

## Caricature and French Political Culture 1830-1848 Charles Philipon and the Illustrated Press

**Review Number:**

210

**Publish date:**

Saturday, 1 September, 2001

**Author:**

David S. Kerr

**Date of Publication:**

2000

**Price:**

£45.00

**Publisher:**

Oxford University Press

**Place of Publication:**

Oxford

**Reviewer:**

David Hopkin

Political caricature flourished as never before in France during the early years of Louis-Philippe's reign. It was Charles X's assault on freedom of the press that led to the Revolution of 1830, and the maintenance and guarantee of this freedom was one of the July Days' few tangible benefits. Numerous under-employed but politically aware Parisian artists made the most of this 'window of opportunity' before the reimposition of censorship in 1835. But the dramatic progress of caricature in France also relied on technological change: the artists who feature in David Kerr's history chose the relatively new technique of lithography. Lithographs were cheap, quick and easy to mass-produce compared with their predecessors, the woodcut or the copperplate engraving.

One might speculate that a later technological innovation, the digital scanner, lies behind historians' current enthusiasm for imagery as a source. The recent illustrated biographies of two of the most significant pictorial characters of nineteenth-century visual culture, the young recruit Chauvin and the hunchback freethinker Mayeux, might serve as examples.<sup>(1)</sup> The fifty-six images reproduced by Kerr must be a record for the Oxford Historical Monograph Series (although one longs for more given the importance of several prints to his argument which are described but not shown). Probably more significant, however, is the revitalisation of politics in the historiography of France's revolutionary past. Although Kerr makes no such claim for himself, his book is an example of how the revisionist interpretation of the Great Revolution might be extended into the nineteenth century. Just as revisionist historians of 1789 have argued that books, journals, salons and Masonic lodges brought together a new political class away from the influence of the court to create a 'public sphere' where an oppositional political culture took shape in the form of 'public opinion', so political caricature after 1830 provided notables (including Legitimists) with a shared language of ridicule and resentment, which seeped into the public spaces of the July Monarchy? the courts, the theatres, street graffiti and demonstrations. Revisionist influence on Kerr's work becomes apparent in a fascinating section on the Grenoble insurrection of March 1832 that, like so many popular uprisings, originated in carnival. A

group of medical students chose this moment of license to mock the government of Louis Philippe and his Prime Minister Casimir P rier (a Grenoblois) using masks and symbols borrowed from caricature. The prefect's attempts to suppress this piece of street theatre led to demonstrations and finally insurrection. The events in Grenoble have not attracted the same level of attention as those in Lyons the previous year because the latter was clearly a working-class revolt against capitalism, and therefore much easier to fit into a socio-economic interpretation of political violence than the pranks of a group of middle-class students. However, as Kerr explains, "Contemporaries saw things very differently. A working-class revolt had something of the nature of a nature disaster. but the laughter of the political classes was a genuine political event."

Historians' reassessment of the importance of caricature to political culture likewise brings them into line with nineteenth-century opinion. Caricature was even more important than freedom of expression in text because, while words spoke to a person's intelligence, images spoke directly to the emotions. Newspapers circulated only among those who could afford them (or afford to share them), pamphlets were unlikely to be appreciated by the illiterate. Their influence was, therefore, limited to the educated, order-loving middle-classes. But a caricature in a shop window or pasted on a wall was available to a much more popular and rebellious public. Complex arguments were reduced to simple symbols, and thus more rapidly assimilated. Caricature not only gave form to ideas; it converted them into acts performed before one's eyes, a far more powerful incitement to emulation. Viewed thus, the illustrated newspaper *Charivari's* 'Red Number' of 27 July 1835 with its lists of those killed by the forces of order since 1830 could be held directly responsible for Fieschi's bomb-attack on the royal family the following day. In the Chamber of Deputies Thiers successfully demanded the reimposition of censorship because "there is nothing more dangerous. than scandalous caricatures, than seditious drawings. there is no more direct provocation of attacks." (As Thiers, the Kenneth Baker of his era, had a personal collection of 1,500 caricatures presumably he considered himself immune to their pernicious influence.)

A belief in the efficacy of images was the common intellectual currency at the time. Michelet argued that Republicans needed to plaster the walls with colourful posters if they were to reach the masses. Kerr himself is doubtful about the immediacy of caricature's impact. Caricature in the July Monarchy, just like *Private Eye* today, relied on a self-referential system of symbols which it took time to learn. Nonetheless the same assumption was one of the motivations for the man at the centre of Kerr's study, Charles Philipon, the impresario of caricature in the July Monarchy: "In France, as in England, caricature has become a power".

Philipon was a caricaturist of moderate talents. Despite a reputation built on a couple of anti-Carlist images published immediately before and after the July Revolution, his real contribution to the history of caricature was as an entrepreneur. He was the leading partner in the Maison Aubert, the principle shop-window in Paris for caricature of all kinds. He was also the founder and editor of the illustrated weekly *La Caricature* and, later, the illustrated daily *Le Charivari*, both titles were the most successful of their kind. To provide his lithographs he brought together the foremost graphic artists of his time: Daumier, Grandville, Travi s, Decamps and (my favourite) Jeanron. Since caricature became a collectable artistic genre in its own right the names of these artists have become much more familiar than Philipon's own. As half the book's illustrations come from Kerr's own collection he must share this appreciation (and he is good at explaining how a picture's aesthetics convey particular meanings, for example in his analysis of Daumier's well-known defence of freedom of the press *Ne vous y frottez pas*). But his focus is not on the artists or their art but on the historical context of caricature's production, dissemination and reception.

Philipon was at the heart of production; he set the political agenda (which, in the case of Grandville at least, was not shared by the artist); the inspiration for particular caricatures was often his (Daumier's famous series concerning the enterprising thief *Robert Macaire*, for example, were illustrations to Philipon's captions); he wrote the copy. Philipon was the public spokesman for caricature; he was even depicted in his own papers as the Demon of caricature incarnate.

Philipon, who claimed the mantle of a barricade fighter in 1830, did not immediately launch his assault on the July Monarchy. His disenchantment grew as the Orl anist government moved towards the right, starting with the repression of the anticlerical riots in Paris in December 1830. Philipon initially aligned himself with

the 'mouvement', those Orléanists who believed that the Revolution was the starting point for reform. Louis-Philippe, who much to everyone's surprise took a direct political role himself, gave his support to the 'résistance', those who believed the Revolution was the end of reform. It was the government's creeping offensive on freedom of the press that pushed Philipon further to the left. Between February 1831 and August 1832 he was prosecuted sixteen times, and spent much of 1832 in prison. Like *Private Eye*, Philipon used his court appearances both for publicity and fundraising. By the time of his release in 1833 he was a committed Republican, using his papers to attract support for Republican causes. The caricatures became increasingly virulent in their attacks on the government and the person of the King himself, particularly after the suppression of Republican uprisings in 1834. Louis-Philippe was portrayed as an avaricious political manipulator, his ministers as hypocrites, the deputies as corrupt (the 'Ventre' of Daumier's satire). The July Monarchy's craven foreign policy was compared with its reliance on brute force to crush opposition at home. The King was at the centre of this failed regime because he denied the true origins of his own legitimacy. He owed his position as the 'roi des barricades' to public opinion, and yet now he tried to suppress public opinion. Hence Philipon repeatedly chose to depict him in disguise, the smiling mask of the liberal 'juste milieu' falling away to reveal the autocrat within.

How influential were Philipon's prints? This is the question that lies at the heart of Kerr's book, and a primary task, therefore, was to discover their distribution. As is so often the case, we are indebted to the instruments of repression for our historical knowledge. In July 1835 a police raid on Philipon's offices netted a subscription list to *Charivari*. Of the 1,400 subscribers (a decent figure for the period) more than a quarter lived in Paris, although copies were sent as far afield as the King of Sardinia. Among Parisians the greatest number of personal subscribers could be found in the arriviste neighbourhoods around the Bourse, or in the old money of the Faubourg Saint-Germain. (Philipon's aristocratic readership lends the flimsiest support to the government's charge of a Carlist-Republican plot.) Illustrated newspapers were expensive, only the genuinely well-heeled could afford to buy their own. But 530 subscriptions were held by *cafés*, *cabinets de lecture* (private, commercial libraries), and clubs. In Paris these were concentrated around the Palais-Royal and the boulevards, where notables rubbed shoulders with the lower middle-classes, clerks, shop assistants, even workers. They jostled each other to get a glimpse of the latest caricature in the windows of the Maison Aubert, and in the foyers of the nearby vaudeville theatres where caricature was enacted on stage. Here, at least, politics was no longer the exclusive concern of the handful of electors, it was available to 'the people'. The close connection between boulevard *cafés*, vaudeville and caricature, already explored in the works on Chauvin and Mayeux mentioned above, is brought to life by Kerr thanks to his prodigious knowledge of nineteenth-century French literature and journalism.

Philipon's success can be gauged by the spread of pear as a symbol originally of the Louis-Philippe's head, then his whole body, and finally the entire regime. Philipon's first used the pear as part of his defence against a charge of 'insulting the person of the King'. He argued that, while it was true that one of the characters in his papers had the features of the King, anything could be made to resemble anything else, for instance a pear and the King's head. Did that mean that greengrocers were guilty of sedition? The sketches Philipon drew that day appeared in *La Caricature* in January 1832, and the pear rapidly became a stock element in his artists' repertoire. Kerr suggests that one reason the pear appealed so much is that Philipon's educated readership, possessing some basic knowledge of physiognomy, would understand that by emphasising the King's narrow forehead and overdeveloped mouth a reference was being made to his intellectual incompetence and greed. This is part of a more general argument that Philipon's caricatures eschew references drawn from popular culture, although it should be pointed out that the pear does have a place in French folklore as an extremely crude sexual symbol. But whatever its origins there can be no doubt as to its triumph. Other newspapers, even government ones, found it impossible not to mention pears. Puns proliferated, as did pear-shaped graffiti. Fanny Trollope, visiting the Latin Quarter in 1835, found 'Pears of every size and form. were to be seen in all directions.' They were also all over the walls of prisons. In 1834 there was even a shop specialising in wax pears. Through the press the language of pears reached the provinces, Philipon claimed they were springing up all over the country. Even among historians Louis-Philippe cannot rid himself of this tiresome fruit; it is simply impossible to write about him without the image of the pear floating into one's mind, the very symbol of an unloved and unlovable monarch.

Given the wide distribution of the pear (so much part of the collective consciousness of the time that it appears in the autobiography of the working-class politician Martin Nadaud a year before Philipon had even thought of it), it is surprising that Kerr himself denies caricature's influence on the political upheavals of the period. Caricature did not penetrate the countryside; it did not form part of the culture of the working-class barricade fighters of 1834 or 1848. Louis-Philippe may have blamed his overthrow in the February Revolution on the campaign ridicule he suffered (just as Napoleonic imagery was credited at the time, and in a recent work by the historian Barbara Day-Hickman,<sup>(2)</sup> with Louis-Napoleon's electoral success later in the year), but Kerr argues that "Caricature was not an important means of initiation into the world of national politics; in a sense Philipon preached to the converted". Indeed, the more the opposition (and in particular the Republicans) adopted Philipon's satirical language the easier it was for the government to discredit them. The more violent the image the more likely it was to invoke memories of 1793 (Philipon's contemporaries mistakenly believing that the Terror had also been a period of graphic incontinence). The more crude and insulting the representation, the more the middle classes (on whom Louis-Philippe relied for his support) learnt to associate political liberty with *libertinage*, an accusation that has dogged revolutionaries from 1830 to 1968. "The Revolution of 1848 perhaps owes as much to the reassuring absence of political caricature from 1835 to 1848 as it does to Philipon's brilliant but unsettling political campaign from 1830 to 1835."

Kerr's conclusion has its modern echo - why was Mrs Thatcher not driven from office in the 1980s by the laughter generated by *Spitting Image* and alternative comedy? A book that denies its own wider significance is, in a way, quite refreshing. And if one accepts the downbeat conclusion one can still enjoy this book for its insights into the meaning of caricature, and its portrayal of that exciting part of Paris where middle-class respectability bordered on Bohemia. It seems to me, however, that Kerr is too quick to dismiss the evidence that he himself has assembled. It may not have been the sight of a caricature that led people onto the streets in 1848, but might not Louis-Philippe's failure to create a popular counter-image to the pear help explain his difficulties in mobilising support in that crisis? Might the camaraderie of a shared joke help us understand how Republicans were able to build their alliance with the nascent labour movement? Modern research has so far failed to reveal any clear-cut link between portrayals of violence on TV and actual violence, nonetheless the suspicion remains that they are connected. Guizot, Thiers, Michelet and Stendhal had a similar suspicion about caricature, and so does this reviewer, though how I might prove it is another matter.

## Notes

1. Gérard de Puymège, *Chauvin, le soldat-laboureur: Contribution à l'étude des nationalismes* (Paris 1993); Elizabeth K. Menon, *The Complete Mayeux: Use and Abuse of a French Icon* (Peter Lang, Bern, 1997).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Barbara Day-Hickman, *Napoleonic Art: Nationalism and the Spirit of Rebellion (1815-1848)* (University of Delaware Press, Newark, 1999).[Back to \(2\)](#)

**Other reviews:**

[2]

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/210#comment-0>

**Links**

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/1225>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>