

## The Dreyfus Affair and the Emergence of the French Public Intellectual

“L’affaire Dreyfus m’a toujours paru plus exceptionnelle encore par les passions qu’elle a soulevées que par elle-même. Il s’agissait d’un crime—comme il y en a beaucoup eu, il y en a, et il y en aura encore beaucoup en Europe. C’est devenu le combat de *deux mondes*, de deux sommets de la pensée humaine, du passé et de l’avenir.”

-Romain Rolland

As Romain Rolland suggests, the Dreyfus affair constituted a watershed in modern French history. France, quite literally, was divided into two countries, one that looked toward the future, the other toward the past, a secular, rapidly industrializing, forward-looking France pitted against a traditional, seemingly pre-Revolutionary avatar, which was xenophobic, racist, and intent on restoring a France that no longer existed--if it had ever existed. On the one hand, the affair appeared to be a clear-cut miscarriage of justice that overturned the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789, threatening the very nature of a modern democratic state; on the other, the affair was an overarching confrontation between two visions of France: the first was based on basic human rights: the revolutionary values of “liberty, equality, and fraternity,” the very values that constituted the foundation of liberal parliamentary democracy, in France and elsewhere; the second drew on the legacy of the *ancien régime*: tradition, authority, and religion in order to combat what the Right saw as the moral decline associated with the Republic, ranging from numerous political scandals and rising crime in cities across France to the rise of Socialism.

The French Naturalist novelist and intellectual Émile Zola captured the national mood perfectly when, in 1898, he wrote: “Sais-tu où tu vas la France? Tu vas à l’Église, tu retournes au passé, à ce passé d’intolérance et de théocratie” (Zola 106). And it was public intellectuals such as Zola and Barrès who best articulated these two different worldviews. Advocates on the Left and Right organized themselves into leagues, such as the Dreyfusard *Ligue des Droits de l’Homme* and the vehemently anti-Dreyfusard *Action Française* and, no doubt, were less concerned with the travails of one innocently convicted man than they were with the implications of the Dreyfus affair for the future of France.

Contrary to general opinion, Zola did not invent the world-famous slogan “J’Accuse” (his editor at *L’Aurore*, Georges Clemenceau, did); nor was he the first French intellectual to take up the defense of Dreyfus. That honor belongs to the French-Jewish intellectual Bernard Lazare (1865-1903), little known and quite obscure, really, when one considers his lack of recognition outside the small circle of Dreyfus scholars. Charles Péguy, himself an ardent *dreyfusard* and French nationalist who would die on the battlefield in World War I, called him a Jewish “prophet” and a saint, awed by Lazare’s uncompromising nature and unconditional idealism, his conviction that humankind could ultimately be redeemed and liberated by anarchical socialism. Another Dreyfusard hero, Léon Blum, future Prime Minister in the Popular Front Government (1936), was less prone to hyperbole than Péguy, and, with typical understatement, simply referred to Lazare as a “just” man (Julliard and Winock 825). Lazare was both, but he was also a protean figure who did not fall neatly into any given category. In his November 1894 article published in *La Justice*, Lazare came one step short of pronouncing the fateful phrase: *J’accuse*. He came close, though, since his tone is as accusatory as Zola’s and since he identifies the main

culprits behind the conspiracy to convict Dreyfus in the army and in the courts.

In this paper, I will look at how the *affaire* helped create a new type of intellectual community in France, based on intellectuals' immediate public intervention in the press in the form of open letters to the press, petitions, and manifestoes. Zola's passionate defense of Dreyfus is legendary, and I will begin by reviewing Zola's *engagement* since it constitutes the moral high point of intellectual commitment in France in this period. Next I will look at the evolution of the petition and manifesto in France, a crucial venue of expression for public intellectuals in these years. Finally, I will consider the term *intellectuel*, its origins and adoption into the French language, and how, thanks to the Dreyfus affair, what for all practical purposes was a *barbarisme*, virtually overnight, was on everyone's lips.

I. **“J'accuse”:** **Émile Zola's Open letter to the French Nation** Zola's passionate defense of Dreyfus is legendary, and constitutes the high point of intellectual commitment in France. The Dreyfus affair is what one critic has called a “stage curtain” (Sirinelli 17-18) and marks the first time in France that intellectuals would occupy center stage. Virtually overnight the petition and the manifesto became formidable political arms, rallying supporters from all walks of life and damned near breaking the back of the republican elephant. The *affaire*, as it is commonly known (with a tad more familiarity than warranted by such a cataclysmic experience affecting an entire nation), was the mother of all affairs, nothing the like of which has ever been seen again in France. And out of the chaos accompanying it the committed public intellectual was born. No one would ever again bat an eye at the term *intellectuel*, which rapidly gained currency and soon became part of everyday usage. One century after the French Revolution, there emerged a new class of

intellectuals who, from time to time, did not hesitate to leave their Ivory Tower, to drop whatever they did to make a living--teaching, research, writing--to speak out on an issue of importance to society as a whole. In no time at all you had hundreds, if not thousands, of members of this new intellectual estate taking sides for or against Dreyfus, who, ironically, never warmed to those who championed his rights and could not quite comprehend why his case had become a *cause célèbre*. These public intellectuals did not go away because even after Dreyfus had been exonerated from any wrongdoing and regained his freedom, they remained behind--ever vigilant about defending the public interest.

It is no surprise, then, that most histories of the committed French intellectual take the Dreyfus affair as a starting point and state rather matter-of-factly that the committed intellectual was born on January 13, 1898, when Zola wrote his famous open letter to the president of the Republic, Félix Faure, denouncing the condemnation of Dreyfus as a sham and alleging that the army had framed Dreyfus and then engaged in a massive cover-up. Zola's letter came just days after the acquittal of the real culprit in this sordid story of espionage, the pathetic Major Ferdinand Walsin-Esterhazy and the arrest of the brave Colonel Picquart. Not surprisingly (considering how widespread anti-Semitism was in these days), the latter harbored anti-Semitic feelings himself and, to begin with, thought that Dreyfus was guilty, like most everyone else in France; however, Picquart soon began to suspect that all was not right and, in light of the rather conspicuous lack of any hard physical evidence against Dreyfus, he was honest enough to investigate his suspicions further and soon became convinced that Dreyfus was innocent. By July 1896, a little over a year after Dreyfus had been convicted and sentenced to life in prison on the notorious Devil's island penal colony in French Guyana, Picquart had discovered the existence of

the unsavory Esterhazy and come to the realization that Dreyfus must be innocent. To his credit, he not only challenged his superiors in the army but also shared his misgivings with others, who made sure that other, more powerful allies of the truth, such as Auguste Scheurer-Kestner, the vice-president of the Senate, were informed. To no avail, it seemed; for the longest time there was no sign of hope. As if that were not enough, Picquart was considered such a threat by the authorities that in 1897 he was taken off the case and transferred to French North Africa (Birnbaum 57).

Zola's letter was published in the newly created, center-left ("républicain-socialiste") Paris daily *L'Aurore littéraire, artistique, sociale* (1897-1914) and it was its editor-in-chief Georges Clémenceau (later Prime Minister during World War I), who gave Zola's long letter its now world-famous title *J'Accuse*. For all practical purposes, Zola created the modern-day committed intellectual--if not the term "intellectual"--and inaugurated a new age in the history of intellectuals, when those on both sides of the political spectrum--Left and Right--would interrupt their own work from time to time to take part in a national debate on an urgent and usually controversial issue. The affair also ushered in the age of the mass media, signaling that France was finally ready to move full steam into modernity. In this case it was the print media--newspapers, magazines, and journals--which created the affair and were the driving force behind it. Without them it is likely that there would not have been an affair at all and that Captain Dreyfus would have ended his life on Devil's Island, forgotten by all.

Most of us think of Zola first and foremost as a writer, as the Naturalist novelist who composed a cycle of twenty-one novels following the unfortunate fate of the Rougon-Macquart family. Curiously, it was as a *fait divers* that he first became aware of Captain Dreyfus, whom at first he considered as a

highly original character he might someday incorporate into a novel. As the undisputed leader of the Naturalist school, Zola was controversial already before he became involved with the Dreyfus affaire in the fall of 1897, not only because his novels were judged pornographic by offering an ultra-realistic portrayal of the underside of French society, but also because the Catholic church condemned him as immoral and unpatriotic. He was the quintessential outsider and had failed repeatedly to be elected to the *Académie française*, that bastion of French letters that had upheld good taste in France for centuries, and his commitment on behalf of Dreyfus would make his election in the future impossible. His political opponents felt that Zola had an ax to grind, growing up dispossessed of his rightful inheritance by the courts. His father, who was of Italian (actually Venetian) extraction (thus fueling suspicions that Zola had some kind of personal agenda to settle with the ultranationalists, who seemed to question the rights of anyone who was not 100% “French”), had died when he was still a child, but his mother had been swindled of her rightful share in her husband’s business. The law courts had rejected her claims, making mother and son victims of an unjust society and in the process perhaps leading the young Zola to seek revenge through literature, where he could transform his sympathy for the poor and downtrodden in life into a struggle for social justice. Zola also had a reputation as a social activist, evident in three articles he published in 1895-96: “La vertu de la République,” “L’élite et la politique,” and “Pour les Juifs.” (All available in Zola, *La vérité en marche*.)

The third of these articles is the most relevant here. Although Zola had yielded to anti-Semitism in his novel *L’Argent* (1891), perpetuating the old clichés about Jews and their attachment to money, he soon realized his mistake and was anxious to make amends. In “Pour les Juifs” Zola denounces anti-Semitism, which he considered as a cancer on the social body, and underscores the importance of the anti-Semitic press in fomenting the public backlash against Jews all too common throughout most of the Third

Republic. In several later articles, also published in *Le Figaro*, Zola continued to attack the virulently anti-Semitic French gutter press, which he held responsible for creating the public bias that had wrongfully convicted Dreyfus in the minds of most ordinary people.

Public anti-Semitism today--even in Ahmedinejad's Iran--is milder by comparison. The combination of visceral anti-Semitism, raw talent and artistic creativity made newspapers such as *La Libre Parole* and *Je Suis Partout* particularly pernicious vehicles of propaganda. The Left had its arsenal of artistic talent as well, evident in the pages of, for example, *La Lanterne*. The caricatures of the newly-constructed Sacré-Coeur (a symbol of national reconciliation in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War and the Paris Commune but also associated with a Catholic rebirth nationwide and an unmistakable sense of *revanchisme* one century after the ravages of the French Revolution) are well-executed, but they pale in comparison to anything the anti-Semitic Right was capable of publishing. In Claude Lanzman's documentary film *Shoah* (1984) the historian Raoul Hilberg stated matter-of-factly that the Nazis "only" added the logical final step to the anti-Semitic enterprise in the West by creating the gas chamber. Anti-Semitic propaganda had been perfected in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries--in France. The anti-Dreyfusards conceived the project of expulsing the Jew from France, claiming that it was controlled by the Jews, who must be purged from the social body in order for it to regain its vitality. More troubling, radical anti-Semites in France proposed that Jews be recycled into marching boots, mattresses, or spaghetti, an uncanny harbinger of the infamous blankets and bars of soap made from murdered Jews in the extermination camps of World War II. These anti-Semites would not have to wait for long to see their gruesome extermination project become a reality. During the Vichy regime, France did its best to deport its Jews and realize the old anti-Dreyfusard dream of a France that was *Judenrein*. The French collaborationist intellectual Lucien Rebatet declared in 1944, that in his opinion Hitler (whom he admired

greatly) had many precursors in France, none of whom was more important than that arch anti-Semite Édouard Drumont, whose pamphlet *La France Juive* popularized anti-Semitism and gave it a sense of legitimacy. By a cruel irony, the anti-Semitic right had the upper hand in the creative arts department, perpetuating all the horrific stereotypes about Jews and adding a few along the way, such as that of the Semitic sewer rat which needed to be flushed out of the social body in order for the rest of Aryan society to flourish. It would reappear in Nazi Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels propaganda films in the 1930s.

At the time of the Dreyfus's arrest Zola was in Rome, too absorbed in his next novel to keep up with the latest news from Paris. As far as he was concerned, Dreyfus had to be guilty since the verdict had been unanimous. What bothered him most about the trial was the virulent anti-Semitism displayed by the general public, and he warned of its consequences for the moral integrity of the Republic. If France was to thrive in the new century, she must integrate all citizens, making them equal partners in the social enterprise. In the next few years, Zola's position did not evolve much. Then, in November 1896, not long after publishing his extraordinary brochure (*Une erreur judiciaire*) Lazare called on Zola to enlist the support of the most famous novelist of the land. Here are Lazare's words, describing their encounter:

“Je fus voir Zola dans le mois qui suivit la publication de ma première brochure, c'est-à-dire en 1896... Quand je fus le voir, je n'avais pas l'esprit de l'amener à moi; je pensais qu'il ne marcherait pas parce qu'un appareil abstrait de vérité ou de justice ne le séduirait pas; mais je cherchais à savoir l'effet produit par mon livre sur des esprits libres et susceptibles d'apporter un appui moral à la cause que je défendais. Je trouvai de la sympathie; l'acte lui plaisait, mais il n'avait aucune idée sur l'affaire et je sentais qu'à cette heure elle ne l'intéressait pas; elle ne l'intéressa que quand le mélodrame fut complet et quand il en vit les personnages” (Zola, *La vérité en marche* 32).

Lazare's cynicism is not surprising, in light of all that he had to endure as an intellectual French

Jew; Zola's insouciance, though, is remarkable; why, he even contemplated using the Dreyfus trial as inspiration in a novel about the French criminal justice system. On the other hand, there was no reason for Zola to become involved at that point since he was not yet aware of any abuse of power.

The next person to pressure Zola was the *mondain* novelist Marcel Prévost (1862-1940), who made sure that Zola learned of Picquart's investigations. However, it was not until the following fall, in November 1897 to be exact, that Zola became officially involved in the defense of Dreyfus by publishing an article in *Le Figaro* entitled *M. Scheurer-Kestner*, in which he coined the famous phrase: "la vérité est en marche, et rien ne l'arrêtera" without quite realizing himself what the unconditional quest for truth and justice entailed (Drake 19). To begin with, *Le Figaro* took a Dreyfusard stance, but its largely conservative readership revolted, so Zola had to look around for a new venue. Now, the honorable Scheurer-Kestner was already in possession of the information collected by Colonel Picquart, suggesting that Dreyfus was innocent, and as Vice President of the Senate was in an excellent position to push for Dreyfus's exoneration. What Zola did not seem to realize at the time was that the issue of Dreyfus's guilt or innocence was not the question and that the army did not want to lose face by admitting not only that it was wrong but also that it had actively ordered all kinds of machinations to convict Dreyfus in the first place and then engaged in a massive cover-up. By the time he published his next article, *Le Syndicat*, denouncing the absurdity of the idea a Jewish plot to free Dreyfus by paying high profile intellectuals like himself to take up his cause (in actuality, Zola was quite well-to-do by now and did not even accept payment for all his articles [Colette Becker]), Zola had realized the practical consequences of being part of something larger than himself, a growing movement of like-minded intellectuals,

something that amounted to an informal *syndicat* in its own right, a syndicate to promote freedom and fight injustice. In his third and final article to be published in the conservative daily *Le Figaro*, “Procès-Verbal,” Zola again attacked the anti-Semitic press, which, according to him, was leading France down the road to military dictatorship and shaming the country that gave the world the Declaration of the Rights of man and of the Citizen. Let’s not forget that this article came only six years after general Boulanger had tried to seize power through a military coup that effectively would have put an end to the fledgling Third Republic. Boulanger was widely seen as the savior of France, as a modern-day Napoleon who would rid the country of corruption and return it to the road of an authoritarian, traditional and Catholic form of government, putting an end to nascent capitalism and liberal parliamentary democracy. Specifically, Zola charged that anti-Semitism in France was rampant and that reactionary forces threatened the freedom of the press; the conservative readers of *Le Figaro* responded in kind and Zola was summarily dismissed. Zola published two more pamphlets on the Dreyfus affair, in December 1897 and January 1898, respectively, before penning *J’Accuse*, his fifth intervention on behalf of Dreyfus in two and half years. (All of the preceding articles were published together already in 1902 under the title *La vérité est en marche*.)

### **J’Accuse**

All things considered, no one could have imagined that Zola would write such an article because it is nothing less than a declaration of war on injustice, generally, and the miscarriage of justice in the case of Dreyfus, in particular. Here was Zola, a successful, quite wealthy actually, fifty-something, sedentary, sensitive almost to a fault, physically unimposing person at the height of his career, a writer with a social

conscience to be sure, but a bourgeois in his personal habits and lifestyle, hardly a militant idealist with an army of diehard believers behind him. An individual gesture like his is admirable and, as we shall see, a rare thing in the history of the public intellectual. His credo had always been to speak the truth, as he saw it: “Je n’ai eu qu’un amour dans la vie, la vérité, et qu’un but, faire le plus de vérité possible. Tout ce qui tend à faire de la vérité ne peut être qu’excellent... J’ai vécu tout haut, j’ai dit tout haut, sans peur, ce que j’ai cru qu’il était bon de dire” (Zola 35-36). By taking up Dreyfus’ cause, Zola moved from being a sympathetic but passive onlooker on the human comedy to becoming an active public intellectual who sought to uphold the noble aims of the French Revolution and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. In all his works, not only his later novels, but also in his articles and brochures, one senses a commitment to the Republican ideals which he sees as the only hope for humankind to realize its potential. In 1898, however, France was in dire straits, so Zola felt that he had no choice but to act: “Tous les partis politiques ont sombré, le pays s’est partagé en deux camps: d’une part, les forces réactionnaires du passé; de l’autre, les esprits d’examen, de vérité, de droiture, en marche vers l’avenir” (Zola 42). Jaurès would not become a committed Dreyfusard until the spring of 1898, in large part thanks to Lucien Herr, who convinced him that he must act, if not for himself, as an individual, then at least as the leader of the Socialist Party. From then on, he would do everything in his power to make up for his past passivity, publishing a series of newspaper articles entitled *Preuves* and published in *La Petite République* in which he emphatically stated “il n’est possible de douter qu’aujourd’hui que dans le procès Dreyfus une illégalité violente ait été commise” and then detailed the reasons why Dreyfus must be innocent. He brought the majority of the Socialist Party on board, with the exception of the radical Guesdiste faction, which still refused to become involved in what it considered to be a quarrel among bourgeois.

It is clear that, to begin with, Zola's article was a last-ditch attempt to keep the story of Dreyfus alive in the public mind: Esterhazy had been vindicated and if no one reminded the French public that Dreyfus was languishing in hell, on Devil's Island, thousands of miles from France, what hope was there for France? As is often the case, when an outsider not privy to all the facts and unfamiliar with customs in another walk of life, intervenes to make a point, mistakes are made. Zola's famous article is no exception because Zola, for example, omitted all mention of Colonel Henry who had, after all, forged the documents against Zola. With Lazare (Lazare, *Une erreur judiciaire* 12), one could also argue that the instigator of the affaire was not Zola but the anti-Semite Drumont, whose daily newspaper *La Libre Parole* (which had a daily issue of 500,000 copies), beginning in November 1897, was relentless in its attack on the army, charging that it was reluctant to move ahead with the prosecution of Dreyfus. For years it had been saying that the Jews in the French army (hardly more than a token presence) were a fifth column in the employ of Germany, feeding the fear of Germany and creating the conditions for the "espionage-itis" that gripped France after the arrest of Dreyfus. On November 1, 1894, for example, only months after Dreyfus's arrest, it cried out: "L'affaire sera étouffée parce que cet officier est juif" (Lazare, *Une erreur judiciaire* 12). General Mercier, Minister of War, could tell which way the wind was blowing and did not hesitate for a minute to sacrifice Dreyfus on the altar of God and country in order to save his own neck (Drake 13). Thus, by antagonizing the army, Drumont and *La Libre Parole* greatly contributed to contaminating the public mind, thereby preparing the ground for the confrontation between Left and Right that invariably would occur when Zola picked up the gauntlet. In other words, those who did know the facts, as Lazare wrote, were too cowardly to intervene: "l'on s'étonnera que ceux qui étaient en possession de la vérité n'aient rien fait pour enrayer ce torrent de fureur et de haines. S'ils se turent, c'est qu'ils subirent eux aussi le terrorisme antisémite et n'osèrent y résister" (Lazare, *Une erreur judiciaire*

27). Lazare is perfectly aware of the hypocrisy of the army's position, and his analysis of the evidence against Dreyfus is a virtual *J'accuse* of the leading protagonists in this melodrama, chief among them Generals Mercier and Paty de Clam. Just like Zola, he has nothing but scorn for the latter, not only for his criminal incompetence during months leading up to the trial but also for leaking information about Dreyfus's arrest to *La Libre parole* and thereby speeding up the trial and virtually guaranteeing a guilty verdict (Lazare, *Une erreur judiciaire*<sup>12</sup>).

Zola's *J'Accuse* established that Dreyfus was part of something larger than himself, a struggle between the forces of progress and light and the forces of darkness and reaction. Cleverly, he avoided all mention of anti-Semitism, not wanting to unnecessarily alienate potential supporters since anti-Semitism, historically speaking, seemed to be a given in France. All that Zola was interested in proving at this point was that the high command of the French Army had gone out of its way to wrongfully convict an innocent person and that it had engaged in a massive cover-up into the bargain. Zola proceeded to name the principal culprits but no doubt exaggerated the importance of Paty de Clam. The enemy clearly was the army and Zola openly identified himself with its adversaries, thus making himself the standard bearer of truth, justice and freedom in France. From here on out, the identity and future of France stood and fell with the guilt or innocence of Dreyfus. Zola's *J'Accuse* attacked the military-political establishment head-on, the chiefs of staff, the minister of Defense, and expert witnesses such as the handwriting expert, Alphonse Bertillon with his diagrams and tables. Bertillon had developed the controversial "science" of metrical anthropology, which permitted the *police judiciaire* to identify criminals based on their physical characteristics. If he were not so scary (because he immediately conjures up Nazi schemes of "racial hygiene"), this man and his preposterous claims that Dreyfus had forged his own handwriting would be ridiculous.

For the next three weeks, until February 8 to be exact, *L'Aurore* published petition upon petition, signed by countless luminaries in the world of letters, science and education, expressing support for Dreyfus and demanding action. Three thousand people signed in all, most of them from Paris, suggesting that the Dreyfus affair was an essentially Parisian phenomenon (Drake 21).

Zola must have realized right then and there that eventually there would be legal consequences to face. He was no stranger to politics and knew that he would most likely be indicted. The whole country was in an uproar with massive rioting in fifty-five cities and riots as far away as French Algeria, where anti-Dreyfusard rallies degenerated into anti-Semitic pogroms in the best East European tradition. In metropolitan France the riots were bad enough but varied greatly in intensity, ranging from harangues along the lines of “Death to the Jews” and “Long Live the Army” (widely seen as the sole defender against foreign aggression, that is by Germans and Jews) to actual instances of physical violence that injured individuals and damaged property. Fortunately, there were few deaths, but the underlying violence created a climate of fear, which, along with several coup attempts over the next few years, greatly undermined the authority of the French Republic. Despite being considered as the savior of France, the army, fortunately, did not budge; although it might have been a haven of anti-Semitism, it did not like taking risks. Meanwhile the anti-Dreyfusard press, producing a total of five million copies a day, did its best to maintain pressure on the government not to overturn the conviction by whipping up a frenzy among the public.

Zola fully anticipated being charged for defamation by the authorities following publication of *J'Accuse*, and indeed welcomed it since it was a way to hold the public's attention and thereby maintain pressure on the authorities. The trial began in February 1899 and, after two weeks of pandemonium in the courtroom, accompanied by hysterical outbursts by the large crowds gathered outside, Zola was

convicted and condemned to one year in prison and a substantial fine. Proust, who was present during the trial, has described the delirious atmosphere in the courtroom when the military involved testified. Supporters on both sides were quite literally at each other's throats. Zola had said that "un jour, la France me remerciera d'avoir aidé à sauver son honneur" (Winock 33), but that day would still be a long way off. In April Zola's conviction was overturned, but in July it was upheld again by a higher court. Zola decided not to accept a guilty verdict and instead chose exile in Great Britain, just like Hugo had done after the failed coup against Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte. Unlike Hugo (who spent almost twenty years in exile), Zola could return to France already the following year, in the fall of 1899 to be exact, by which time Colonel Henry had committed suicide after it had been established that his so-called secret letter incriminating Dreyfus was a gross forgery. "Je rentre puisque la vérité éclate et puisque la justice est rendue" (Winock 34). Fortunately, the authorities did not pursue Zola further thanks to a recently passed law on amnesty applicable to all who had been convicted of a crime during the Dreyfus affair, but neither did they exonerate him, so one might say that Zola still awaits his full rehabilitation (Birnbaum 59).

The day after *J'Accuse* saw the publication by *L'Aurore* of the so-called "Manifeste des Intellectuels" (not its original title), signed by more than one hundred intellectuals, demanding a full review of Dreyfus's trial. This document was short and to the point (reproduced in Sirinelli, *Intellectuels et Passions Françaises* 25), and was signed by dozens of writers and university professors, among them Marcel Proust (who acted as secretary and collected all the signatures), Guillaume Apollinaire, Anatole France, Charles Péguy, Daniel and Élie Halévy, Lucien Herr, and Charles Andler, but also by painters such as Claude Monet, historians such as Gabriel Monod, and actresses such as Sarah Bernhardt. For the next month each new issue of *L'Aurore* included a fresh list of signatures by intellectuals of every breed:

not only writers, journalists, professors, and lawyers, but also actors, musicians, and artists. In the end, more than three thousand intellectuals signed. It soon became evident that Zola and Herr were the true leaders of the Dreyfusard camp, along with Bernard Lazare and Charles Péguy. There was hardly an intellectual who had not been touched in some way by the affair even if they had not become actively involved themselves.

The Right, naturally, responded with a battery of its own petitions and manifestoes. In fact, the Dreyfus affair could be read as one long series of petitions and counter petitions spewing forth from both sides of the political spectrum. One such petition, attacking Zola and what was widely perceived to be an anti-militarist, internationalist conspiracy of the Left, led to the creation of the *Ligue de la Patrie Française* (The League of the French Homeland), inspired by Barrès, organized by Jules Lemaître and spearheaded by the quasi-totality of the Académie Française, including Paul Bourget, Fernand Brunetière, François Coppée, Léon Daudet, Gyp, Jules Lemaître, Albert Sorel, Jules Verne, as well as a number of well-known painters such as Degas and Renoir (Sirinelli 27). At its organizational meeting in January 1899, Lemaître charged that the Jews, Protestants and Freemasons had conspired to “run France for the past twenty years” (Drake 32). However, the *ligue* was never strong enough to withstand internal divisions between moderate nationalists like Brunetière and anti-Semitic nationalists like Barrès. The former were actually pro-republican and not overtly anti-Semitic (Drake 28) but disapproved of the commotion caused by the affair and wished a speedy return to business as usual; the latter were a different breed altogether and clearly were looking for blood and wished for nothing no more than the downfall of the Third Republic. Even Paul Valéry signed a petition in favor of Colonel Henry’s widow, who was suing the Dreyfusard Reinach. Henry had committed suicide when it was revealed that he had forged documents proving the guilt of Dreyfus and now his wife wanted to go after Reinach with all the

legal firepower that she could muster, so the anti-Dreyfusard rightist daily newspaper *La Libre Parole* stepped in, organizing no less than eighteen drives and, in no time at all, received pledges from more than 25,000 people from all walks of life to rehabilitate the honor of the great French “patriot” Henry. These lists in favor of Henry’s widow are also known as *Henry’s Monument* because they were voluminous, to say the least. Equally disturbing is the fact that so many supporters were drawn from the working classes, who alleged the usual, anti-Semitic reasons: Jews controlled the government, the labor market, public opinion, and, of course, the world of finance. “Getting” Dreyfus had become a matter of class pride for many workers.

Zola was ultimately vindicated in his struggle for truth and justice when Dreyfus was finally rehabilitated in 1906. Unfortunately, Zola never lived to see Dreyfus a free man again because he died in circumstances that remain somewhat controversial to this day, some people even believing that he was assassinated. In 1953, for example, it was alleged that an *anti-dreyfusard* had “blocked up the chimney of his house” (Drake 36) causing death by asphyxiation. Over the years his opponents certainly had demonstrated that they would stop at nothing and were vicious enough to commit murder. Finally, in June 1908, Zola’s remains were laid to rest in the Pantheon, but a nationalist fanatic fired two shots at Dreyfus, who was present at the ceremony, wounding him in one arm.

If Zola had not spoken out, Dreyfus would no doubt never have been pardoned, much less rehabilitated. Zola’s aim was thus not only philosophical but also and above all polemical. He deliberately sought to provoke a public debate, which might lead to the reconsideration of what was a classic case of miscarriage of justice. Zola did what intellectuals have been doing ever since; he used the media to create a public controversy.

Zola’s courage cannot be sufficiently stressed: he knowingly jeopardized his personal safety and

sacrificed his literary career, losing many of his readers (most of whom were bourgeois and therefore more than likely anti-Dreyfusard) and any hope of ever being welcomed into the august body of the Académie Française. The contemporary reader is rather reminded of Salman Rushdie's decision to publish *The Satanic Verses* almost a century later. Rushdie must have known full well that he would incur the wrath of the Islamic world. Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Vacláv Havel are two other writers who made the same kind of commitment to the truth, as they saw it, and who paid a high price for their courage. Although all three writers worked in widely different circumstances and acted for different reasons, all must have realized that the stakes were high and that they were putting their own personal safety at risk.

**II. The Petition and the Manifesto** To be sure, Paris had already seen a multitude of petitions and manifestoes but nothing like the multitude produced during the Dreyfus affair. Zola's courage inspired intellectuals of all stripes to join the struggle, but more often than not their commitment was limited to signing a petition or endorsing a manifesto calling for some form of action to be taken. Now is as good a time as any to establish a few distinctions between these two genres of political discourse. As that bedrock institution in French society, the dictionary *Le Petit Robert*, makes clear, petitions are addressed to an authority in society, whereas manifestoes have no specific receiver [*destinataire*] (*Le Petit Robert*, 1038, 1286). Petitions, typically, exist in a flux, that is to say that they gather momentum as the number of signatures grows. They are normally addressed to a body in society, usually a civil authority and protest a recently adopted decision or policy. Manifestoes, on the other hand, are a finished text and tend to serve as a longer statement of principle addressed primarily to public opinion, as in 1887 when a large

number of artists and writers published a manifesto against the proposed construction of the Eiffel Tower.

Authors of petitions and manifestoes typically react against a *fait accompli*, protesting a decision which, for better or worse, has already been made and almost always react *against* the powers that be from what is usually a position of weakness. Moreover, these two genres of collective writing appear to reflect a rigid class system: petitions normally involve the “lower echelons of the intelligentsia” [“*basse intelligentsia*”] (Régis Debray), as well as the public at large, whereas manifestoes are authored by an intellectual aristocracy or elite, addressing a mixed audience of *clerics* and laity, intellectuals and the general public. Without indulging my positivist predilection for the taxonomy too much, let me just point out that obvious subcategories of both genres include the appeal (*appel*), the open letter (*lettre ouverte*), and the pamphlet (*pamphlet*). Zola’s *J’accuse*, for example, was a *lettre ouverte*, whereas Romain Rolland’s collection of pacifist essays *Au-dessus de la mêlée* (1915) is a pamphlet or brochure even though it originally was published in newspaper form. All three discourses are directed *against* the powers that be. One final distinction can be made between what Sirinelli calls incantatory texts (*textes-incantations*), condemning an event, and incitatory texts (*textes-incitations*), intended to mobilize the public to take action (Sirinelli 85). Indeed, some texts can fulfill both of these functions and once again Zola’s *J’Accuse* serves as a model text, since it not only condemned Dreyfus’s conviction as a miscarriage of justice but in so doing also urged every citizen with a conscience to demand that Dreyfus be freed and rehabilitated.

Finally, petitions and manifestoes have always been at the epicenter of what the historian Theodore Zeldin might call “les passions françaises” and therefore reflect the high and low points in French history. To some extent, passions are almost ephemeral and intangible, but they are nevertheless a

valuable resource for the sensitive historian equipped with a seismograph to reconstitute the past and show what people really thought at a given time. On occasion, of course, petitions and manifestoes can also lead to the creation of something more permanent such a political party or review, as when the 1919 right-wing petition *Pour un parti de l'intelligence*, written by Henri Massis, led to the creation of *La Revue Universelle*, a review of some notoriety that survived until 1945, when it was banned for its collaborationist politics during the occupation.

The Dreyfus affair was the first act of a drama that would cast intellectuals in their most active role yet, and it immediately provoked countless petitions and manifestoes from all directions, from intellectuals of all stripes. This is not to say, however, that the *affaire* marked the birth of the first petition or manifesto. These two genres of political discourse have a long if not terribly distinguished pre-history, the most curious early example of which is probably the manifesto entitled *Les artistes contre la Tour Eiffel*. It was published in 1887 and, as its title suggests, sought the demolition of the Eiffel Tour, which had been completed just in time for the celebration of the centenary of the French Revolution. This manifesto was signed by a slew of artists, among them the musician Charles Gounod, the poets François Coppée, Sully-Prudhomme and Leconte de Lisle, the still well known novelist Guy de Maupassant, and painters such as Auguste Renoir. Nonetheless, the Dreyfus affair marked the first time that the petition and the manifesto became formidable political weapons, rallying the faithful and challenging the nascent Republic. So, we must concur with Sirinelli and declare that “in the beginning was the Dreyfus affair” (Sirinelli 21). For reasons that had nothing to do with the *affaire* per se, intellectuals had just begun to emerge as an independent socioeconomic type; thanks to the expansion of urbanization, education and the freedom of the press, there was a rapid increase in the number of secondary teachers, university professors, and journalists, the most vocal of whom lived in ... Paris

(Drake 21). It should come as a surprise to no one, therefore (France being the highly centralized country it is, and always has been, at least in modern times), that the Dreyfus affair essentially played out in Paris (which is not to say that its repercussions were not felt elsewhere—they were: riots engulfed cities all over France and the French Empire, for that matter, and tore apart families everywhere). By a curious twist of fate along came captain Alfred Dreyfus, at about the same time intellectuals were looking for an opportunity to assert themselves not only as authorities outside their respective fields, as independent observers and critics of society, but also (and foremost perhaps) as individuals. As everyone knows, from this time on, intellectuals--and French intellectuals in particular--have felt, well, that, as Jean-Paul Sartre put it, to become involved in something that is not, strictly speaking, their professional business is part of what being a public intellectual is all about.

### III. The Term “*intellectuel*”: from “*barbarisme*” to Mass Phenomenon

The honor of popularizing the term “intellectuel” goes to the indefatigable anti-dreyfusard novelist and intellectual Maurice Barrès (1862-1923). A week after Zola’s article appeared in *L’Aurore*, on February, first, Barrès published a polemical article in the widely read and far more popular conservative daily *Le Journal*, titled *La protestation des intellectuels*, in which he poked fun at the very notion of intelligent intellectuals and railed against the vanity of those who had signed Zola’s manifesto, these intellectuals, who, in his opinion, were mostly made up of Jews, foreigners and just plain “nigauds” (“fools”). Curiously, Barrès had already used the term “intellectuel” in a more favorable sense in several earlier novels promoting his latter-day romantic conception of *Culte du moi* and in the most famous novel of his “national energy,” (“*énergie nationale*”) cycle, which supposedly transcended his erstwhile

self-indulgent “culte du moi” (“cult of self”) in favor of an all-encompassing love of the ancestral hearth, *Les Déracinés* (1897) [Ory & Sirinelli 7]. One has to wonder whether or not he wanted to keep the term *intellectuel* for himself, for his own purposes, but then had to resign himself to a *fait accompli*, to the fact that the term had somehow been hijacked by his political enemies on the Left. By the 1930s the political Right, too, had come to accept a term it had had once shunned and only used out of scorn (Sirinelli 68). Little wonder, then, that the political Right in France would have such a hard time in the following decades to accept the idea of intellectuals having anything valid to contribute to the nation outside their area of expertise. In their opinion, they certainly had no moral authority to pass judgment on society!

The Dreyfus Affair also gives currency to the word *intellectuel*. Until the *affaire*, the term *intellectuel* typically was used only in its adjective form and carried negative connotations, designating a person who is “overly refined, futile or affected”) [“alambiqué, futile ou maniéré” [Schiffer 22]. According to the *Larousse* and *Littre* dictionaries, the word *intellectuel* already existed in 1898 but was used primarily as an adjective, carrying a negative connotation and referring primarily to a person who was superficial or close-minded. Prior to then, the noun *intellectuel* had been used in a variety of ways by writers as diverse as Saint-Simon, Stendhal, and Balzac (Drake 2). Curiously, Ernest Renan had used the term as early as 1845 but, apparently, had in mind an “intelligent person.” In its modern connotation, as a person of opposition, the term emerged in the 1890s to designate writers and artists and other anarchistic elements of the Parisian *bohème* who were rebels against the established norms of modern bourgeois society. It is in this sense that Léon Blum used the term in 1892, in an article published in the avant-garde review, *La Revue blanche*. The same connotation of the term also can be found around the turn of the century in the writings of intellectuals as diverse as George Sorel, Édouard Berth and Daniel Halévy.

In January 1898, Clémenceau used the noun in this oft-quoted passage: “N’est-ce pas un signe, tous

ces *intellectuels*, venus de tous les coins de l'horizon, qui se groupent sur une idée et s'y tiennent inébranlables? ... Pour moi, j'y voudrais voir l'origine d'un mouvement d'opinion au-dessus de tous les intérêts divers, et c'est dans cette pacifique révolte de l'esprit français, que je mettrais à l'heure où tout nous manque mes espérances d'avenir" (Winock 26).

Now, the *dreyfusards* were only too happy to embrace their new name, deciding that it was anything but derogatory. This is precisely what Lucien Herr did in a response to Barrès's outburst. Much like the gay community in our day has turned the term "queer" into something positive, the Dreyfusards decided that to be an "intellectual" was indeed an honor that paid tribute to the greatness inherent in the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789, in particular the spirit of inclusiveness, to say nothing of the burgeoning notion of civil rights, the idea that all citizens had inalienable rights that the state must enforce equally across the board in order to hold moral authority over the social body.

Zola's *J'Accuse* helped the enemy side organize. To begin with, they coined the memorable term *le syndicat* to designate their adversaries, these *intellectuels* who meddled in things they did not understand. The prominent literary historian Fernand Brunetière and director of *La Revue des Deux Mondes*, expressed this anti-intellectualism most eloquently:

"Et cette pétition que l'on fait circuler parmi les *Intellectuels*, le seul fait que l'on ait récemment créé ce mot d'*Intellectuels* pour désigner, comme une sorte de caste nobiliaire, les gens qui vivent dans les laboratoires et les bibliothèques, ce fait seul dénonce un des travers les plus ridicules de notre époque, je veux dire la prétention de hausser les écrivains, les savants, les professeurs, les philologues, au rang de surhommes. Les aptitudes intellectuelles, que certes je ne méprise pas, n'ont qu'une valeur relative. Pour moi, dans l'ordre social, j'estime beaucoup plus haut la trempe de la volonté, la force du caractère, la sûreté du jugement, l'expérience pratique. Ainsi, je n'hésite pas à placer tel agriculteur ou tel négociant, que je connais, fort au-dessus de tel érudit ou de tel biologiste ou de tel mathématicien qu'il ne me plaît pas de nommer" (Winock 26).

Despite such rhetoric and despite his support for the antidreyfusard cause, Brunetière was still a moderate. He was an agnostic and a champion of Darwin at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, where he was

on the faculty, and far from a practicing anti-Semite. In fact, he had condemned Drumont's *La France Juive* when it appeared in 1886 (Winock 40) and made no bones about it in public, which is amazing considering the raucus caused by this inflammatory brochure. What is at stake for him in the *affaire* (as was the case with Barrès, as we saw above) is reason of state. For Brunetière the choice was simple. The so-called intellectuals in their blindness cannot see that the military is what safeguards democracy. To attack the military is to attack democracy and all that France stands for and all that stands between France and the barbaric *outré-rhin*. Just like Barrès, Brunetière believed that the individual must subordinate himself to society and, if necessary, even be sacrificed on the altar of the state.

As I have suggested above, the term *intellectuel* early on became the property of the Left and perhaps for that reason the Right in France has never felt comfortable using it. Perhaps they still felt some pride in knowing that the rest of the world would be forever indebted to France for inventing the term as well as the phenomenon itself. Although the Russians have a stake in the history of the *intelligentsia*, the Russian word is of French origin and linked to the cosmopolitan ambiance of Paris in the second half of the eighteenth century, as well as to the Russian word for “educated,” whose English transcription, interestingly, is “intelligent.”

**Conclusion** The long overdue rehabilitation of Dreyfus in 1906 gave the French Republic a new-found sense of legitimacy and purpose. Thus the travails of Dreyfus were not in vain because they led to political stability for a period of several decades and ultimately paved the way for a liberal parliamentary democracy that we today take for granted. Last but not least, the *affaire* marked the advent of the age of committed public intellectuals and their moral high point but also, paradoxically, the beginning of their demise. In the final analysis, the rehabilitation of

Dreyfus constituted a victory for justice, but it also signaled a decline in the moral stature of the committed intellectual. In the future, French intellectuals no longer would command the moral high ground. During World War I, intellectuals on both the Left and Right rushed to embrace the war effort without questioning it (the only truly well-known intellectual to oppose the war was Romain Rolland) and by the 1930s French intellectuals were more likely to take their cues from Moscow or Berlin, as though they had forgotten the legacy of the French Revolution in a rare case of public amnesia. This tendency to immediately situate issues in which they became involved in a much larger, ideological and overtly political context, needless to say, made it difficult for them to maintain a sense of objectivity and fairness.

In the long term, the Dreyfus affair helped consolidate and make permanent a political landscape in France that in large part has subsisted until this day, in particular the division between Left and Right. Remember that Voltaire and Hugo had acted alone. None of Voltaire's peers had helped defend Calas and Hugo had taken on the Second Empire and "Napoléon le petit" alone, too. The Dreyfus affair was something else altogether and, for all practical purposes, a mass movement, spurred on by the rapid-fire production of petitions and manifestoes authored by a growing class of public intellectuals.

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