras'; and it must undertake the political education of the countryside. The beaten man of February, the 'raging madman' denounced by Thiers, started on an astonishing re-ascent, and Paris was to elect him to the Assembly, together with four other radicals. The ballot-box demonstrated in fact, in spite of the Commune with which the conservatives strove to identify it, the strength of the extreme radical left. Hardly a month after the crushing of the insurrection, Paris elected predominantly friends of Thiers; but in southern and south-eastern France the radicals won some thirty seats. In general, and contrary to the monarchists' expectations, the Commune did no harm to the republican concept. On the contrary, its suppression demonstrated the Republic's capacity for maintaining order; and at the same time it made it essential to satisfy at least the fundamental claim of the rebels of 18 March.

At the very moment when the country was making its feelings known the monarchist alliance broke up. The laws enforcing exile had been repealed and the Orleanists had agreed to recognize the comte de Chambord; at his death the throne would return to them, since the comte had no heir. But the exile of Frohsdorf meant to assert his principles. Returning to Chambord, on 5 July he published a manifesto which was a provocation to the

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Orleanists and a painful disappointment to the moderate legitimists. Its conclusion bore witness to the comte's romantic loyalty to the white flag: 'For me it has always been inseparable from my absent country; it waved over my cradle and I wish it to shade my tomb.' Quite apart from this symbolic assertion of divine right as opposed to a sovereignty based on popular assent, the whole document revealed hostility to the France that had emerged from the French Revolution, and a complete refusal to contemplate any compromise: 'One cannot escape eternal truths by means of expedients.'

The comte de Chambord certainly spoke of 'public freedom', but the term indicated, as in the thought of a man like Fénelon, a society based on the corporations, decentralization and 'local franchises'. The Orleanists were not unfamiliar with this ideal, but the prince did not say a word about the parliamentary government dear to their hearts. Even the reference to his study of the 'working classes' and the letter of 1865 about the workers were bound to worry them, for he had there shown himself favourable to corporations, thus going half-way to meet the ideals of economic liberalism.

On 9 July, at Falloux's request, most of the royalist members of the National Assembly, while asserting their 'respect' for the comte de Chambord, also asserted their loyalty to the tricolour, 'which has become, as opposed to the blood-red standard of anarchy, the flag of social order'. But the comte de Chambord preferred reaction and intransigence to conservation and compromise. A conflict of ideas, more bitter than any of the others, separated the two wings of the right. It was to exert a decisive influence on the outcome of the Assembly's labours.

It was only the elections of 2 July and those following the failure of the restoration that gave the National Assembly its true character. Until then, between the two extremes – 'Whites' and 'Reds' – the outlines of the various camps were not clearly defined; there was a search for a strong conservative bloc. Henceforth different groups were to form. It is true that these groups, which had no juridical basis, did not cover all members of the Assembly; double affiliations were possible. Nevertheless, these political friendships reflected fairly well the various shades of public opinion. Two points of view, however, were all but absent; those of the losers in the Commune and at Sedan. Socialism blended with radicalism was represented by men like Louis Blanc; Bonapartism counted only about twenty faithful supporters from the bastions of Corsica or the two Charente departments.

On the extreme right, some eighty legitimists did not follow the right on the question of the flag. They used to meet in a room in a blind alley called the rue des Chevau-légers (Light-horsemen). The name was marvellously apt for nobles such as Carayon-Latour, La Rochette and Cazenove de Pradines and Catholic bourgeois like Lucien Brun, a lawyer from Lyon, and the Béarnese Chesnelong. They formed the most resistant rock of

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monarchism and counter-revolution; they professed the ideal of a hierarchical society, based on intermediary bodies, which would have no truck with religious, political or social liberalism; they were connected with the Catholic Workers' Circles founded in December 1871 by Albert de Mun, a legitimist officer. Admirers of the *Syllabus* and ultramontane in their views, they vowed the same devotion to the exiled comte de Chambord, and to Pius IX, imprisoned in the Vatican. They wanted the restoration of the king and of the Pope's temporal power. Their strength was limited to the rural France which, in the wooded areas of the west and the mountains of the Massif Central, had not yet rejected the influence of the presbytery and the château. Men of principle to whom politics were alien, they were to be awkward elements in coalitions of the right. Accustomed to read events as the decrees of providence, they would not hesitate on occasion to follow the worst possible policy, being convinced that the renewal of Catholic France would only come about through catastrophe.

One can easily see how great a distance separated them from the moderate legitimists, men like Falloux, Charles de Lacombe,[2] and the vicomte de Meaux. In spite of their attachment to the legitimate branch, they were liberal conservatives like the Orleanists of the right, led by General Changarnier, or of the centre right, headed by the dukes – Broglie, Decazes, Audiffret-Pasquier. All these people wanted both order and freedom, considering, as Augustin Cochin put it, that parliamentary government and political liberalism represented the highest degree of civilization. They were readier than the legitimists to sit on boards of directors, for they had no doubts about the virtues of economic liberalism tempered by benevolence and charity. Many of them had given up the Voltairian tone of the 1830s and a certain number of them were liberal Catholics. The Rome of Pius IX had made an unfavourable impression on them with its proclamation of the *Syllabus* and of papal infallibility, which they considered inopportune, at the very least. In the review *Le Correspondant* and the newspaper *Le Français* they wrote finely modulated, middle-of-the-road analyses for highly cultivated readers. But that was their weakness: there was a legitimist electorate and a republican electorate, but there was no liberal Catholic or Orleanist electorate. Defeated by universal suffrage under the Empire, the dukes owed their election to the atmosphere of February 1871. The question was whether they would find enough voters in the centre to maintain the régime they wished to establish.

A small percentage of Orleanists formed the centre left group, whose rôle was to be decisive. It is difficult to see what divided this group from the centre right with the result that some historians have seen only a false appearance in these divisions; yet here we touch on one of the keys to the history of the régime. On both sides there was the same liberalism and the same faith in parliamentary government. Even if the centre left, with

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