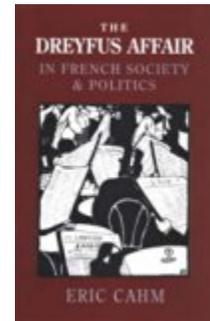


Eric Cahm. *The Dreyfus Affair in French Society and Politics*. London and New York: Longman, 1996. xvi + 211 pp. \$28.00 (textbook), ISBN 978-0-582-27678-9; \$59.25 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-582-27679-6.

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The Dreyfus Affair

Eric Cahm begins *The Dreyfus Affair in French Society and Politics* by restating the conventional wisdom that “there is nothing new to be said about the Dreyfus Affair” and then dismissing this convention as an “illusion” (p. vii). An earlier French version of this work was published in 1994 for the Dreyfus centenary. This 1996 publication has been revised for an English-speaking audience. Cahm’s goals are to provide a clear and concise account of this endlessly fascinating story, and to demonstrate that valuable new historical discoveries can still be extracted from the Affair. This work fits into an ever-widening reconsideration of political history in which such fundamental elements as parties, ideologies, electoral campaigns, and legislatures are once again being examined. In several instances this examination or re-examination has been taken up from new perspectives influenced by the insights of social, cultural, and gender history.

Cahm demonstrates the significance of the Dreyfus Affair. It initiated a distinctively new phase of the Third Republic, what has been called the Radical Republic; it enabled a coalition of Left Wing forces to gain a legislative majority that governed from 1899 to 1906. With the coming to power of the Left, the Republic was further consolidated and the campaign to secularize French society was relaunched. The eventual success of the Dreyfusards ended moderate Republican efforts of the 1890s to construct a conservative Republic acceptable to Catholics. With this view of the Dreyfus Affair, Cahm corroborates Madeleine Reberieux’s well-

established portrait of *la République radicale* and Maurice Agulhon’s more recent analysis of the Dreyfus Affair, which also identifies it as the initial conflict making possible a Left Wing Republic (*La République radicale? 1898-1914* [1975] and *The French Republic, 1879-1992* [1993]). Cahm contributes by reiterating the need to place the Affair in the broader context of the political development of the Third Republic.

He also fulfills his objective to provide a concise and accessible re-telling of the story—a tale told extremely well, by the way, with all its changing tones and decors, moving rapidly from drama to tragedy to melodrama to farce and then back through the gamut again. In this book Cahm has given us something of importance that will satisfy American students’ persistent curiosity about these highly charged, complex events. Not only will students have access to a clear account of what happened, when, and who was doing what to whom (accompanied by a chronology), but they will also find explanations for the extraordinary political passions aroused by the Dreyfus affair.

Most important, Cahm formulates a new category, the “moderate anti-Dreyfusards.” He applies this term to the majority of conservative bourgeois, especially including the political class of moderate Republicans who dominated the governments and the administration of the 1890s. They constituted a powerful silent majority. Like the Premier Jules Méline, they refused even to recognize the existence of a Dreyfus Affair, and they insisted that

the decisions of the military authorities were necessarily just and must be honored. The strident anti-Semitism and nationalism of the extreme anti-Dreyfusards made these moderates slightly uncomfortable, but the extremists could and did successfully pressure them. The presence of these powerful, quieter, but deeply convinced opponents to any revision of the 1894 verdict helps explain the length of the Affair and the repeated failures of the Dreyfusards.

Second, Cahm stresses the significance of the press in creating, maintaining, and energizing the Affair. This is not a novel conclusion, but his insistence on this element suggests that we should consider the Affair, at least in part, as a media event. Cahm identifies the 1894 campaign in the anti-Semitic and nationalist press, led especially by Edouard Drumont and Henri Rochefort, as the cause of Dreyfus' rapid trial, conviction, and degradation. A final insight that Cahm underscores, and one that is often obscured by historical hindsight, is the precariousness of the Dreyfusard position. The Dreyfusards lost their most publicized and important legal battles: Emile Zola was convicted in February 1898 and, even more damaging, the long-awaited retrial of Alfred Dreyfus in the late summer of 1899 ended in a second conviction. In Cahm's account the eventual Dreyfusard success appears as unexpected, rather than inevitable, as well as incomplete.

The Dreyfusards as a group are presented as an embattled tenuous minority. Cahm labels both Dreyfusards and anti-Dreyfusards as outsiders, discontent with the dominant moderate Republican political culture. Although for some Dreyfusards, such as the young Charles Peguy, this label may be apt, for others, it seems misplaced. It is difficult to consider a senior senator like Scheurer-Kestner or even a highly successful novelist like Emile Zola as outsiders. Nonetheless, the difficulty that the Dreyfusards had in affecting those in power right down to the summer of 1899 is key to an understanding of the Affair.

Cahm's *Dreyfus Affair* offers us some important new insights, but it is the force of the narrative that dominates. The author's own story-telling skill, especially his numerous biographical vignettes, amplifies the power of this twentieth-century mythic tale of triumphant justice. Perhaps Cahm might have had greater success in illuminating new discoveries had he focused on why the Dreyfus story continues to be so powerful and fascinating.

I would like to suggest some areas that Cahm might have explored more fully or from a different perspective,

possibly providing additional elements explaining why the Dreyfus Affair remains so fascinating. In discussing the compelling nature of the Affair and especially the force of anti-Semitism, it is unfortunate that Cahm did not consider views that dissent from the prevailing consensus that the Affair was an urban phenomenon, leaving rural France untouched. Nancy Fitch in a 1992 article in the *American Historical Review* has argued that rural France was gripped by the Affair and that it dominated several 1898 electoral campaigns ("Mass Culture, Mass Parliamentary Politics, and Modern Anti-Semitism," *AHR* 97, 1 [Feb. 1992]: 55-95). Central to her argument is the force of anti-Semitism and its dissemination by the national and regional press. In this she concurs with Cahm's emphasis on the press and the extent to which the Affair was orchestrated by the media, especially, but not only, by the anti-Semitic press. Both Fitch and Cahm agree that following the Affair, anti-Semitism became a permanent part of the extreme Right, expressed rhetorically and visually in a sophisticated press network. Though Cahm certainly stresses this point, it would have been useful to have a more detailed analysis of how the press, both anti-Dreyfusard and Dreyfusard, constructed the various stages of this media event. Further, we might ask how the Affair affected newspapers and journalists. For example, why did *Le Figaro* begin as a Dreyfusard paper, publishing the early Zola articles, then withdraw from this position, and eventually become a leading critic of the political forces emerging from the Dreyfusard victory?

Cahm argues, and I would agree, that the major consequence of the Dreyfus Affair was a realignment of political forces in which the Left comes to power. But it is a Left dominated by the Radicals, and Cahm leaves us with a curious portrait of this pivotal political force. The Radicals, with the important exception of Georges Clemenceau, came very late to the Dreyfusard cause (most not until 1899). In fact, it would be more accurate to label them as anti-Dreyfusards, rather than Dreyfusards. The most vivid portrait of a Radical painted by Cahm is that of General Godefroy Cavaignac, who adopted an extreme anti-Dreyfusard position when appointed Minister of War in the brief Brisson government of 1898. Cavaignac eventually abandoned radicalism and identified himself as a nationalist of the Right, but the bulk of Radicals did become Dreyfusards of sorts, and as a group they accumulated the most political gain from the outcome of the Affair. It is their complicated, often self-serving and sometimes contradictory transformation that lies at the heart of why a Left Wing legislative

coalition emerged out of the Dreyfus Affair.

Unfortunately, these complex motives are not thoroughly explored in this study. Cahm does offer several suggestions, but they remain only tentatively analyzed. He suggests that Radicals, following the lead of Socialists like Jean Jaures, became convinced that the Republic was threatened by the increasingly vociferous and militant anti-Dreyfusard forces that promoted militarism and relied on clerical support. By 1899 perceived and real threats brought most Radicals, most Socialists, and a significant portion of the working class into the Dreyfusard camp. And this in Cahm's view was critical to the Dreyfusards' ultimate success.

The clerical issue does seem an essential one in transforming and broadening the Affair, and here especially it is unfortunate that Cahm has not brought us new discoveries. He stresses the pivotal role of the press and notes the significance of Drumont's *La Libre parole*, but what of *La Croix*, whose circulation was large and whose influence was even greater because most of its subscribers were parish priests? How are we to interpret the Assumptionist order's commitment to anti-Semitism? What type of electoral politics did the Assumptionist electoral committees—significantly named Justice-Equality—pursue in the 1898 campaign? This clerical involvement on the anti-Dreyfusard side persuaded many Radicals to join the other side. Radicals recognized an opportunity to attack the moderate Republicans for their conciliatory policy to an activist Church, perhaps thereby eliminating the moderates from power and, even more important, revitalizing the anti-clerical campaign. All of this they accomplished between 1899 and 1905. The clerical issue was essential in bringing the Left to power; understanding clerical activity and motives during the Dreyfus Affair would explain not only this political change, but also perhaps the intensity and passion of the Affair.

Finally, Cahm might have explored more thoroughly

the significance of the political reorientation that began in 1899 and was consolidated in the 1902 legislative elections. The Left that came to power presented itself as the defender of the Republic. The political coalition of Republican Defense included Radicals, Socialists committed in practice to social democracy, and a fraction of moderate Republicans committed to a policy of secularization. Perhaps even more important than the array of political forces was the emergence of several discourses that would persist through much of the twentieth century. As Maurice Agulhon argues in his survey *The French Republic*, the Republic was now identified with the Left and a revolutionary tradition in opposition to a menacing anti-republican Right. By 1899 the emerging Left Wing republican coalition could call on the "people" to defend the Republic against anti-Dreyfusards. Cahm describes how the "people" took over from the politicians and even the intellectuals to defend the Republic and its president, who had been assaulted by anti-Dreyfusards. "Workers, students, and petty bourgeois" came together in a massive peaceful demonstration at Longchamps in June 1899 and this event, in Cahm's presentation, marked the beginning of the Dreyfusard victory (p. 152). What remains unspoken in the author's description, which captures so well the Dreyfusard rhetoric of republican defense, are the tensions and fissures within the popular coalition and the enormous difficulty this coalition repeatedly faced when attempting to shift from defense to action.

Although there are several issues that merited greater exploration (among which I would rank the clerical issue as most intriguing), Cahm nonetheless has made a useful contribution to the literature on the Dreyfus Affair. He has told the story concisely, clearly, and accessibly; and he has demonstrated the central importance of this story to French political culture.

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