

## A silent cultural revolution in Belle Époque France

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Between 1880 and 1900, France achieved the “irreversible alphabetization” evoked by François Furet and Jacques Ozouf in their essay referring to the report made by the rector Maggiolo in 1877.<sup>1</sup> To give a quick idea of the changes underway, we may compare two figures concerning the printing and distribution of school textbooks. Between 1832 and 1882, the Librairie Hachette sold 2.2 million copies of Mme de Saint-Ouen's *Petite Histoire de France*, a bestseller used in primary schools for some fifty years, while between 1874 and 1889 rival publisher Armand Colin sold 5 million copies of Ernest Lavisse's *L'Histoire de France*, total sales of which reached 13 million by 1920.<sup>2</sup> The turning point came in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, when nearly all young people aged under twenty regularly attended school for between six and thirteen years, and the French population of 40 million consumed nearly 10 million newspapers every day, while regularly reading millions of magazines and catalogs such as the *Chasseur français*. With the introduction of inexpensive collections of books such as Fayard's “Le Livre Populaire,” which sold for 65 centimes (3 euros in today's money) and had print runs of 50,000 or 100,000, this was an era of mass publication and record sales. For example, nearly 500,000 copies of the Pierre Loti

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<sup>1</sup> François Furet and Jacques Ozouf, *Lire et écrire. L'alphabétisation des Français de Calvin à Jules Ferry* (Paris: Ed. de Minuit, 1977), 2 vols., vol. I, ch. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Caroline Duroselle, *La Librairie Armand Colin (1870-1939)*, DEA in history (supervisor Jean-Yves Mollier, Université Paris X-Nanterre, 1991), and Daniel Bermond, *Armand Colin. Histoire d'un éditeur de 1870 à nos jours* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2008).

novel *Pêcheur d'Islande* were sold between 1907 and 1919 in the “Nouvelle Collection illustrée” published by Calmann-Lévy at 95 centimes (less than five euros).<sup>3</sup>

Henceforth, and contrary to the widespread belief that a good number of the *poilus*, the French soldiers who fought in the trenches of the Great War, spoke only regional dialects, France was linguistically and culturally unified. In this respect the country was radically different from Italy and Spain, where these phenomena did not begin to produce comparable effects until the latter half of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> It would be legitimate to consider that in around 1900, of three generations living under the same French roof, the children were playing the role of cultural mediator to the grandparents and parents. An unprecedented culture increasingly driven by modern media united urban crowds while spreading far and wide in the countryside, which by then was well served by the railways. That is why I propose to use the concept of “silent cultural revolution” to interpret the changes experienced by the French during the Belle Époque. By this I mean not so much the period referred to by economists, which began only in 1896, as the one that figures in representations and the collective imagination, which adopted this term after 1918 to describe a kind of golden age that can be traced from the 1880s to the years just before the Great War.

Using a term as resonant as “silent cultural revolution” is not without its risks, since the expression was coined by historians describing the specific situation of Maoist China undergoing the upheavals of the “Great Cultural Revolution” (*wénhuà dàgémíng*).<sup>5</sup> We know now that this attempt to radically overhaul the country’s structures hid much less noble motivations, and that it was in fact more or less an internal coup involving the leadership of

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<sup>3</sup> Jean-Yves Mollier, “De la consécration au pilori, le cas Loti,” *Revue d’histoire littéraire de la France* 1 (2014), 157–68.

<sup>4</sup> Eugen Weber put forward this thesis in *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914* (Stanford University Press, 1976). It was based on impressive research carried out at high speed in several French archives and a selective use of information that seemed to flesh out his vision of a France that was belatedly unified by the violent shocks of the First World War. For a radically different vision, see Jean-Yves Mollier and Jocelyne George, *La Plus Longue des Républiques. 1870-1940* (Paris: Fayard, 1994), ch. VI, “L’état de la France en 1900 ou l’intégration des citoyens.”

<sup>5</sup> Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution* (Harvard University Press, 2006).

the Chinese Communist Party. However, in transferring it to late nineteenth-century France, we need to decide if this concept can make sense and reflect, at least partially, the new reality that emerged at the beginning of the Third Republic. When it was used by the historian Serge Bianchi in his 1982 book on *La révolution culturelle de l'an II*<sup>6</sup> to analyze the political will to accelerate the transformation of France applied in 1793, the expression was criticized as an overly literal transposition from a context so specific it could almost be said to exclude any kind of comparison with another country. In 1992, ten years after this first failed extension of what, admittedly, is a very rich concept, I published an article in *Historiens et géographes*<sup>7</sup> arguing that mass culture should not be seen as a construction of the twentieth century caused by the arrival of television in American and French homes,<sup>8</sup> but instead as a specific attribute of the last decades of the preceding century. I developed this position, which is now widely shared,<sup>9</sup> in my essay “Le parfum de la Belle Époque,” included in the multi-author volume on *La culture de masse en France de la Belle Époque à nos jours*.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, in 1999 I began using the concept of “silent cultural revolution” to analyze the consequence of adapting the cultural goods industry to the mass literacy achieved by the French during the Belle Époque.<sup>11</sup>

Without going back over these analyses, which are now accepted by the community of historians, I would like here to explore an expression in which the adjective “silent” adds a significant dimension: the fact that this revolution in the field of culture was not theoretized at the time when the changes occurred, and that it was more the culmination of changes underway for several decades than a sudden change resulting from consciously pursued

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<sup>6</sup> Serge Bianchi, *La révolution culturelle de l'an II : élites et peuple (1789-1799)* (Paris: Aubier, 1982).

<sup>7</sup> Jean-Yves Mollier, “Un siècle de transition vers une culture de masse,” *Historiens et Géographes*, 338 (December 1992), 187–99.

<sup>8</sup> Edgar Morin, *L'esprit du temps. Essai sur la culture de masse 1. Névrose* (Paris: Grasset, 1962).

<sup>9</sup> Dominique Kalifa, *La culture de masse en France. 1. 1860-1930* (Paris: La Découverte, 2001), and J.-Y. Mollier, J. F. Sirinelli and F. Vallotton, eds., *Culture de masse et culture médiatique en Europe et dans les Amériques, 1860-1940* (Paris: PUF, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> Jean-Yves Mollier, “Le parfum de la Belle Époque,” in Jean-Pierre Rioux and Jean-François Sirinelli, eds., *La culture de masse en France de la Belle Époque à nos jours* (Paris: Fayard, 2002), 72–115.

<sup>11</sup> Jean-Yves Mollier, “Le manuel scolaire et la bibliothèque du peuple,” *Romantisme. Revue du XIXe siècle*, 80 (1993), 79–93, reprinted in *La lecture et ses publics à l'époque contemporaine. Essais d'histoire culturelle* (Paris: PUF, 2001), 51–70.

policies. In this sense, I differ from Serge Bianchi and his vision of a Jacobin France, led by Robespierre, Saint-Just, and their friends, impelling a radical transformation of minds within a limited period of time. Equally, I diverge from Mao Zedong and his demiurgic will to impose the birth of a new man. For what I call a “silent cultural revolution” to take place, the time frame needs to be long enough for its most visible effects to be felt and for a new generation to appear in the social space under consideration. That is why I refuse to reduce the Belle Époque to the economic dimension, to the years that followed the change of cycle, the 1896–1914 period, and suggest that we have it begin with the advent of the republican Republic, in 1879, or immediately after the great laws on the liberalization of the press and of publishing, in July 1881, and on schools, in June 1881 and March 1882.<sup>12</sup>

### **The people’s library, a first major sign of the changes under way**

When, in 1846, Michel Lévy declared that “the reign of *feuilletons* sewn into volumes by housewives is over,”<sup>13</sup> he was trying to convince his contemporaries that they were not living in the same world as their predecessors and that the “law of speed”<sup>14</sup> was bringing deep changes in their habits. Nine years later, he returned to this theme and, in putting his name to the “Collection Michel Lévy,” an emblematic series of books launched in October 1855<sup>15</sup> costing a franc for a volume of 350 to 400 pages, his aim was to make buying a book the subject of “an impatience as imperious as the desire to dine when one is hungry. Eating and reading: we must create the union of these two needs.”<sup>16</sup> This exhortation had not been fulfilled either by his death, in 1875, or by that of his brother Calmann in 1891. Nevertheless,

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<sup>12</sup> See my “Chronologie” in J.-Y. Mollier and J. George, *La Plus Longue des Républiques. 1870-1940, op. cit.*, 737–61, for the precise dates of these legislative measures that were to profoundly change France.

<sup>13</sup> Prospectus from the Librairie Michel Lévy Frères announcing the publication of *Œuvres complètes d’Alexandre Dumas format de la bibliothèque Charpentier à 2 francs le volume*, in 1846 (author’s collection, p. 2).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> Prospectus announcing the “Collection Michel Lévy” put on sale in October 1855, p. 1 (author’s collection).

<sup>16</sup> Michel Lévy to George Sand in early 1869, conversation related by the journalist Marzac after the publisher’s death in “Calmann Lévy,” *Gil Blas*, 20 (June 1891), explaining the changes his brother had made to the lives of his fellow countrymen.

these words, later taken up by a journalist in an obituary for the latter which considers the true legacy of the Lévy brothers, are of interest because they relate directly to the cultural shifts then under way. The prospectuses announcing the forthcoming launch of new collections are indeed precious documents, for they take us inside the office where editorial policies that would bring about a major publishing operation were developed. Pro-active, prescriptive, and normative and designed, first and foremost, to create a sense of anticipation, these texts tell us a great deal about the hopes of those who conceived them and their vision of their readership and its possible sub-categories.

Looking closely at the commercial documents written by those close to the publisher Michel Lévy – including renowned journalists and writers published by the company – we can observe a distinct will to revolutionize the cultural practices of the French and to lead them to abandon the habits of domestic economy that were a considerable brake on the consumption of cultural goods.<sup>17</sup> Since serial parts hand-sewn in whipstitch did not disappear from the countryside until the end of the Second World War – a period that also witnessed a slight revival in the use of the reading rooms which provided considerable income for booksellers in the previous century<sup>18</sup> – it would be tempting to pessimistically conclude that behavior remained unchanged or that country dwellers obstinately refused to adopt the fashions and practices of their urban counterparts. This would be to ignore what Norbert Elias has taught us about the spread of the civilization of morals in Europe since the sixteenth century,<sup>19</sup> and above all, to turn our backs on the modernity introduced by the early achievement of full literacy in France, a reality brought to light by the *Statistique Générale de*

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<sup>17</sup> See Anne-Marie Thiesse, *Le roman du quotidien. Lecteurs et lectures populaires à la Belle Époque* (Paris: Le Chemin vert, 1984), for an ethnographic and sociological analysis of the uses of the serial novel in the less privileged sectors of the population in the years 1880–1914.

<sup>18</sup> Françoise Parent-Lardeur was wrong to see this as the preserve of the Restoration and to consider that the introduction of the serial novel in the press in 1835–40 marked the end of this cultural institution. See F. Parent-Lardeur, *Lire à Paris au temps de Balzac. Les cabinets de lecture à Paris. 1815-1830* [1981], repr. (Paris: Ed. de l'EHESS, 1999), and, for a critical discussion, *Autour d'un cabinet de lecture*, texts selected by Graham Falconer, Centre d'Études du XIXe Siècle Joseph Sablé, coll. "À la recherche du XIXe siècle," (University of Toronto, 2001).

<sup>19</sup> Norbert Elias, *The Court Society* [1969], trans. Edmund Jephcott (Pantheon, 1983), and *The Civilizing Process* [1939], formerly *The History of Manners* (1939) (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

*la France* before the turn of the twentieth century. The number of illiterate persons aged over twenty fell from 43.4 per cent in 1872 to 19.4 per cent in 1901 and 11.2 per cent in 1911,<sup>20</sup> reflecting a clear improvement in the provision of schooling, due to the Guizot Law regarding boys in 1833, the Falloux Law concerning girls in 1850, and the Victor Duruy Law of 1867, which unified these measures for both sexes. The Ferry Laws of 1881 and 1882 completed the project, and the introduction of compulsory schooling, combined with the essential step of free elementary education, did the rest. In terms of a finer-grained reading of the 4 million illiterates who seem to have resisted the wind of change blowing through the country, illiteracy affected 10 per cent of adults aged over forty-five, 20 per cent of sexagenarians, and 30 per cent of septuagenarians.<sup>21</sup> These raw data shed light on the emerging gap between the generations and, if we consider the 49.8 per cent of octogenarian women who could neither read nor write, we get an idea of the gulf between elderly country dwellers and little girls starting primary school, 96.2 per cent of whom knew how to read and write in 1900, as against 96.6 per cent of boys aged over ten. The statistics for fifteen to nineteen year-olds are even more eloquent, because here the girls had caught up with and overtaken the boys, with only 3 per cent of them still being illiterate, compared to 3.6 per cent of boys. Over the age of fifteen, 10.4 per cent of males did not know the pleasure of reading, writing, counting, singing *La Marseillaise*, and reciting the prefectures and sub-prefectures of departments, but this was the situation for 15.2 per cent of females. As for foreigners, across the board, 24.2 per cent were listed as illiterate, with 18.5 per cent for males over fifteen and 21.5 per cent for females over fifteen. This means that the Republic did indeed encourage populations to mix, as highlighted by the ideologues of the regime. Finally, the army, which since 1889 had been housing men of French origin and immigrants in the same barracks, calculated that the French

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<sup>20</sup> *Statistique générale de la France. Résultats statistiques du recensement de la population effectué le 5 mars 1911* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1913), 2 vols., vol. I, ch. VI: "Instruction," with tables summarizing the previous censuses.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

population still numbered 3,660,056 illiterates aged over fifteen in 1911, including 182,000 immigrants,<sup>22</sup> offering further proof of the progress made in those few decades. To conclude this statistical overview, it can be said that only 0.78 per cent of the population slipped through the net of schooling in 1901–06, against 13 per cent in 1877 and over 50 per cent in 1848.<sup>23</sup> It was, of course, on this solid base that the flourishing cultural industries of the second half of the nineteenth century were able to develop, to such an extent that, in 1910, the French bought over 9.5 million daily, national, or regional newspapers.<sup>24</sup> However, this undeniable success, on the basis of which it is fair to speak of the emergence of media culture in France at this time,<sup>25</sup> cannot be understood without bearing in mind the remarkable growth of educational publishing and the production of tens of millions of textbooks for primary schools. One figure could almost suffice to convey the sudden change of situation: between 1872, when Armand Colin opened his bookshop, and 1889, when he presented his products at the Universal Exposition in Paris, he printed and sold some 50 million volumes for first-level pupils.<sup>26</sup> These results stunned Librairie Hachette, which had itself enraged its competitors in 1833–35 when it obtained an exclusive contract for five of the six textbooks used in schools after the Guizot Law.<sup>27</sup> Louis Hachette sold a million copies of his *Alphabet et Premier livre de lecture* in the early years of the July Monarchy; Armand Colin sold 12 million copies of his Larive and Fleury grammar, matching the geography book by Pierre Foncin and the arithmetic primer by Pierre Leyssenne, in barely fifteen years.<sup>28</sup> Quite clearly, we are looking at two different epochs and two different worlds. It was the flowering of the first that paved the way for the fruition of the second, and there was continuity between the schools policies

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> François Furet and Jacques Ozouf, *op. cit.*, and J.-Y. Mollier and J. George, *op. cit.*, 277–78.

<sup>24</sup> Gilles Feyel, *La presse en France des origines à 1914. Histoire politique et matérielle* (Paris: Ellipses, 1999), and D. Kalifa, P. Régner, M. E. Thérenty and A. Vaillant, eds., *La civilisation du journal. Histoire culturelle et littéraire de la presse française au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Nouveau Monde Editions, 2011).

<sup>25</sup> Marc Lits, *La culture médiatique aux XIXe et XXe siècles* (Louvain: Université Catholique de Louvain), Les Dossiers de l'ORM, COMU, 6 (November 1999), and *Culture de masse et culture médiatique en Europe et dans les Amériques. 1860-1940, op. cit.*

<sup>26</sup> Caroline Duroselle, *op. cit.*

<sup>27</sup> J.-Y. Mollier, *Louis Hachette (1800-1864). Le fondateur d'un empire* (Paris: Fayard, 1999), ch. VII.

<sup>28</sup> J.-Y. Mollier, "Le manuel scolaire et la bibliothèque du peuple", *op. cit.*

implemented by François Guizot, Armand Falloux, Victor Duruy, and Jules Ferry. It was, in fact, because of Guizot's historic decision to make it mandatory for towns of over five hundred inhabitants to maintain a boys' school and to persuade the state to buy the first schoolbooks for poor children that, fifty years later, town halls took over from families in distributing the little secular bibles that now found their way into every home. But the change of scale was such that, between 1880 and 1900, *Le Tour de la France par deux enfants. Devoir et patrie* (6 million copies sold by the Librairie Belin between 1877 and 1900), the *Petite Histoire de France* by Ernest Lavisse (5 million volumes off the presses between 1876 and 1889<sup>29</sup>) and other comparable volumes gave young French children a relatively standard vision of their language, territory (this was also the effect of Vidal de La Blache's wall maps), heritage, and culture. Indeed, after 1918 no single publisher was able to sell as many school textbooks and thus to help unify the vision of the majority of future citizens.

If everyone knew by heart the exploits of Joseph Bara, Joan of Arc and the good knight Bayard, and all about the riches of metropolitan France and its empire, its clement climate and the outstanding contribution made by its literature to human civilization, it was because teachers were as zealous in spreading the new religion of education as the medieval monks sowing the seeds of Christianity and eradicating pagan cults in the hearts of peasants. A similarly titanic combat, albeit one that went largely unsung before the quarrel sparked by the accelerated secularization that began in 1904–05,<sup>30</sup> pitted the upholders of schooling against believers in the past and all those who considered that young shepherds did not need to read, and that tenant farmer would lose their blind faith in their curates and landowners. We have plenty of evidence on this subject, from Emile Guillaumin's *La vie d'un simple*, 1905,<sup>31</sup> to Daniel Halévy's *Visite aux paysans du Centre* in 1934<sup>32</sup> and René Bazin's description of his

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Christian Amalvi, "Les guerres des manuels autour de l'école primaire en France (1899-1914)," *Revue historique*, vol. CCLXII/2 (Oct.-Dec. 1979), 359–98.

<sup>31</sup> Emile Guillaumin, *La Vie d'un simple* (Paris: Stock, 1905).

<sup>32</sup> Daniel Halévy, *Visite aux paysans du Centre* (Paris: Grasset, 1934).



beloved Vendéens, but these examples of resistance to change are very much a measure of the changes that were sweeping through France.

### **Media culture, mass culture, and mental horizons in the Belle Époque**

Now a modern and increasingly urban country (with urban populations dominant as of 1930), fully opened up by a rail network serving the west, the north, the east, the center and the south of the country (the sectors covered by the six companies that merged to form the SNCF in 1937), and benefiting from efficient press distribution, France also had reputable publishing houses that turned out mass editions. The Librairie Hachette continued to spread its tentacles over Europe, some indeed likening it to a green octopus (green being the color of its horse-drawn and, later, motorized vehicles), while the names Calmann-Lévy, Garnier, Fayard, Flammarion, Ferenczi, Offenstadt, Rouff, and Tallandier were familiar to all, and the collections of books modestly priced at 95 and 65 centimes sold by Arthème Fayard in 1904–05 were immediately imitated. In this second, concluding phase of the conception of the universally accessible book, an idea initiated in 1838 by Gervais Charpentier and taken up in 1853–55 by Michel Lévy and Louis Hachette, who opened the first bookstalls in railways stations, this policy bore fruit in the decade before the First World War, and so frightened conservatives that *Romans à lire et romans à proscrire*, the little book of catechism by the Abbé Bethléem, France's spokesman for the Catholic rejection of modernity propounded by Pius X, became a best seller. The book, initially aimed at the clergy, reached the 140,000 mark with its eleventh edition in 1932.<sup>33</sup>

In fact, the censor Bethléem did not reject the principle of escapism for the reader in the form of novels, illustrated magazines or cartoons. He accepted that twentieth-century men and women needed leisure pursuits, but he was constantly extending the limits of the cultural

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<sup>33</sup> J.-Y. Mollier, *La mise au pas des écrivains. L'impossible mission de l'abbé Bethléem au XXe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2014).

territory that he watched over and, having given his opinion on fiction, he then published a volume about opera and theater, then another about publications for youngsters. In his magazines, *Romans-Revue* and *La Revue des Lectures*, he expounded at length about radio programs and the cinema, whose creation he witnessed and actually acclaimed. Aware that these were opening up new possibilities for intellectual development, he argued that they should be subjected to strict control and moral surveillance, a task that the Catholic Church could not afford to leave to any other social force.<sup>34</sup> We might smile at Bethléem's zealous efforts to read everything and see everything, as the task was obviously a superhuman one, but they do reflect his strong awareness of the changes under way, and this consciousness is also evident in the papal bulls on the media, radio, and cinema of the 1920s and 1930s, which tried to define a proper Christian use of media culture and the morally irreproachable consumption of mass cultural products. *La Semaine de Suzette*, *Lisette*, *Pierrot*, and the *Bécassine* and *Tintin* books were some of their responses to the challenge of the cultural industries that were popularizing the adventures of the *Pieds-Nickelés* and, later, Mickey Mouse and Tarzan, but the launch of Catholic magazines and albums shows the sheer extent of the changes that had taken place by the eve of the Great War.

In attempts to explain the fact that French soldiers did not revolt against that slaughter as did the soldiers of the Austrian and Russian empires, and even of the Second Reich, commentators usually invoke their patriotic courage and their conviction that they were fighting to save civilization.<sup>35</sup> That the press and intellectuals played a considerable role in the brainwashing process that was certainly not lost on the *poilus*<sup>36</sup> does not change the fact that these men were united by a certain number of shared values, based on what they had read at school and in newspapers and novels. After Jean-Claude Vareille, who was one of the first to

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Jean-Jacques Becker, *1914. Comment les Français sont entrés dans la guerre. Contribution à l'étude de l'opinion (printemps-été 1914)* (Paris: PFNSP, 1977).

<sup>36</sup> Frédéric Rousseau, *La guerre censurée. Une histoire des combattants européens* (Paris: Seuil, 1999).

emphasize the importance of the great archetypes structuring the serial novels of the nineteenth century,<sup>37</sup> at a symposium in Cergy I suggested that a connection be made between the contents of the school books used from 1870 to 1914 and that of the most widely read fiction.<sup>38</sup> Without overstating the case or making extravagant hypotheses, we can draw a parallel between the love for the motherland mutilated by the loss of two provinces, Alsace and Lorraine (or rather, the Moselle), as encouraged by Vidal de La Blache's maps, the chapter in Lavissee's *Histoire de France* that urged readers to "think of it always, speak of it never," and the fashionable melodramas both at the theater or in press serializations and other popular *feuilletons*.

Even the violence of the Dreyfus Affair and its street clashes can be understood only in light of the defeat at Sedan in 1870 and the Treaty of Frankfurt in May 1871. Following the coronation of Emperor Wilhelm in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles on January 18th that year, and the crushing of the Commune in Paris, the treaty confirming the end of the war also spawned the myth of France's interior enemies, forces waiting in the shadows and preparing for the final German victory. This can be clearly seen from the drawing by Caran d'Ache published in the first issue of *Psst... !* on February 5<sup>th</sup> 1898, in which a Jewish banker wears the mask of writer Emile Zola while behind him stands a Prussian officer ready to gobble up France.<sup>39</sup> His name now prefaced by the German particle, "Von", the French writer with an Italian father is transformed into a Teuton in the periodical founded by Caran d'Ache and Jean-Louis Forain and distributed by the Catholic publisher Plon to all its readers, thus suggesting his motive for publishing "J'accuse !" in *L'Aurore* on January 13th 1898: to offer the country up to the rapacity of the enemies most set on seeing it disappear. Once again, we cannot fail to observe the continuity connecting the school environment in which young boys

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<sup>37</sup> Jean-Claude Vareille, *Le roman populaire français (1789-1914). Idéologies et pratiques* (Limoges: PULIM/Quebec: Nuit Blanche, 1994).

<sup>38</sup> J.-Y. Mollier, "La naissance de la culture médiatique à la Belle Epoque: mise en place des structures de diffusion de masse," *Etudes littéraires* (Quebec), 1(1997), 15–26, reprinted in *La lecture et ses publics, op. cit.*, 159–72.

<sup>39</sup> J.-Y. Mollier, "Zola et la rue," *Cahiers naturalistes*, 72 (1998), 75–91.

learned, in arithmetic classes, to count the number of cartridges needed by a colonel to supply his regiment, in geography, to deplore the way their country was carved up by its neighbor, in history, to hate the barbarians who cut off the hands of children in 1870,<sup>40</sup> and finally, in French lessons, to memorize heroic poems to their country's glory.<sup>41</sup>

Not that the French mental world in the 1905–14 period was constituted solely by rancid memories and hatred and the desire to take on Germany: the Left, led especially by Jean Jaurès, campaigned against the extension of military service and won a record number of seats in the 1913 election. Still, the popular imaginary was made up of hybrid elements in which the culture inculcated by schools had left more or less the same sediments in all the towns and villages of France, notwithstanding the strong regionalist movement, to which the media responded with its share of fantasies based on the shameless exploitation or – when there was nothing to hand – invention of criminal acts.<sup>42</sup> Over this solid substrate, it was easy for mass culture to add its detectives and criminals, with characters such as the mysterious Docteur Cornélius, Chéri-Bibi, Zigomar, Arsène Lupin, and Fantômas consolidating the most traditional archetypes of Good versus Evil, Virtue against Vice and Innocent versus Guilty. Here again it was no coincidence that the Dreyfusard publisher Pierre-Victor Stock ordered a popular print of the innocent victim by way of a riposte to the propaganda unleashed by a Catholic Right who could not bear to admit that the Army had been misled or, worse, had itself misled the French.

### **On the proper use of cultural revolutions**

As will now be clear, the term “revolution” is ambiguous, because it is used here to describe phenomena that took a long time to come into effect along with others that were much quicker

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<sup>40</sup> John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001).

<sup>41</sup> J.-Y. Mollier, “La naissance de la culture médiatique...,” art. cit.

<sup>42</sup> Dominique Kalifa, *L'encre et le sang. Récits de crimes et société à la Belle Époque* (Paris: Fayard, 1995).

to bring change. However if I have preferred it to “evolution,” a term that has the advantage of offering greater nuance, it is because the point here is to describe a historical situation in which there was a sudden acceleration of events. The generations that reached the age of twenty after 1890 knew perfectly well how to read and write and the skyrocketing rate of newsprint consumption in this period confirms the abruptness of the change. The French bought one million daily newspapers a day in 1870, 3 million in 1881 and 9.5 million in 1900, which shows that in thirty years reading newspapers went from being a marginal activity to a majority cultural practice since, for each of the million copies that were sold of *Le Petit Parisien* and *Le Petit Journal*, there were at least three readers. If we add to these new practices reading escapist novels, we get some idea of how much France changed during this period: Calmann-Lévy sold 492,000 copies of *Pêcheur d’Islande*, 195,000 of the *Roman d’un spahi* and 145,000 of *Matelot*, all by Pierre Loti, in its “Nouvelle Collection illustrée” between 1907 and 1919,<sup>43</sup> while Fayard sold 150,000 copies of the adventures of *Fantômas* for the first volumes and 50,000 for the thirty-second and last in the series between February 1911 and September 1913, representing over 2 million volumes in under three years.<sup>44</sup>

All those who painted an apocalyptic picture of the immediate post-war period and its loss of traditional values, with the decline of faith, the slump in the ordination of new priests, the rise of anti-clericalism, and the secularization of the country, the multiplication of strikes and growing ranks of unionized workers, plus the progression of socialism, were in fact trying to transcribe their painful impressions on seeing one world disappear and another take its place. Compared to their writings, the upholders of change, such as Zola in *Trois Villes* and *Les Quatre Evangiles*, Victor Margueritte, whose 1922 novel *La garçonne* had sales of over 750,000, and his brother Paul, with whom he wrote *Mariage et divorce* in 1900, showed much more serenity and real confidence in the future. The former group had already been outraged

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<sup>43</sup> J.-Y. Mollier, “De la consécration au pilori, le cas Loti,” art. cit., 167.

<sup>44</sup> Loïc Artiaga and Matthieu Letourneux, *Fantômas ! Biographie d’un criminel imaginaire* (Paris: Les Prairies ordinaires, 2013), 161–63.

by Gustave Eiffel's tower in 1889, while the latter appreciated the advent of bicycles, motorcars and airships and the new sporting events they competed in during the 1900s and 1910s. They also enjoyed cabaret and operetta, and frequented the Moulin Rouge and the Folies Bergère, two concert halls vehemently denounced by those who were outraged by the amours of Colette and “Missy”, aka Mathilde de Morny, and by Camille Claudel’s open passion for Rodin. Brought to public attention by the media, this new tabloid fodder was commented upon much as princes and kings had been in the past. Divas and stars occupied much of the space previously taken by bluebloods, and cinema followed on from theater and operetta in crowning the glories of the day.

The great law on press freedom passed on July 29th 1881, the retirement of the last of the “commissaires de la Librairie” who had kept a stern eye on publishing activity for an unbroken seventy years, plus the removal of censorship on live shows (theater, song, café-concert, music-hall, etc.) in 1905, all marked significant changes in the lives of French men and women. As literate consumers of newspapers and popular fiction, these citizens of the Belle Époque were probably not clearly conscious of the scope of these transformations, or that they were witnessing a revolution in behavior and culture. Yet the violence with which those who rejected these changes reacted to them, the belligerence of the Catholic Church towards the Republic after the latter had cut off its income with the disestablishment of 1905, and the emergence in the 1920s and 1930s of the *Fédération Nationale Catholique*, a vindictive and determined mass organization which had as many as 2.2 million members,<sup>45</sup> bear witness to the reality of this cultural revolution that, like any other, had partisans and adversaries. Silent before 1900 but highly vocal afterward – perhaps as of 1904–05 if we take as our starting point the emblematic publication of *Romans à lire et romans à proscrire* – this reaction had many effects over the years, including some that are perhaps still being felt if we

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<sup>45</sup> J.-Y. Mollier, *La mise au pas des écrivains...*, *op. cit.*

judge by 2013–14 and the clamorous return to the forefront of forces hostile to any kind of change in mores and education.

Translated by Charles Penwarden