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L'affaire Dreyfus: looking beyond accusatory histories

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“Unfortunately the habit of passing judgements leads to a loss of taste for explanations. When the passions of the past blend with the prejudices of the present, human reality is reduced to a picture in black and white” (Bloch, 1964, p. 140).

Introduction

There is a powerful temptation to reduce divisive historical affairs into ‘black and white’ representations – to perpetuate historical divisions through rigid, one-sided interpretations. This impulse is strengthened when the task of recording history invites the historian to bring, and prove, serious accusations. However, any finding of guilt (pronounced by a jury or a historian) may become prejudiced by the retrospective application of contemporary values to an historical event. Reflecting this outcome, Mark Bloch of the *Annales* school argues that, when historians “pass judgment” and allow “the passions of the past [to] blend with the prejudices of the present”, we are left with a reductive “picture in black and white” that glides over causal explanations and the complexity of historical phenomena (1964, p. 140).

However, by overcoming the urge to condemn or acquit actors in the Dreyfus Affair (1894–1906) –instead focusing on the complex interplay of political, legal and cultural forces – a number of historians have drawn significant conclusions which illuminate important aspects of both *fin de siècle* France and modern political cultures. Firstly, historians have examined the dynamics of bitter social and political divides, questioning the possibility of ‘common ground’ in these tumultuous contexts. These discussions reveal the underlying factors, in particular the historical contest between secularism and the Catholic church, which alienated Dreyfus’ supporters and accusers from each other, feeding their mutual resentment. In today’s political climate, where democracies are being torn apart by conflicting opinions and polarised media reporting, this focus on bifurcation remains pertinent.

Secondly, scholars have perceived *l'affaire* as a warning against the collapse of military and judicial power. These approaches challenge the independence and integrity of *fin de siècle* French courts, while reminding audiences that that any liberal conception of the rule of law requires a strict separation of state powers. Finally, *l'affaire* is instrumental to understanding the development and radicalisation of antisemitism, both historically and in the present. With recent surges of antisemitic events across the globe, understanding the causes and characteristics of antisemitism remains urgent.

Accordingly, by avoiding binary representations of the Dreyfus Affair – ‘Dreyfusard’ or ‘Anti-Dreyfusard’ histories – and instead interrogating the political, social and cultural fabric of France at the turn of the century, historians have attained a pluralistic understanding of this polemic moment, while also detecting important lessons for the modern age.

Social division in *l'affaire*

Rather than focusing on either pole of the Dreyfus controversy, historians have used the Affair to illustrate the complexities, motivations and hypocrisies of profound social divide within French society. The Dreyfus Affair could ostensibly be reduced to a simple controversy: Alfred Dreyfus, a French Army Captain and an Alsatian Jew, was falsely convicted of treason and espionage in two separate trials in 1896 and 1899. To left wing Dreyfusards, the state’s maintenance of Dreyfus’ guilt in the face of compelling exculpatory evidence constituted an egregious miscarriage of justice that shook the fabric of liberal French society. To right wing ‘Anti-Dreyfusards’, the Dreyfus problem, including the prospect of his acquittal upon retrial, reflected an unacceptable threat to the reputation and authority of military organs. This division was enflamed by Emile Zola’s polemic article *J’Accuse* (1898) published in *L’Aurore* which castigated military and government corruption, pervasive antisemitism, and profound injustice. However, historians such as Nancy Fitch (1992, p. 59) have challenged this simplistic understanding of *l'affaire*, arguing that it was symptomatic of a broader and more complex schism in French society:

The Dreyfus Affair became an *affaire* and not just an unhappy case of miscarried justice because it generated arguments and ideas that transcended the outbursts of anti-Semites. The fact that these arguments and ideas could be expressed in a myriad of particularistic vocabularies with numerous local nuances is precisely why the Affair could become the source of a powerful new nationalism with ramifications beyond France and into the future.

Exemplifying this approach, Clair White has identified continuities that span across the Dreyfus Affair and an earlier controversy surrounding the release of Zola’s novel *Lourdes* (1894). White (2021, p. 383) argues that “the overwhelming hostility to Dreyfus among Catholics was rooted in wider reaction against the often militant secularism of the Republic”. Zola’s naturalist novel *Lourdes* caused a scandal by challenging biblical narratives, subverting the religious notion of ‘miracle’, and most notably, refuting the Virgin Mary’s beneficence (White, 2021, p. 377). By focusing on the commonalities between *Lourdes* and *J’Accuse*, both as subversive texts, and also registering the homogeneity in campaigns to “dismantle Zola’s narratives” in 1894 and 1898, White (2021, p. 378) suggests that Zola sealed his place “in the Catholic imagination with a diabolic strain of anti-clericalism”. Accordingly, White (2021, p. 383) finds it unsurprising that the Catholic church delivered issues of “*La Croix*... from the pulpit” – an antisemitic newspaper which condemned Dreyfus and heavily criticised Zola. The strength of White’s approach is her close textual analysis of rhetoric, identifying that critics of Zola in either controversy “frequently cross-reference[d] one another, and tend[ed] to harness many of the same terms and arguments” (2021, p. 382). Consequently, she makes the persuasive argument that the Affair was subsumed in a broader struggle between religion and secularism that extended beyond 1894–1906. White (2021, p. 394) suggests that Zola’s trial, in which he was convicted of criminal defamation in *J’Accuse*, was perceived as “expiation for

Zola's trespasses against the Catholic faith." She concludes, "in each case, the intricate manoeuvres of literary criticism married with ideological disputes, as questions of style and method spilled over into the workings of political history" (2021, p. 397).

Ruth Harris has similarly challenged simple characterisations of the Dreyfus Affair, exposing the deeper motivations underlying French social division. Harris' social and cultural history, *The Man on Devil's Island: Alfred Dreyfus and the Affair that Divided France* (2010, p. 9), interrogates a surfeit of letters and personal writings to focus on "the people involved and the links between intimate and collective psychologies". Harris (2010, p. 3) explicitly contests the perspective that "Two Frances, or so it seemed, fought for the nation's soul: the Dreyfusards, or revisionists, defended Truth and Justice by demanding a retrial; and the anti-Dreyfusards championed Tradition and Honour by insisting that the original verdict stand." Interestingly, by interpreting the letters of French author Joseph Reinach, a prominent figure in the Dreyfusard camp who "was required to hold the Dreyfusard leadership together, conciliating personal animosities, defusing ideological tensions, paying off the discontented", Harris (2010, p. 333–339) contends that division also existed within political camps, particularly among the supporters of Dreyfus (Sowerwine, 2011, p. 517). This complicates the picture.

Moreover, Harris locates a number of interesting continuities which traversed the opposing sides of the Affair, rebuking the idea of a neat division. For example, her analysis of letters exposed that "partisans on the Left and Right were frequently motivated by petty jealousies, sexual desire, and career considerations" (Harris, 2010; Fitch, 2012, p. 473). Further, and across the divide, there was a general recognition that divisive rhetoric could be wielded as an effective political tool: "both sides wanted to represent themselves as the bastions of competing value systems" (Harris 2010; Fitch, 2012, p. 472). With J.D Vance's recent expression of political allegiance to Trump as a 'stalwart loyalist,' notwithstanding his criticisms eight years earlier of Trump as 'reprehensible' and comparable to Hitler, a recurring question arises about the extent to which we should question the real motivations behind absolutist rhetoric (Slattery and Coster, 2024)

Harris (2010, p. 113, 168) has also destabilised moralising characterisations of Dreyfusards and anti-Dreyfusards, qualifying her praise for Emile Zola with the provocation that Zola "accentuated the divisions between the two sides by making 'goodness', 'truth' and 'justice' the prerogatives of Dreyfus's supporters, and attaching 'evil', 'deceit' and 'injustice' to their opponents ... his tendency to demonize helped to destroy any possibility of compromise". These historical approaches aptly demonstrate that divisions within society are often the result of competing interests and deeper motivations. By rejecting the impulse to 'take a side' and instead focusing on the phenomenon of division itself, historians are better placed to examine the nature of tumultuous societies.

Warnings against military 'justice'

While the extraordinary miscarriage of justice at the heart of the Dreyfus Affair has widely produced moral outrage and calls for retribution, historians have used the Affair to examine the fraught relationship between military and judicial powers. Resisting the urge to narrowly focus on the moral turpitude or otherwise of military and political

figures, these historians have more broadly condemned the concept of ‘military-justice’ and the blurring of judicial and military powers. Indeed, *l’affaire* provides a stark warning against societies which fail to uphold a strict separation of state powers.

It is trite that the French military were embedded throughout the unjust proceedings. Dreyfus was convicted under the 1857 French Code for Military Justice and the doctrine of ‘personal competence’ which provides that “every soldier, no matter what the crime committed, would come under the jurisdiction of a military court” (Cerullo, 2011; Roynette, 2016, p. 138). Subsequently, French officer Ferdinand Walsin-Esterhazy (the true perpetrator of Dreyfus’ alleged crimes) was put on trial and acquitted by a court-martial. During Dreyfus’ second court-martial, Generals Bosidreffre, Gonse and Mercier fabricated inculpatory evidence, creating a document known as the *petit bleu*. Consequently, Dreyfus was convicted a second time, adjudged “guilty with extenuating circumstances” (Kaplan, 1999, p. 511).

This episode of injustice, and the broader impropriety of military-judicial bodies, boils down to an unworkable conflict of interest. It is the duty of criminal courts to safeguard an accused person’s liberty against the state. Sometimes, this democratic function will come at the expense of government or police reputation. By contrast, military organs pursue rigid conformity, discipline and authority. In considering the interests of Ministers of War Billot, Zurlinden and Chanoin, who vehemently defended Dreyfus’ conviction despite having “nothing to do with the original court martial”, Robert Kaplan (1999, p. 500) argues that the “interests of national defence” supported the maintenance of Dreyfus’ guilt. Indeed, the Dreyfus Affair occurred during a period of escalating geopolitical tensions and during a “revolution in land warfare” (Kaplan, 1999, p. 501). These exigencies placed pressure on the French Army to maintain its image of authority. Fascinatingly, Kaplan (1999, p. 500-501) demonstrates how the Affair was manipulated by the French Army to create a ‘deception’ which resulted in France acquiring the “75 mm rapid fire cannon and a tremendous lead over Germany in field artillery.” This scheme (or injustice) would substantially contribute to the repulsion of Germany’s Schlieffen Plan at the beginning of World War I (Kaplan, 1999, p. 514).

Further, historians have demonstrated how a reversal of Dreyfus’ original verdict would undermine the reputation of the Army (for example, Cerullo, 2011). Evidently, these motivations are inimical to the performance of a fair trial and the administration of justice. Moreover, the integrity of criminal justice systems require that a miscarriage of justice can be corrected on appeal. By contrast, the authority of any Army rests on a perception that its orders are mandatory and final. Perhaps the difficulty (or impossibility) of reconciling the different objects of criminal justice and military discipline is best illustrated by the French court martial’s incoherent verdict of “guilty with extenuating circumstances”. Given the gravity and specificity of the allegation, it is difficult to understand how Dreyfus could be both guilty and deserving of extenuation.

The inappropriateness of vesting military bodies with judicial power has also been underscored by John Cerullo (2011) who has described the French military justice system as a ‘minotaur’ after comparing its roles in the Dreyfus Affair and the Aernoul-Rousset Affair of 1911. Cerullo traces the establishment of French military courts, noting that they set out to “shield citizen-soldiers from courts, reduce the severity of punishments and to introduce the rule of law everywhere, even in the army” (Roynette,

2016, p. 139). However, as Roynette notes, Cerullo ultimately concludes that both affairs demonstrate the “obstinate resistance of the military in the face of civil society’s democratic aspirations” (Roynette, 2016, p. 139).

Just as a final point, it is worth noting that Generals Boisdeffre, Gonse and Mercier committed serious offences which obstructed the administration of justice. While the exigencies of conflict may require military figures to be immunised from prosecution in defined circumstances, it is vitally important that the rule of law is both robust and extensive. Military powers must be checked by courts reposed with a separate and detached source of judicial power. It is encouraging that a war crimes investigation commission headed by Weinberg JA has been recently established to review the conduct and potential criminality of prominent Australian military figures such as Ben Roberts-Smith (McKenzie and Masters, 2021).

The dominant role of antisemitism

While historians have attributed varying weight to antisemitism as a causal factor of *l’affaire*, the current consensus is that antisemitic sentiment played a predominant role. Moreover, by charting consistent episodes of antisemitism throughout metropolitan and rural France, before *l’affaire* and afterwards, most notably in the collaboration of Vichy France with Nazism, historians have persuasively characterised this species of prejudice as a pervasive and recurring force (Hyman, 2005). In today’s context where we have seen a surge of antisemitic violence and opinion, these discussions remain unquestionably relevant.

Current historians agree that the Dreyfus Affair should not be perceived as a source of antisemitism, but rather as an expression of it (Hyman, 2005, p. 341). A corollary of this approach is that antisemitism is understood as a pervasive, but also latent, force embedded within French society which may be awakened and radicalised by a triggering circumstance or event. After considering historical studies which exposed the entrenchment of antisemitism throughout France, Paula Hyman (2005, p. 349) has registered the need for “additional research on antisemitism, the sources of its persistence and the particular political and social situations that lend themselves to its mobilization.” Hyman suggests that the importance of this work extends well beyond the Affair, suggesting that for “all who are concerned with the potential power of racial and religious hatred”, studies into antisemitism “offer the possibility to examine how hatred flares up and how it may be controlled and suppressed, at least temporarily” (Hyman, 2005, p. 349).

Hyman notes that historians initially downplayed the role of antisemitism in the Affair. For example, Guy Chapman, writing in 1955, suggested that “there was little substantial antisemitism in France ... In Paris ... it existed. But it was on the whole confined to high society” (Hyman, 2005, p. 336). However, later historians such as Pierre Birnbaum refuted that proposition after conducting widespread surveys of provincial newspapers and archives. In his ‘Tour de France’, Birnbaum revealed that that “throughout France antisemitic statements and demonstrations were widespread, although there were distinct regional and local differences” (Hyman, 2005, p. 340). Nancy Fitch (1992) has made similar findings in her study on the prevalence of antisemitism in rural regions. The consequence of these studies is that “it is no longer

defensible to discuss the Affair without exploring the political and social significance of its antisemitic dimension” (Hyman, 2005, p. 340).

Cultural histories have played a meaningful role in elucidating the widespread existence of antisemitism throughout France. Hyman recalls that a book length catalogue accompanying a 1988 exhibition in New York entitled *The Dreyfus Affair: Art, Truth, and Justice* “offered the single greatest collection in one place of antisemitic political cartoons, posters and newspaper illustrations” (Hyman, 2005, p. 340). She suggests that this “panoply of images ... vividly demonstrated the power of the antisemitic images.” Moreover, Bernard Tillier’s cultural history *Les artistes et l’affaire Dreyfus: 1898–1908* (2009) examines the value of artistic representations during *l’affaire* in revealing antisemitism. In one interesting example, Tillier focuses on the violent reaction to Rodin’s *Balzac* which was construed as a political statement supporting the Dreyfusard cause and criticising antisemitic opinions. Tillier (2009) draws important conclusions: firstly, that the passions and tensions in French culture made *l’affaire* inevitable; and secondly, that the role of rampant antisemitism cannot be discounted in understanding the Affair (Sowerwine, 2011, p. 517). Interestingly, these studies convey that visual representations were far more conducive to the anti-Dreyfusard cause, distorting stereotypical Jewish facial features into grotesque images.

Conclusion

The Dreyfus Affair produced a host of memorable actors. The disturbing events that occurred in those 13 years revealed the integrity and courage of a number of individuals: Zola, Clemenceau, and Dreyfus himself to name a few. On the other side of the ledger, it produced some unforgettable villains: Boisdeffre, Mercier, Esterhazy and Gonse. It also called into question the integrity of key institutions such as the court, the army and the ministries. It is almost irresistible to put these individuals and structures on ‘trial’. To blend and apply historical and contemporary standards so that we can pass judgment on them. However, the most valuable historical works have recused themselves from that function. Instead, they have focused on the causes and unique cultural, political and legal factors which brought about the Affair. The appeal of this latter approach is that it locates an enduring relevance in the Affair. Rather than extricating Dreyfus, or any of those characters, from *fin de siècle* France, they have interrogated the contextual markers which foreshadowed this extraordinary example of injustice. Yet they have also drawn persuasive connections between the Dreyfus Affair and other ‘affairs’. Today, as we face insurmountable divisions, difficult questions about the limitations of lawful military conduct and global antisemitism, the Affair issues an important message: that we must remain vigilant about the dangers of the present, yet equally aware of the injustices of the past.

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