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The Image of the Popular Front: The Masses and the Media in Interwar France

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On the evening of 16 March 1937 Colonel de la Roque's extreme-right Parti Social Français held a meeting in a cinema in the Socialist and Communist-controlled industrial suburb of Clichy. Mindful of its legal responsibilities, the authorities allowed the meeting to go ahead and banned the proposed counter-demonstration organised by the Left, who chose to protest anyway. After a night of rioting, the Republic's gardes mobiles had driven back the demonstrators, leaving five dead and 200 gravely wounded, one of whom died during the night. The Socialist Minister of the Interior, Marx Dormoy, was greeted with cries of 'Dormoy assassin!' A sickened Léon Blum contemplated resignation, but hung on to power until the summer, when the Senate rejected his call for increased powers to deal with the budget. However, to all intents and purposes, the Popular Front had died on the streets of Clichy in March.

Simon Dell's account of the Popular Front and the media begins with an even more famous night of rioting, 6 February 1934, which brought down the Daladier government and paved the way for the reunification of the French Left (which would become the Popular Front). On that evening, the events were covered for the left-leaning weekly *Marianne* by the veteran journalist Carlo Rim, who was amused to note that one of the first bullets fired at the crowd passed straight through the hat of a young photographer. From this 'coincidence' (the staple of news reporting), Dell paints a fascinating picture of the way in which the Popular

Front not merely temporarily renegotiated the relationship between government, capital and the people, but also redefined the role of the news media. In fact, the two become one. As Dell concludes:

the history of the image of the Popular Front may be understood as a history of contingency. By this I mean more than that the image operated through the agency of its viewers. What I have sought to emphasise is that each successful transformation of the image was also potentially the moment of its failure. In 1935 the image worked to secure the Popular Front from above but this was at the expense of the Front from below. In 1936 this image contributed to election victory but the transformation of the Front from potential to actual government resulted in a further curtailment of its popular base. And finally, when the image of the Popular Front succeeded in mobilising support for the cause of the Spanish Republic, this success resulted in the destruction of the image. In each case, the success of the image as a site of exchange required more than the renewal of a mandate. For in each case the success transformed the very terms of the exchange. Perhaps this should be understood as a condition of hegemony. If hegemony is defined as the articulation of distinct struggles then the successful conclusion of any individual campaign will require a process of rearticulation (p. 155).

As this quotation indicates, Dell bases his study of the Popular Front on Gramsci's analysis, in the *Prison Notebooks*, of the Third Republic as an exercise in bourgeois hegemony, briefly punctuated from 1935 to 1937 by a counter-hegemonic project on the part of an anti-Fascist alliance. This analysis does not differ significantly from most well-trodden narratives of the Popular Front, with their emphasis on the tensions between popular aspirations and party political realpolitik. The originality of Dell's book, as its title indicates, lies in its discussion of the role and exploitation of the media in the negotiation and articulation of those tensions.

Dell's exploration of 'the Republican Imaginary' contains a remarkably astute analysis of the development of the role of the press photographer in the Third Republic and especially the creation of photographic agencies: just three in 1922, rising to 18 in 1929, and covering both the capital and the provinces. At the same time photographers, whether working for agencies or for individual newspapers, became a significant part of the journalistic profession with an increasingly recognised status. Not, however, that they necessarily benefited from technological advances; as Dell demonstrates, contrary to the received wisdom of the revolutionary role played by the 35mm Leica in press photography, French photographers were still forced to use the heavy and old-fashioned plate cameras because the plates could be converted directly into prints without the intermediary of an enlarger. This goes a long way to explaining the preference for static shots in French press photography during the inter-war years, although it clearly could not exclude the use of lighter cameras for war reporting, for example, and in the illustrated news magazines.

The bulk of the book is devoted to following the development of this 'Republican Imaginary' through three key moments in the history of the Popular Front: the Quatorze juillet celebrations of 1935, with the solemn swearing of the oath of allegiance at the Place de la Nation; the accession to power in May to June 1936 under the shadow of the strikes and factory occupations; and the subsequent disintegration of the Rassemblement in the wake of the Spanish Civil War. Using images taken predominantly from the two Popular Front dailies, *Le Populaire* and *L'Humanité*, and the Communist news magazine *Regards*, Dell explores the way in which the news photograph reflects the competing claims of hierarchy and democracy: from the essentially 'democratic' montages of Popular Front leaders and supporters in the brochure commemorating the events of 14 July 1935, to more conventional pictures of ministers once in power.

This is a fascinating and well-researched account of the Popular Front through its own media although it is, perhaps necessarily, more concerned with news management by the Popular Front itself rather than with an overall analysis of visual news depiction. There are few comparisons or contrasts with the depiction of the events of 1934 - 1937 in the right-wing or centrist press and, as Dell admits, no discussion of the powerful regional dailies. The author, quite rightly, devotes considerable space to his analysis of Marc Réal's photographic montages in the brochure *14 juillet 1935* which, by involving the masses in the media depictions of events in which they were participating, abolished a visual and political hierarchy. Yet it would be interesting to know how common a pictorial device this was across the spectrum of the French press in

the inter-war years.

It would also be useful to compare the images studied here with those in the rest of the media, notably cinema but especially newsreel, which was often the primary source of visual news for the bulk of the French urban population, as it was in other Western countries. It is true, as Dell claims, that the four major newsreel companies were generally hostile to the Popular Front. However, this hostility was not always reflected in their coverage of events, such as the 'carnival' atmosphere surrounding the 14 July 1935 celebrations and the factory occupations of 1936. In this respect it could be argued that the book does not entirely sustain its subtitle of 'The Masses and the Media in Interwar France'. In addition, there are no references to Popular Front feature films, for example: Renoir's *Le crime de Monsieur Lange*, the lavish government-sponsored *La Marseillaise*, or Duvivier's *La belle équipe*. Neither is there any discussion of the French Communist Party (PCF)-funded 1936 propaganda film directed by Renoir, *La vie est à nous*, which raises many of the issues dealt with by Dell.

There is also one puzzling thematic lacuna: the congés payés and the summer holidays of the urban working class in 1936 (which did, incidentally, attract sympathetic coverage in the newsreels). Perhaps the author considered the imagery which derived from the summer of 1936 as akin to those cosy pictures and evocations of the atmosphere of fête, which were often privileged over serious political and social contestation in coverage of the factory occupations. However, in visual terms and in addition to its social legacy, the Popular Front is indissolubly associated with the release of the urban working classes to the countryside and the coasts. Some discussion of the role of the architect of this policy, Léo Lagrange, and some of the other major cultural and leisure policy-makers, such as Jean Zay, might have shed more light on the image of the Popular Front as it was conceived in action and reflected through an ambitious cultural policy which privileged inter alia the visual arts.

As Dell correctly points out in the third substantive section of his book, the deep complexities of the Popular Front and its image were encapsulated in its responses to the Spanish Civil War in the summer of 1936. For Dell, it was the failure of the Popular Front to come to the aid of its Spanish counterpart which effectively 'destroyed' the image and consecrated the revision of the 'exchange between leaders and led'. Yet, here again the Popular Front and its supporters were divided along non-party political lines. As Charles Robert Ageron points out, as late as 1939, French public opinion was broadly supportive of the Spanish Republicans, with 74 per cent of respondents in an Institut Français d'Opinion Publique poll of December 1938 considering Franco's Spain as 'an enemy power'.⁽¹⁾ There was some indifference to the fate of Spain on a day-to-day basis across the country as a whole. David Wingeate Pike notes that coverage of the Spanish Civil War was largely restricted to the Parisian 'political' dailies and to the regional press of the south-west. Elsewhere, in Nantes for example (the site of one of the very first strikes and factory occupations), the war was not a topic of burning interest.⁽²⁾ In many cases, it was the Right, rather than the Left, who were the most concerned at the events in Spain, often viewing the 'excesses' of the Republican militias as a warning of what might happen in France under an unfettered Popular Front. Similarly, as Dell reminds us, those who supported the Spanish Republic and attended the August 1936 peace rally at Saint-Cloud, were divided between interventionists and pacifists, but with a majority who broadly, if heart-brokenly, supported the cabinet's policy. The liberal Radical novelist André Chamson, who was also an adviser to Daladier and a major architect of Popular Front cultural policy, reflected the anguish of the pacifist supporter of the Spanish Republicans. Chamson's *Retour d'Espagne* of 1937, cited by Dell, is a moving account of the Republican military struggle and of Fascist atrocities, but it concludes nonetheless with a call to France to remain outside of the conflict.

At the same time, it is difficult to see the PCF as the disinterested defender of the values of 14 July 1935 in their calls for intervention, which sprang quite as much from Moscow's global foreign policy and its desire to assert itself against left-wing, often Trotskyite rivals, as they did from a fidelity to the former revolutionary exchange between leaders and led. For instance, the veteran Communist militant André Marty, the leader of the mutiny in France's Black Sea fleet in 1919, became a feared political commissar in the French International Brigade, hunting down and executing allies of the Workers' Party of Marxist Unification (POUM) and the anarchists. In this respect, Malraux's *L'Espoir* represents the highest point of

his commitment to Communism. Dell is right to quote the fascinating observation of the Republican intelligence chief, Garcia, that the early phase of the conflict was defined by an 'Apocalypse of fraternity', but he omits Garcia's crucial conclusion: 'it is our modest function ... to organise the Apocalypse'. Malraux's novel is a plea for realism and hard-headedness over lyricism and emotion, and that plea is naturally translated into support for Communist organisation over anarchist or POUM-inspired flamboyancy. Not for nothing are most of his characters artists, perceived as those who impose order upon chaos, and Garcia himself is an ethnologist who makes patterns out of human diversity. We are far from George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*, Ken Loach's *Land and Freedom*, and incidentally, from Malraux's *L'Espoir*, distributed in 1937 and which portrays fraternity to powerful polemical effect. In this film at least, the image has not yet been destroyed, and it might be argued that reflections of it survive way beyond the life of the coalition itself.

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

Notes

1. C. R. Ageron, 'L'opinion publique française pendant les crises internationales de septembre 1938 à juillet 1939', *Cahiers de l'Institut de l'Histoire de la Presse et de l'Opinion*, 3 (1975), 218-19. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. D. W. Pike, 'L'Information des Français et la guerre d'Espagne' (Paris: Institut Français de la Presse et des Sciences, Université de Paris II, 18 November 1975), p. 8. [Back to \(2\)](#)

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