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Dubbelboer, Marieke

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WRITERS AND THE PRESS IN FRANCE 1600–2000: POLITICS, PAMPHLETS AND PROPAGANDA

MARIEKE DUBBELBOER¹

Describing the importance of journalism to the novelists of his own generation, in 1881 Émile Zola declared ‘Nous sommes tous enfants de la presse’.² In Zola’s case this statement was certainly true; his *Jaccuse* is arguably one of the most famous examples of political interventions published in the press.

While studies on politically committed writers in France take for granted that many writers expressed their ideas in journalistic texts, the specific cultural and historical context of journalism and the press is often ignored, even though, as the contributions in this issue show, that context influenced how and what individuals wrote or were allowed to write. The history of writers and political commitment is fundamentally linked to that of their journalism. The press is understood here in the broad sense of mass-produced, widely distributed print publications made possible since the invention of the printing press around 1440: from early pamphlets and almanacs to periodical newspapers and magazines.

All five articles focus on how writers—fiction writers, journalists, pamphleteers, satirists—have made use of the press to intervene in politics over four centuries and the complex ways in which this involvement has shaped French political culture. This special issue brings together scholars from the fields of history, literary studies and journalism studies, thus offering a trans-historical and interdisciplinary approach. The authors explore what political commitment and politically engaged writing has meant in different contexts and times: from the use of pamphlets during the political controversies of La Fronde in the seventeenth century (Mark Bannister) to twentieth-century political magazines such as Françoise Giroud’s *L’Express* (Imogen Long), by way of Jean-Paul Marat’s revolutionary newspaper *L’Ami du Peuple* (Nigel Ritchie), Émile de

¹ The author is an academic advisor at the University of Groningen and can be contacted at marieke.dubbelboer@gmail.com. She would like to thank colleagues in the School of Modern Languages at the University of Bristol, in particular Martin Hurcombe and Rowan Tomlinson, for helping organize the initial conference in 2013 that inspired this special issue. The conference was also made possible by the Society for the Study of French History, the Society of French Studies and the Association for the Study of Modern and Contemporary France. The author’s gratitude goes out to all six authors as well as to the editors and reviewers of *French History* for their valuable feedback and comments, which have made this special issue possible.

² A. Wrona (ed.), *Zola journaliste. Articles et chroniques* (Paris, 2011), 7.

Girardin's *La Presse* and nineteenth-century satire (Laura O'Brien) and Andrée Viollis's travel reportage in the 1930s for *Le Petit Parisien* (Frank Harbers and Marcel Broersma). How have writers in France made use of the printing press to intervene in political debate since the early days of mass printing? What role did politics play in these papers or texts? How did the different genres and forms of writing (pamphlet, reportage, *chronique*, satire) affect the political commitment expressed in them?

It is important to remember that until the 1880s the printed press in France was heavily regulated by the state. Ever since the first mass-produced printed pamphlets appeared, authorities had understood their power and their potential for danger.³

In 1631 Théophraste Renaudot launched the *Gazette de France* under the watchful eye of Cardinal Richelieu. The *Gazette* was intended to be the official state newspaper, while the French government repressed any other domestic efforts to launch a political paper. The pamphlet was often the only outlet available in France to anyone seeking to criticize the government in the seventeenth century. Mark Bannister discusses these pamphlets in 'Mazarinades, manifestos and mavericks: political and ideological engagement during the Fronde'. Bannister argues that most of the pamphlets by literary authors were often the product of a certain literary one-upmanship rather than representative of any substantial political or ideological stance. Ideological debate mostly took place in pamphlets written by non-literary figures. Alongside literary authors and more ideological non-literary writers, other pamphlet writers became involved. These Bannister characterizes as mavericks, individuals whose political credentials were sketchy, who were often close to the church, and whose writing, as Bannister writes, was 'neither very creative nor politically sound'. However, even though the *mazarinades* differed considerably in literary style and political content, authorities and opposition alike recognized their importance and potential impact.

The genre of the pamphlet has of course specific characteristics that affect the way they communicate a political message. The deluge of pamphlets during the Fronde—1100 were printed in just three months—were a very specific reaction against a specific event, the blockade of the capital ordered by Mazarin to starve people into submission. Pamphlets were not intended to be nuanced discussions or even an expression of a particular political idea. They were a weapon of attack, meant to draw attention, to develop an audience, and to criticize, often aggressively. The writing therefore needed to be embellished to be effective. Pamphlets were also often, as in the case of the Fronde, used to address a specific, urgent issue, rather than general political ideas or a specific ideology. Yet, despite their perhaps limited political scope, the tide of critical pamphlets, and of a critical press, could not be turned.

During the eighteenth century the periodical press truly established itself in France; by the end of the century print culture was flourishing. Alongside

³ J. R. Censer and J. D. Popkin, *Press and Politics in Pre-Revolutionary France* (Berkeley, 1989).

pamphlets and almanacs, which had long been popular, but were published infrequently, there now existed a large number of printed publications 'available on announced dates, at least once a trimester, designed to serve a broad, or at least regional, reading public'.⁴ In 1745 a total of five political periodicals were published—of which four were outside France. By 1785 that number had risen to nineteen—of which sixteen were published outside France.⁵ Then there were the weekly or bi-weekly published regional *affiches*, bulletins that relied on advertising but also covered a variety of topics, including socio-cultural commentary. Non-political periodicals were subject to their own regime of government regulation. These clearly catered to an elite, thus limiting their scope. Political ideas did circulate in these publications, sometimes critical, sometimes an extension of the monarchy, more often somewhere balancing in between.

The political and social context of the time equally affected political writing. The literary, satirical nature of seventeenth-century pamphlets, and their perceived 'lack of real political commitment', had much to do with the regulation and censorship of the press enforced by the authoritarian French state. Political allegiance—or lack thereof—also had to do with the dependence of literary authors on patronage in the days before authors could develop financial opportunities and independence through other means. Political figures and those in power could turn to writers, pamphleteers and journalists to advocate for them. The distrust of journalists, journalism and the media, a constant theme throughout the history of the press, can partly be traced back to the close connections journalistic writers often had with those in power. But the blossoming press also presented opportunities for the opposition.

By the end of the eighteenth century it became increasingly difficult for the French state to keep track of the sheer number of publications. As the periodical press grew in size, it also became bolder in its reporting and criticism.⁶ During the French Revolution the political press became 'an indispensable symbol of the public opinion of a people that lacked the means to speak for itself'.⁷ The period saw an unprecedented increase in the distribution of the printed press.⁸ Government control of the press broke down, leading to a flurry of printed material.⁹

The large number of francophone political newspapers published abroad played a significant role in the expansion of the medium during these years.¹⁰ In addition, French writers looked across the Channel for models of political

⁴ J. R. Censer, *The French Press in the Age of Enlightenment* (London, 1994), 1

⁵ *ibid.*, 7

⁶ C. Todd, *Political Bias, Censorship and the Dissolution of the 'Official' Press in Eighteenth Century France* (Lewiston, NY, 1991).

⁷ J. D. Popkin, *Revolutionary News: The Press in France 1789–1799* (Durham, NC, 1990), 4.

⁸ R. Darnton and D. Roche, *Revolution in Print: The Press in France 1775–1800* (Berkeley, 1989).

⁹ Popkin, *Revolutionary News*.

¹⁰ B. Harris, *Politics and the Rise of the Press: Britain and France 1620–1800* (London, 1996); S. Burrows, *French Exile Journalism and European Politics 1792–1814* (London, 2001).

journalism during the eighteenth century, when the European press was dominated by what media historian Jeanneney calls 'la gloire de l'Angleterre'.¹¹ In 'An Anglo-French revolutionary? Jean-Paul Marat channels the spirit of Wilkes and Junius', Nigel Ritchie argues that Jean-Paul Marat's revolutionary politics and journalistic strategy were inspired by examples he witnessed in England. In Marat, Ritchie observes the development of the concept of the 'public writer' in France: the writer-journalist intervening in politics, speaking out on behalf of (radical) causes, critical of authorities, defending freedoms and the balance of power. Ritchie shows how Marat, inspired by his stay in England, witnessed English radicalism and the model of opposition offered by journalist-politician Wilkes and his supporters, including the writer behind the pseudonym Junius and the classical republican, commonwealth tradition they represented. Ritchie argues that the influence of Junius on Marat's revolutionary career and the development of a 'new politics' based on printed media have largely remained unexplored. He shows how both Junius' polemics and Wilkes' rebellion against the authorities shaped Marat's self-understanding as a public writer and his self-appointed role as *l'ami du peuple*. Ritchie follows Elizabeth Eisenstein's argument that during the years of the French Revolution in particular, the expansion of print culture and the flourishing press allowed political figures such as Marat to mobilize support.¹² This allowed for a new politics based on printed media rather than traditional political institutions. As Bannister's contribution shows, the seeds for this sort of new politics had already been sewn in the seventeenth-century pamphlet wars. Marat's newspaper *L'Ami du Peuple* (1789) was meant to be a weapon of attack, but the format also left more room for factual reports and other genres. Marat's newspaper was modelled after English examples, using satire, reportage and other journalistic genres to achieve a political goal, in this case critique of the French state, a revolution of the system with an appeal to the elusive *peuple*. In the spirit of Wilkes and Junius it was increasingly individual personalities—in this case that of Marat—that could make a political impact through the press.

Habermas of course described the eighteenth century as a period when the public sphere rapidly developed, broadly defined here as the mediation between those in power and the masses without a voice.¹³ Ever since the printing press, an idea of a public sphere had obviously been recognized—feared even—by authorities. Pamphlets, almanacs and newspapers allowed political and journalistic figures to widen their reach and their audience beyond the scope of the parliament. Ritchie describes how Marat closely observed the 'Wilkite phenomenon' in England, 'the mobilization of extra-parliamentary political forces through the press to capture public opinion beyond the ruling elite' and how this helped create an alternative space of political culture where

¹¹ J.-N. Jeanneney, *Une Histoire des médias. Des origines à nos jours* (Paris, 2011), 45–66.

¹² H. Chisick et al. (eds), *The Press in the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1991), 153.

¹³ J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. T. Burger and F. Lawrence (Cambridge, 1989).

the political powers could be resisted by *l'esprit public* as Marat wrote in one of his articles.

New printing technologies, improved distribution, increased literacy, and diminished state control accelerated the distribution and availability of the periodical press after the Revolution. The boundaries between politicians, journalists and writers remained blurry. In 'Monsieur Vipérin: Émile de Girardin and the republican satirical press in 1848', Laura O'Brien shows the complex ties between the popular press, caricature and the political establishment through the example of Girardin and *La Presse*, one of France's first affordable daily newspapers. Émile de Girardin revolutionized the newspaper market, but he also became the target of satirists because to some he epitomized the bourgeois journalist-politician-social climber. Like so many journalists, Girardin had political ambitions and he was elected to the Chamber of Deputies during the July Monarchy.

After the French Revolution the fear of another revolution had remained so great that subsequent regimes, whether monarchist or republican, continued to clamp down on the press, or use the press to their advantage. O'Brien argues that Girardin's explicit criticism of the government of the Republic, coupled with his frequently shifting political allegiances, made him a prime target for mockery. Satirical criticism of Girardin abounded over the course of 1848, in *Le Charivari* or in the anti-Bonapartist *La Revue comique*. O'Brien views this ridicule as part of a wider effort by the republican satirical press to use caricature and satire to define the meaning of *quarante-huitard* republicanism, by excluding those who did not conform to the political norm through a process of mockery and derision.

Until the late nineteenth century, caricature, commentary and opinion, not factual journalism, were often still the only ways to criticize the powers that be and to influence public opinion. O'Brien's article also shows how caricature and satire were deployed in an attempt to curb the political engagement of certain figures within the press. Like pamphlets in earlier decades, caricature was a weapon of attack, a means to discredit the opponent. Actual reporting or fact checking was still virtually impossible in France due to the fact that authorities actively controlled the press agencies. This lasted well into the nineteenth century in France, much longer than in certain other European countries, although the level of censorship and regulation varied greatly. However, increasingly after the revolutions of 1789, 1830, 1848 and the Commune of 1871, freedom of the press appeared inevitable and finally became law during the Third Republic in 1881. The liberal press laws of 1881 widened the political spectrum and engaged a larger audience in political debates.

However, the French press had become so used to being an opinion press that most dailies were slow to incorporate the more fact-based journalism that had already become the norm in many other countries. By 1900 the political bias of the French press—even the Baedeker guide warned tourists explicitly against the unreliable French newspapers—was notorious.¹⁴ Historians of

¹⁴ *Paris et ses environs. Manuel du voyageur par K. Baedeker* (Paris, 1900), 32.

journalism have observed that French journalism in the nineteenth century had grown into a journalism of expression and opinion instead of observation.¹⁵ Journalists focused more on analysis and criticism of official sources than the gathering of news. On the front page preference was given to the *chronique* over reportage; an opinion article by a prominent 'homme de lettres'—or an occasional 'femme de lettres'.¹⁶ Despite influences from Britain and the United States around 1900, French journalism therefore kept a distinctly literary character.¹⁷

In 'Impartial reporter or écrivain engagé? Andrée Viollis and the transformation of French journalism 1918–1940', Frank Harbers and Marcel Broersma argue that a substantial transformation took place in French journalism after the First World War. Only then can a shift be observed from the partisan columnist to the more observant *grand reporter* who aimed to avoid explicit political views. Nevertheless, Harbers and Broersma argue, literary influences remained important in French daily newspapers, more so perhaps than in other Western countries. Contrary to the more impersonal 'objective' Anglo-American style of reporting, French reportage often kept a distinct personal, authorial voice. By studying Andrée Viollis's travel writing for the popular daily *Le Petit Parisien*, Harbers and Broersma challenge a still dominant narrative in journalism studies that modern factual and non-partisan reporting was an Anglo-American invention whereas French journalism remained less professionalized and more partisan. As the press in France and elsewhere set up professional standards, an American idea of objectivity in reporting also spread to Europe. This meant a higher standard of fact checking, balanced reporting, separating fact from opinion, and political impartiality. However, most European countries had different traditions, newspapers were associated with specific political parties and influenced by literary culture. Different journalistic traditions also meant distinctive approaches to and different conceptualizations of objectivity, journalism and political writing.¹⁸ While the Anglo-American 'objectivity regime' required reportage to be depersonalized, Harbers and Broersma show that reporting in France relied on the 'mediating subjectivity' of the reporter. The journalist had the capacities to understand reality and convey it in a compelling way by lending the readership his or her perception. We see similarities with Marat's clever use of his public persona and celebrity status to advocate causes in *L'Ami du Peuple*. In the twentieth century professional reporters such as Viollis might have had to refrain from explicit political or ideological views, but information was not disconnected from the personal experiences of the

¹⁵ C. Delporte, *Les Journalistes en France 1880–1950. Naissance et construction d'une profession* (Paris, 1999); M. Martin, *Médias et journalistes de la République*. (Paris 1997); J. Chalaby, *The Invention of Journalism* (London, 1998).

¹⁶ P. Albert, *La Presse française* (Paris, 1990), 38.

¹⁷ T. Ferenczi, *L'Invention du journalisme en France. Naissance de la presse moderne à la fin du XIX^e siècle* (Paris, 1999), 30.

¹⁸ D. Hallin and P. Mancini, *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics* (Cambridge, 2004), 220–48.

writer. While Viollis remained very much a left-wing *écrivain engagé* in her published books, in her reportage for *Le Petit Parisien* she was restricted by the journalistic regime and preferred to write about the tropical scenery she encountered during her travels.

The smaller, more literary or radical periodicals remained instruments of political combat and propaganda during the polarized political climate of the 1930s. Debates about political commitment in journalism continued after the Second World War when ideological divides remained great. In 'A powerful political platform: Françoise Giroud and *L'Express* in a Cold War climate', Imogen Long discusses Françoise's Giroud's editorial policy during her tenure as editor of magazine *L'Express*. *L'Express*, Long argues, stood out as an exception amongst the ideological polarization of the Cold War years. Giroud was one of the few, respected female intellectual figures of her generation and had founded the political bi-weekly magazine together with Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber. Giroud saw a future in left-leaning economic liberalism as opposed to the conservative left-wing economic stance of for example Sartre and his circle. Giroud would later accept President Giscard d'Estaing's appointment as the first ever minister for women's rights despite her political allegiance to the defeated Socialist candidate, François Mitterrand. Even though Giroud preferred the power of pen, her decision to join the political establishment came from a wish to have some actual influence. That same pragmatism also characterized her editorial policy. Long argues that 'the Cold War *L'Express* operated in a time of intense political conflict, military action and profound change and acted as a bridge between two worlds: between the erudite discussion of *Les Temps modernes* and the cut and thrust of the popular press'. What made Giroud's *L'Express* remarkable in a polarized postwar political climate, setting her apart from writers like Sartre, was Giroud's capacity for bringing a wide range of writers and opinions together.

For centuries fact-finding journalism in France had been stifled by censorship and state control with most information coming through official government channels. It had often been up to satirists or literary figures to hold authorities and opponents to account. Criticism and uncomfortable truths could often only be published when set in more literary genres as satire, offered up as opinions rather than facts. The status of the pamphleteer, the columnist or the satirist rose as a result, perhaps even more so in France than elsewhere. And from early on many of these more literary journalistic figures had made sure to distinguish themselves from professional journalists. The assessment by the *Encyclopédie de le journaliste* for example, in articles written by both Diderot and Voltaire, was unequivocally negative. Writing for money—in other words subservient to the authorities, to commercial and political interests—did not pass the high standards of philosophes and their circle and reflected what seemed to be a widely shared low opinion of professional reporters among the eighteenth-century elite. Such negative assessments have proven to be very persistent. In the twentieth century writing for a political, yet commercial magazine such as *L'Express*, as Long points out in her article, was met with

suspicion if not disdain, especially from intellectuals like Sartre. Despite their differences, Giroud wanted to give Sartre a platform. Sartre accepted reluctantly and his first article in *L'Express* was accompanied by an ideological disclaimer: 'Il tient à marquer nettement que ce choix n'a aucune signification politique: il s'affirme en effet en désaccord avec les positions du journal sur de nombreux points.'¹⁹ Long writes that Giroud's 'innovative approach to intellectual journalism was founded on her capacity to challenge and critique and in the process engage with others, political friends or foes, thus demonstrating a rare quest for inclusivity in French Cold War journalism'. Giroud's magazine was not so much a Sartrean 'journal de combat' as a 'journal de débat'.

What all the five articles demonstrate is that political interventions in the press were shaped by a myriad of factors, which could include genuine political convictions, but equally personal vendettas, literary one-upmanship and opportunism, as well as an adherence to specific literary or journalistic conventions. Even the concept of politics was not always defined as we now know it. Politics in the seventeenth century was largely understood as the Machiavellian 'art of exercising and maintaining power' (Bannister). Political interventions through print in the seventeenth century by 'maverick pamphleteers' did not resemble those of twentieth-century intellectuals like Giroud or Sartre who engaged with the dominant ideologies of the time, the nineteenth-century writers who criticized the social order and social injustices, or the eighteenth century *philosophes* debating the values and principles for society.

Even the concept of 'engagement' reveals its problematic narrow definition, the product of more recent times. The social theories, ideologies or radical political ideas that we have come to associate with political engagement from the eighteenth century onwards were not yet developed as such or were understood differently in different times. Ideological debate in the early seventeenth century, as Bannister remarks, concerned itself with 'divergent views of monarchy', not with democratic, republican forms of government. Ritchie's contribution shows how Marat's idea of the 'public writer' and his revolutionary models for political journalism were influenced by examples from across the Channel. More research on the topic of cultural exchange in journalism and political journalism within Europe is clearly needed.

While the articles by Bannister and Ritchie illustrate that concepts of political commitment, the intellectual, the public writer, even politics, are relatively modern, the contributions by O'Brien, Harbers and Broersma as well as that of Long also make clear that individual cases are often more complex and richer than histories of journalism and political commitment in France tend to show. The five articles in this special issue aim therefore to provide a more nuanced discussion of the pivotal yet complicated role writers and the press have played as national and international political mediators, as instruments of state propaganda or as the opponents of regimes, in shaping political culture, commitment and public opinion in France.

¹⁹ F. Giroud, 'Sartre et *L'Express*', 221.