

H-France Review Vol. 9 (July 2009), No. 93

Thomas Bouchet, *Un Jeudi à l'Assemblée: Politiques du discours et droit au travail dans la France de 1848*. Québec: Editions Nota Bene, 2007. 195 pp. Notes, index. \$24.95 U.S. (pb.) ISBN 978-2-89518-250-4.

Review by Cynthia A. Bouton, Texas A&M University.

On 25 February 1848, the French Provisional Government proclaimed “the right to work” (*le droit au travail*).^[1] But the Second Republic’s November 1848 Constitution omitted this clause and adopted a different wording that signaled a conservative shift away from the February commitment.^[2] Historians have often explored the political culture and lines of force as well as the social and economic context for a reversal that marked the triumph of a “Party of Order” that emerged after elections in April and gained momentum after the bloody June Days and ensuing military occupation.^[3] Yet, although we know that debates (about the *droit du travail* and many other issues) raged in the halls of the National Constituent Assembly, politicians and journalists dueled in the public sphere, and activists demonstrated and rioted in public spaces, we know less about how parliamentary democracy worked in the Assembly hall, about the dynamics of the era’s parliamentary process itself, and about how (or even whether) these oral debates actually influenced constitution making.

Thomas Bouchet, who has long immersed himself in the culture of political communication, both oral (such as political insults and oratorical styles) and textual, has now turned to exploring the structure and chaos, the speeches and silences, the heard and unheard of the National Constituent Assembly.^[4] In *Un Jeudi à l'Assemblée*, he has taken as his subject 14 September 1848—the last “day at the Assembly” in a series of days—when representatives debated (and ultimately defeated) several amendments to (re)introduce the right to work in the preamble of the Second Republic’s Constitution.^[5] He closely studies the session—six hours of debate—as it appeared in the next day’s *Moniteur universel*, supplementing this with various commentaries appearing in the political press and subsequent memoirs and autobiographies. *Un Jeudi à l'Assemblée* proposes “une réflexion sur les formes et les logiques du discours politique au milieu du XIXe siècle” that draws upon multiple disciplinary approaches such as the history of parliamentary oratory and the history of political ideas and practice, as well as recent debates over biography and the narration of events (p. 12).

Rather than approach the session in chronological fashion, Bouchet organizes his book into four parts, or four “tempos,” which he entitles “*Tensions*,” “*Décalages*,” “*Maîtrises*,” and “*Absences*.” He thus seeks to break with a conventional linear reading of parliamentary debates and present them as a “*chant polyphonique*.” He asks who spoke, how they spoke, who listened, and who interrupted. Throughout, he enriches our appreciation of this moment with biographical information and evocations of previous debates. The list of speakers is long and includes the well-known and the obscure from all sides of the chamber, such as Alphonse Lamartine, Alexandre Ledru-Rollin, Michel Gouchchaux, Charles Lagrange, Auguste Billault, and Armand Dufaure. Moreover, Assembly President Armand Marrast (and principal artisan of the first draft of the constitution), also appears as clearly influential in the course of the session, wielding his powers to set the list and order of speakers, to acknowledge calls for recognition from the floor, and intervene (or not) to call for order and announce breaks. The great and obscure, the exiled and the victors, the assertive and the intimidated thereby make an appearance in Bouchet’s analysis of 14 September. From the example of the “misadventure” of Henry-Auguste Ceyras, a

républicain de la veille, friend of Pierre Leroux, and avid defender of the rural poor who never managed to get his voice heard from the floor, Bouchet concludes that “le débat du 14 septembre est à la fois démocratique, ouvert, déséquilibré, heurté, cruel pour ceux qui ne peuvent se faire entendre” (p. 46).

Un Jeudi à l'Assemblée asks how parliamentary debates actually worked in practice, how much political reputation and oratorical eloquence mattered during debates themselves, how to evaluate the efficacy of speeches (whether listened to with attention or not) and sudden interjections (negative or positive), and how much influence an absent representative could still exercise. Acknowledging that any one session, no matter how important, rested on “des mois et des années de réflexion poussée, sur une longue tradition politique et juridique,” Bouchet emphasizes that it also all came down to just one day of debate, or rather, one moment: the vote (p. 178). This moment, he stresses, represents “l’articulation entre républicain et démocratie” and emanates from those politicians present to vote.

Bouchet’s approach disorients those familiar with thinking about parliamentary processes linearly, moving logically from rational discussion to decision-making. It reintroduces the past into the present, the ghosts among the living, the emotional into the rational, and the contingent into the teleological. *Un Jeudi à l'Assemblée* achieves these goals brilliantly, so well, in fact, that a reader already not intimately familiar with the debate and the issues would do well to consult, alongside the book, more conventional renditions as well as the transcript in the *Moniteur universel*.

But I am less convinced that it succeeds in showing how debate (this or any other)—however discontinuous or direct, eloquent or pedantic, electric or calm—actually influences the actual outcome manifested in the final vote itself. Eloquence mattered for a variety of reasons, but did it actually convince anyone to change his mind? Specifically, did anyone in the Assembly on 14 September change his position (and thus his vote) on the *droit du travail*? Some had written their speeches in advance and submitted them revised to the *Moniteur universel*. Others voiced long-established positions and “parties” had long coalesced around well-known issues. Many others (Alexis de Tocqueville, Adolphe Thiers, Alexandre Ledru-Rollin, Victor Considerant, and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, for example) had spoken days earlier. Indeed, those who “won” the vote (600 for, 187 against) that day did not make the day’s most eloquent speeches and, as Bouchet has argued convincingly elsewhere, much of the work of undermining *le droit du travail* had occurred outside the Assembly in print not speeches.[6]

Un Jeudi à l'Assemblée at its best captures the session’s “électricité” and “oppositions virulentes sur le droit au travail et sur la République” by invoking the “cacophony” that often dominated the Assembly (p. 12). Bouchet’s insights about the rules and vicissitudes of life on the floor of the Assembly resonate today. For example, experience has shown that “monter de propos délibéré...après les éloquents orateurs qui en descendent” is risky for one’s reputation (p. 21). Or, “rien n’est plus périlleux pour un novice qu’une intervention spontanée, même lorsque la question à l’ordre du jour est bien connue” (p. 21). Asserting that “le quotidien de la vie parlementaire est fait aussi—et surtout—d’échanges en tous sens, d’une libération des mots,” that often manifested themselves in “*cris et invectives*” uttered over prepared speeches and an undercurrent of “*bavardages*” and “*conversations particulières*” (p. 52), Bouchet encourages us to consider the ways that the culture of parliamentary debate and decision making interact and influence each other.

NOTES

[1] “Le gouvernement provisoire de la République française s’engage à garantir l’existence de l’ouvrier par le travail. Il s’engage à garantir du travail à tous les citoyens. Il reconnaît que les ouvriers doivent s’associer entre eux pour jouir de leur travail.”

<http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/histoire/histoire-1848.asp> (cited 5 April 2009). Article 7 of the first draft of the constitution (20 June 1848) echoed: “Le droit au travail est celui qu’a tout homme de vivre

en travaillant. La société droit, par tous les moyens productifs et généraux dont elle dispose, et qui seront organisés ultérieurement, fournir du travail aux hommes valides qui ne peuvent s'en procurer autrement." Articles 9 and 132 developed this principle further. Francis Démier, "Droit au travail et organisation du travail" in Jean-Luc Mayaud, ed., *1848* (Paris: Créaphis 2002), p. 170.

[2] "La République doit protéger le citoyen dans sa personne, sa famille, sa religion, sa propriété, son travail, et mettre à la portée de chacun l'instruction indispensable à tous les hommes; elle doit, par une assistance fraternelle, assurer l'existence des citoyens nécessiteux, soit en leur procurant du travail dans les limites de ses ressources, soit en donnant, à défaut de la famille, des secours à ceux qui sont hors d'état de travailler."

<http://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/conseil-constitutionnel/francais/la-constitution/les-constitutions-de-la-france/constitution-de-1848-ii-republique.5106.html> (cited 5 April 2009).

[3] From among the many studies of this era and its debates, see for example Francis Démier, "Droit au travail et organisation du travail" in Jean-Luc Mayaud, ed., *1848* (Paris: Créaphis, 2002); François Luchaire, *Naissance d'une constitution, 1848* (Paris: Fayard, 1998); Jean Bart, et. al., eds., *La Constitution du 4 novembre 1848: l'ambition d'une république démocratique* (Dijon: Editions Universitaires de Dijon, 2000); William Fortescue, *France and 1848: The End of Monarchy* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2005); and Marcel David, *Le printemps de la fraternité, genèse et vicissitudes, 1830-1851* (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1992).

[4] Thomas Bouchet is maître de conférences en histoire contemporaine at the Université de Bourgogne. He has co-edited and contributed to several collections of essays, especially, *Meetings & Alcôves: Gauches et Sexualités en Europe et aux Etat-Unis depuis 1850* (Dijon: Editions Universitaires de Dijon, 2004) and *L'Insulte (en) politique, Europe et Amérique latine du XIXe siècle à nos jours* (Dijon: Editions Universitaires de Dijon, 2005). He has published an article related to this book's subject, "Le Droit au travail sous le 'masque des mot': Les économistes français au combat en 1848," *French Historical Studies* 29 (2006): 595-619.

[5] At the end of August the second draft of the constitution rejected earlier articles about the *droit du travail* and proposed the wording that would ultimately prevail in the final constitution. The two amendments came from Mathieu de la Drôme ("La républic droit protéger le citoyen dans sa personne, sa famille, sa religion, sa propriété. Elle reconnaît le droit de tous les citoyens à l'instruction, au travail et à l'assistance.") and Glais-Bizoin ("La république reconnaît le droit de tous les citoyens à l'existence par le travail et à l'assistance.").

[6] "Le droit du travail sous le 'masque des mots.'"

Cynthia A. Bouton
Texas A&M University
c-bouton@tamu.edu

Copyright © 2009 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of

H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172