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Christian Delporte, Claude Penetier, Jean-François Sirinelli, and Serge Wolikow, Eds.,
L'Humanité de Jaurès à nos jours. Paris: Nouveau Monde, 2004. 419 p. 32.30€ (pb). ISBN 2-84736-081-6.

Review by Dominique Laurent, Dickinson College.

A little over a century ago, Jean Jaurès decided to leave the newspaper for which he had been working and create a new one devoted to the cause of socialism. Weary of the deep and sometimes hostile divisions within the movement—namely between revolutionary and reformist socialists—Jaurès wanted his newspaper to gather together all those who fought for justice, equality, and the abolition of social classes. In his eyes, this was the only way humanity could truly become united, hence the title he chose. *L'Humanité* would be a tribune where all socialists could express their views respectful of each other. It would also be in “constant communion” with the proletariat and the trade union movement. Through the publication of free and unbiased news, Jaurès’s paper would contribute to the vast movement of workers’ liberation. Since true independence was an essential condition for the implementation of his project, Jaurès ensured that his newspaper would be financially protected from the influence of any pressure group.

Thus began the history of *L'Humanité*, a tale marked by dramatic upheavals, financial difficulties, victories, and defeats. Since the heyday of the Liberation, when it reached its widest distribution, the newspaper has had to face a steady decline of its readership. In spite of this erosion, *L'Humanité* still remains a monument in the French political press after more than a hundred years. In fact, because of its deep link with the socialist and communist parties in France, many consider that it occupies a unique place in the history of the French press. This uniqueness of *L'Humanité* was the basic question examined by a colloquium held at the *Bibliothèque Nationale de France* on April 1 and 2, 2004, a time chosen to coincide with the hundredth anniversary of the newspaper’s first issue. The conference, entitled *L'Humanité de Jaurès à nos jours* was jointly organized by the *Centre d'histoire culturelle des sociétés contemporaines* (Université de Versailles/St. Quentin-en-Yvelines), the *Centre d'histoire de l'Europe du vingtième siècle* (CHEVS), *Fondation nationale des Sciences politiques*, the *Centre d'histoire sociale du XXe siècle* (Université Paris I), and the *Institut d'histoire contemporaine* (Université de Bourgogne). The event brought together French university researchers from a great variety of disciplines. Political scientists, cultural historians, press specialists, and sociologists examined various aspects of *L'Humanité* and episodes of its tumultuous history. The papers presented at the conference were later published under the direction of Christian Delporte, Claude Penetier, Jean-François Sirinelli, and Serge Wolikow in the volume under review here, *L'Humanité de Jaurès à nos jours*.

The richness of this book, as Christian Delporte explains in his introduction, owes not only to the diversity of scholarly approaches, but also to the wealth of new documents recently made available to researchers after the archives of *L'Humanité* were opened and deposited at the *Archives départementales* of Seine-Saint-Denis. All the articles revolve around four major fields of research: the relationship between *L'Humanité* and the political parties, (first socialist and then communist); the people involved in the publication of the paper, from its directors to the simple militants selling it door to door; its political role in France throughout the twentieth century; and the rapport between *L'Humanité* and the rest of the French press. The chapters are organized chronologically.

Chapter One focuses on the struggles that the newspaper had to fight in order to survive financially. Only two years after the publication of its first issue, *L'Humanité* was facing such severe financial

problems, that drastic measures had to be taken: new stocks were issued and the initial corporation dissolved and replaced by a larger one in 1907. Jaurès had to overcome many skeptics in the SFIO who were reluctant to support *L'Humanité* at the expense of other socialist publications.^[1] In the process, the party increased its control over the newspaper. In an attempt to attract more readers, Jaurès also had to compromise on the contents of the newspaper and adopt a more alluring style by focusing, like the rest of the press, on sensational news: crimes, scandals, accidents, catastrophes (*les faits divers*). Anne-Claude Ambroise-Rendu argues, however, that unlike the popular press, *L'Humanité* treated these stories from a political angle, using them to denounce the injustices of the capitalist system.

The interwar period was a time of upheaval for the socialist movement. The impact of these events is examined in chapters two through four. After the Socialist Party congress in Tours, in December 1920, *L'Humanité* came under the control of the newly formed Communist Party (SFIC, later PCF). Alexandre Courban shows how this political transformation was reflected in the various titles of the newspaper: from *Journal socialiste*, to *Journal communiste*, and finally *Organe central du Parti Communiste* as Moscow imposed strict rules intended to “bolshevize” communist parties throughout the world in the second half of the 1920s. Serge Wolikow and Annie Burger-Roussenac study how two dominant figures of *L'Humanité* during that period, Marcel Cachin and Paul Vaillant-Couturier, coped with the hard line dictated by the Comintern. Although marginalized for his lack of orthodoxy, Cachin managed to remain director until his death in 1958. Vaillant-Couturier's efforts to transform *L'Humanité* into a major political newspaper were finally successful in the mid 1930s after Moscow did an about-face and ordered communist parties to form “popular fronts” with other parties of the left to counter the threat of fascism.

After the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact in August 1939, the communists, under orders from Moscow, reversed course yet again and adopted a pacifist stance. Support for the treaty caused *L'Humanité* to be banned by the Daladier government at the end of the month. It would remain an underground newspaper until the Liberation. In his article on that period, Yves Santamaria examines the clandestine organization of *L'Humanité* and its relation with Moscow where some of the French communist leaders had taken refuge. Santamaria shows how the newspaper, under the influence of the Comintern, downplayed the United States' role in the fight against the Axis. More serious is his accusation that *L'Humanité's* silence on the Holocaust is a reflection of the antisemitism of the French Communist Party as a whole.

The Red Army's victorious struggle against Nazi Germany and the role played by the communists in the Resistance after 1941 boosted the prestige of the party and swelled the distribution of *L'Humanité* which reached the all-time high of 423,000 in 1945. Since then, however, that number has been steadily eroding and Chapter Six explores the causes and consequences of that decline. Patrick Eveno argues that the communist leadership fell victim of its own success in the late 1940s and persisted in toeing the Stalinist line throughout the Cold War. Instead of adapting to the expectations of its readership, *L'Humanité* kept a doctrinaire tone and gave too much importance to ideology. Paradoxically, 1956 was a relatively good year for *L'Humanité*, despite Krushchev's denunciation of Stalin's crimes at the Twentieth Party Congress and the brutal repression of the Budapest uprising by Soviet troops. The newspaper benefited from two international crises, the war in Algeria and the Anglo-French invasion of the Suez Canal, and from manna from Moscow with the Soviet purchase of 10,000 subscriptions. In spite of that aid, the situation continued to deteriorate for the communists and their press, especially after De Gaulle's return to power in 1958. Only the benefits made at the annual *Fête de L'Huma*, which Eveno regards as a way of laundering money from the East, brought some financial relief to the paper.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and disappearance of its subsidies, *L'Humanité* was forced to open its capital to private investors and to distance itself from the PCF. Gérard Bonnet's article on André Stil, chief editor of *L'Humanité* from 1950 to 1958, supports Eveno's thesis by showing how the Stalinist

line was detrimental to the newspaper. After a meteoric rise through the ranks, Stil was progressively marginalized by the newspaper for his positions, in particular his incendiary articles greeting the arrival of the new NATO commander, General Ridgway, in 1952 and his defense of the Budapest repression. Laurent Martin's comparative study of *L'Humanité* and *Le Canard Enchaîné* also points to the alienating effect of the Stalinist line during the Cold War. Despite a long history of solidarity between the two newspapers, *L'Humanité's* defense of the Soviet intervention in Hungary caused a split with *Le Canard*. The tensions between the newspapers have somewhat subsided today because *L'Humanité* has dropped its hard line and established some distance from the PCF. In spite of these changes and the hiring of a new generation of less political and more professional journalists, the Party still exerts a strong influence on the newspaper, as is shown by Eugénie Saitta in her analysis of the coverage of the 1999 elections to the European Parliament in *L'Humanité*.

The Algerian War was a period of intense political activity for the newspaper. Because of its opposition to the war, it was far more exposed to government repression than any other periodical in France. Yet Frédéric Génévée's analysis shows that the various measures taken by French authorities against *L'Humanité* were largely ineffective. In fact, Génévée argues that government repression was helpful to *L'Humanité* in that it broke the isolation that its Stalinist stance had caused from the rest of the press. Ludivine Brantigny is somewhat more critical of the role played by *L'Humanité* during the Algerian War. Her analysis of the way the newspaper dealt with the French military in Algeria brings her to the conclusion that the communist newspaper could have done more to mobilize the population against the war. She suggests that the fear of government repression was probably a determining factor in the newspaper's reserve, a conclusion which somewhat contradicts Génévée's views.

Another area of political action for *L'Humanité* during the same period was the fight against the Fourth Republic. Jean Garrigues examines how the communist newspaper used several political and financial scandals to undermine the regime. Garrigues shows how those scandals were skillfully exploited to discredit every other political force in the country and portray the PCF as the only choice against a corrupt and compromised regime, especially after the beginning of the Cold war and Moscow's call for an all-out attack against the bourgeois parties in September 1947. The PCF's heeding of Stalin's and Zhdanov's call is clearly illustrated in Christian Beuvain's analysis of anti-American cartoons published in *L'Humanité* at the height of the Cold War. Beuvain shows how anti-Americanism reached its climax at the beginning of the Korean War, when United Nation forces led by the U.S. prevented a communist invasion of South Korea. The communist propaganda machine unleashed a barrage of violent attacks against the U.S. government and the American nation in general. These attacks were based upon a few themes which are evident in the cartoons selected by Beuvain: America as an avatar of Nazi Germany; America as a danger to world peace; America as a racist society; America as a proponent of biological warfare. Paradoxically, during the following two decades, which saw a lessening of rhetoric between the two superpowers, *L'Humanité* seemed reluctant to follow the policy of détente adopted by Moscow. Focusing on the coverage of the CSCE conference in the communist newspaper, Laurent Rucker suggests that *L'Humanité's* tepid support for détente was proof that the newspaper was geared toward the PCF cadres who were still stuck in their Stalinist *weltanschauung* and therefore quite suspicious of improving relations between East and West. [2]

Chapter Nine examines the social function that *L'Humanité* played for the communist rank-and-file. Paul Boulland explains how reading the newspaper and/or taking part in some aspect of its distribution were fundamental elements in the construction of a communist identity. Focusing on the *Almanachs* published in *L'Humanité* between 1926 and 1992, Yolène Dilas-Roberieux reaches the same conclusion and argues that, in spite of the fall of communism and the disappearance of the almanacs from the newspaper, an emotional communist community has been created. She argues that, through its almanacs, *L'Humanité* evoked among its readers a sense of identity that went far beyond the mere ideological bond. Béatrice

Fleury-Vilatte and Jacques Walter also examine the function played by *L'Humanité* in the elaboration of a communist identity, but their conclusion mitigates the role of the newspaper. Studying the reading practices of two communist families and their relationship with the party over two generations, Fleury-Vilatte and Walter show that family identity was indeed influenced by ideology, but that it evolved with time and was also determined by other factors such as culture and religion. In the case of the families they interviewed, Judaism was a determining influence which proved difficult to reconcile with the anti-zionism of the Communist Party.

Because of the richness of its documentation, this book is undeniably a milestone in the historiography of *L'Humanité* and of the PCF. The diverse approaches complement each other and cast a new light on the subject. One discovers in particular the complexity of the relations between the newspaper and the political parties (SFIO and PCF) over the years. The papers here dispel some of the myths that have surrounded the movement since its beginning and unveil the dynamics at work in this unique newspaper. It portrays *L'Humanité* as a multidimensional and constantly evolving entity, almost a living organism, the locus where rival and sometimes antagonistic forces compete. Despite the absence of index or bibliography, it is a useful work for everyone interested in the subject. Furthermore, as Serge Wolikow writes in the conclusion, it is only a beginning, because all the archives have not yet been analyzed. Thus, the book is an invitation to further research in the history of *L'Humanité*. Indeed one hopes that it will inspire a similar approach to other major French newspapers.

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DOCUMENTS

- Alexandre Courban, “*L’Humanité*, 1904–2004 : repères chronologiques”
- Jean Jaurès, “Notre but’, *L’Humanité*, 18 avril 1904”

NOTES

[1] The SFIO, the acronym for *Parti Socialiste, Section française de l’Internationale ouvrière*, was the official name given to the Socialist Party in France after the congress of the Second International in August 1904, in an attempt to unite the various socialist movements in the country. Despite its internal divisions, the party managed to preserve its unity until the 1920 party congress in Tours. At that time, a majority of the delegates decided to join the Third International—or Communist International (Comintern)—founded by Lenin in 1919 and form the *Section française de l’Internationale communiste* (SFIC), later renamed *Parti Communiste Français* (PCF). The minority of the socialist delegates kept the name SFIO, which was eventually changed to *Parti Socialiste* (PS) after the congress of Issy-les-Moulineaux in 1969.

[2] The CSCE, or Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe, was an organization created in 1973 in Helsinki, Finland, for the purpose of reducing East-West tensions in Europe. The CSCE fostered a series of talks between representatives of thirty-five nations to promote economic cooperation between Communist and non-Communist countries. The latter insisted on including human rights in the talks. The CSCE culminated with the signing of the Helsinki accords in August 1975. After the fall of communism, the CSCE was reorganized and renamed OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe).

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