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France since 1870: Culture, Politics and Society

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Similarly, he opposed universal conscription while both monarchists and republicans wished to establish the Prussian system of the nation at arms. In the end, Thiers maintained the old system. The poor were conscripted and drew lots, according to which they served five years or six months. The well-to-do obtained exemptions either as students or civil servants or volunteered to serve for a year at officer level if they could pay 1500 francs for their equipment, an amount exceeding a year's salary for most workers or teachers. The monarchists also sought to decentralise power, hoping to benefit from their traditional relations of patronage in the country. Again, Thiers prevented the Assembly from voting any measures that reduced centralisation. Despite token changes, prefects retained power over local councils.

Thiers could not keep antagonising his majority forever. On 24 May 1873, he resigned, hoping the Assembly would call him back, but instead the Assembly nominated a new President, Marshal Patrice MacMahon, Duc de Magenta, who had overseen the repression of the Commune. MacMahon in turn nominated as Prime Minister the Duc de Broglie, leader of the monarchist majority in the Assembly. Thus began what Daniel Halévy called the 'Republic of the Dukes'.[3]

The monarchists in power, 1873–6

Broglie's aim was to 're-establish moral order'. If he could not restore the monarchy, he hoped 'to make Marshal MacMahon a veritable regent under the name of president, and France under the Republic a monarchy minus a king'.[4] To this end, he replaced Thiers's prefects with Bonapartists (there were not many monarchist prefects left). One of their first victims was Lucien Verdet, a municipal councillor in the small town of Oyonnax, near Geneva. On 19 May 1873, five days before Thiers resigned, Verdet spoke at a non-religious funeral. 'Dear friend', he concluded, 'you won't have had the carnival-style procession ..., the banal and venal prayers of a fat curé, ... but behind your coffin march free men, who left their work to accompany their free-thinking comrade to his last rest.' A new prefect nominated by Broglie prosecuted Verdet for 'outrage to the Catholic religion': on 14 July 1873 – it was not yet a legal holiday – he was sentenced to 15 days in jail, from which he returned to a hero's welcome. A few years later he became Mayor.[5]

The government repressed even the most moderate reformers. The very respectable Léon Richer and Maria Deraismes revived the Association for Women's Rights. In June 1872 they organised a banquet for 150 supporters of women's emancipation. The keynote speaker was Victor Schoelcher, who had signed the 1848 decree abolishing slavery, but the highlight of the

evening was a letter from Victor Hugo. Women, he argued, were virtual slaves: 'There are citizens, THERE ARE NOT CITIZENESSES. This is a violent fact; it must cease.' With the advent of Moral Order, however, the Minister of the Interior prohibited the group's meetings: they were 'only a pretext for the assembly of numerous women who are too emancipated'.[6] Richer and Deraismes cancelled plans for a feminist congress in 1873. Even so, the group was banned in 1875.

The Moral Order was also religious. After the defeat at Sedan, a provincial merchant undertook a campaign of prayer and penitence 'for our poor country' and then for 'the crimes of the Commune'. Many Catholics took a vow recognising 'that we have been guilty and justly punished' and promising to build a church dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus as an act of contrition. On 24 July 1873, two months after MacMahon and Broglie came to power, the Assembly approved building the Sacré-Cœur (Sacred Heart) Basilica on the Montmartre hilltop where Generals Lecomte and Thomas had been shot: 'there the communards had spilled the first blood, there would be built the expiatory church', writes one historian.[7] Parisian republicans viewed the Basilica, built over the next quarter-century, as a hated symbol of clerical domination and revenge against the Commune. Only during the twentieth century did it become just a tourist icon.

Struggles across the country strengthened the republicans' hand. On the first anniversary of 4 September, republicans in the southern town of Bollène (Vaucluse) dressed a young woman in red, 'placed a Phrygian cap [symbol of republicanism] on her head and ... paraded her from one café to another through the streets of the town, to the strains of the Marseillaise'.[8] While the republicans gained popular support, they also appealed as defenders of order and stability against the monarchists' wild ideas. Thus a successful candidate in an 1873 by-election argued:

> The monarchist candidature means: a return to the past, restoration of privilege, the dominance of the nobility and clergy, the eradication of your rights, destruction of universal suffrage ... The Republic ... symbolises peaceful progress, universal education, cheap government, in a word, order, justice, and liberty.

This rhetoric struck a chord with many of the elite. A regent of the Bank of France wrote in 1873, 'what madness to create a regime distrusted by the middle classes and hated by the masses'.[9]

During 1874, by-elections returned only one monarchist, against six Bonapartists and 16 republicans. Monarchists had to act before they lost power altogether. On 30 January 1875, an alliance of conservative republicans and moderate monarchists carried the day: the Assembly agreed by

one vote to a law providing a republican constitution with 'two chambers and a president ... elected by the Senate and the Chamber'. During the next few months, the Assembly fleshed out this skeleton with a series of constitutional laws which, taken together, came to be known as the Constitution of 1875. The laws enshrined a republican government, maintaining the administrative framework that France had inherited from the great Revolution. The country remained divided into 90 districts called departments, each under the control of a prefect responsible to the Minister of the Interior. 'General Councils' were elected in each department, but they were virtually powerless. Each department was divided into three or four districts called *arrondissements*, each under the control of a sub-prefect and each in turn divided into several cantons.

The lower house, the Chamber of Deputies, was elected by universal male suffrage and secret ballot, though it was long before voting was really secret in rural areas. The Assembly introduced the election system that is still used in France: single-member constituencies with two rounds of voting, a first in which an absolute majority is required for election, a second in which the best-placed candidate is elected, whether or not he or she obtains a majority. Conservatives hoped that the time between rounds would enable local notables to make deals. Rather than fixing the size of the Chamber, they fixed a maximum size for constituencies, so the number of seats in the Chamber fluctuated as seats were reallocated following population shifts. No one raised the issue of women's suffrage, as some had in 1848.

To counterbalance the lower house, the upper house, the Senate, had 75 life members elected by the Assembly and 225 elected by a college of elected officials from regional institutions plus one delegate for every commune. Gambetta accepted this – although republicans had always opposed an upper house – in part because this 'Council of communes' would give the Republic rural roots, and this proved to be the case. Senators served nine-year terms, with one-third elected every three years. From 1884, all were elected and the electoral college gave some weight to population, but the Senate remained a bulwark of conservatism dominated by notables from the country: landowners, notaries and lawyers.

The President served a seven-year term. He had power to grant pardons, conclude treaties, and propose laws as well as to appoint ministers and to dissolve the Chamber with the consent of the Senate. He also nominated members of the Council of State, a Napoleonic institution that interpreted laws and heard cases of electoral fraud or of disputes between different arms of government.

These powers were remarkably similar to those enjoyed by King Louis-Philippe during the July Monarchy. Jean-Marie Mayeur has suggested that the Third Republic 'established a representative form of government without sovereignty of the people, a parliamentary regime in conformity with the

Orleanist ideal'.[10] But in the last elections of the July Monarchy, only 167 000 men out of a population of 35.4 million were wealthy enough to qualify for the vote; since 1848, all French men over 21 were eligible to vote. The Third Republic is best described in Gambetta's words:

> France cannot be governed against the bourgeoisie; ... [but they] must not be allowed to predominate to the total exclusion of labouring people. The Republic alone can achieve the harmonious reconciliation of the legitimate demands of workers with respect for the sacred rights of property, ... teach the bourgeoisie to cherish democratic government and ... the people to have confidence in their elder brothers [the bourgeoisie].[11]

The institutions of the Republic were in place, but the government remained in the hands of monarchists.

The republicans come to power, 1876–9

At the end of 1875 the Assembly elected the 75 life senators, 57 of whom were republicans. In elections for the new Chamber of Deputies on 27 February and 5 March 1876, republicans presented themselves as sound businessmen. Sadi Carnot, later a President of the Republic, argued: 'republican France works; it saves; it accumulates wealth; it pays off the debts of fallen regimes'.[12] The republicans won 360 of the 535 seats in the Chamber and neutralised the Senate, winning 92 of the 225 seats up for election. With the 57 republican life senators, there were now 149 republican senators, just two short of a majority. As Peter McPhee puts it, 'for the first time, the majority of Frenchmen clearly chose a republican regime as the best guarantee of civil liberties and social progress'.[13]

MacMahon had to accept a government under the 78-year-old Jules Dufaure, a cautious and conservative republican in the image of Thiers who had begun his ministerial career under Louis-Philippe in 1839! He took office on 9 March 1876. Since the constitutional laws did not provide for the President to chair cabinet meetings, Dufaure chaired them and took the title 'President of the Council', that is, of the Council of Ministers, so effectively Prime Minister. After nine months, Dufaure lost a motion of no confidence and, true to parliamentary practice, resigned, thus setting the precedent that ministries were responsible to parliament. MacMahon replaced him with Jules Simon, a conservative republican who had accepted the Empire.

Simon tried to please both the President and the parliament, but Gambetta trapped him on the issue of anticlericalism. French bishops had