Extracts from Péguy’s ‘portrait of Bernard Lazare’ in Notre Jeunesse:

Operating and working the same subject matter, developing within the same subject matter, there were at least two Dreyfus affairs, elaborating the matter of the same story. That of Bernard-Lazare, our story, was innocent and has no need of defence. And in another sense, there were very definitely two Dreyfus affairs, the one emanating from Bernard-Lazare and the one emanating from Colonel Picquart. The one emanating from Colonel Picquart was very good. The one from Bernard-Lazare was infinite…

I can still see him [Bernard-Lazare] in his bed. That atheist, that professional atheist, that official atheist in whom resounded with incredible strength and gentleness the eternal Word; with eternal strength; with eternal gentleness; whose like I have found nowhere else. I still have imprinted upon me, in my eyes, the eternal goodness of that infinitely gentle gaze, that goodness which was not thrust forward, but poised, informed. Infinitely disillusioned; infinitely informed; infinitely indomitable itself. I can still see him in his bed, that atheist streaming with the Word of God. In death itself all the weight of his people rested on his shoulders. One was not allowed to tell him that the responsibility was not his. I have never seen a man so weighed down, so weighed down with a burden, with an eternal responsibility. Just as we are and feel burdened with our children, with our own children in our own family, he felt as much, exactly as much, exactly burdened with his people.


Appendix 50: Antisemitic riots in Paris, Théâtre de l’Ambigu, January–February 1931

1931

January: Great excitement in Paris due to the planned production of the German play *The Dreyfus Affair* on a Parisian stage.

Alfred Dreyfus asks Henry Torrès who wants to translate the piece for the French stage not to do so without knowing the play apparently suspecting that he is depicted on stage. Yet in *Paris-Midi* (of January 29th 1931), he declares he will not object to the planned production, instead he says it gives him great satisfaction that the translator of the play will not be Torrès, but the son of Jean Richepin, one of the sternest ‘Anti-dreyfusards’ during the ‘Affair’.

February: Première of the French version of *The Dreyfus Affair* in the Paris Théâtre de l’Ambigu. The adaptation, totally distorting the German original, is by Jacques Richepin.

During almost all performances, there were violent clashes inside the theatre and outside on the street. Supporters of the Action française, members of the chauvinist organisation Croix de feu and Camelots du roi tried to storm the theatre, attacked the actors and threw teargas bombs in the auditorium to forcibly bring the performance to an end. Despite repeated demonstrations reminiscent of 30 years ago, the run continued until the end of March. Finally, the director of the theatre had to bow to the threats made against his theatre – threats against which the theatre was not being protected. He publicly declared that this was the sole reason that forced him to bring the run to an end.

Dormant emotions re-awoke or erupted again for several weeks. Again, two opposing camps faced each other. Again, a newspaper war broke out. Debates in the chamber. Turbulent assemblies. Clashes between nationalists and pacifists. Like 30 years ago.
Again attempts to confuse the public. Sensation chases sensation. Every day, French and German newspapers print stirring news items: ‘Stink bombs against The Dreyfus Affair...’ ‘over one hundred people arrested and taken into police custody, several dozens jailed for resistance to state authority’... ‘Esterhazy’s daughter tries to hit Richepin with a riding whip!’... ‘Dreyfus’ as a radio drama on the Eiffel Tower high above any stink bombs. After numerous battles around the performances of the play The Dreyfus Affair, the Théâtre de l’Ambigu had to close down for 24 hours. The theatre administration explained the auditorium had to be repaired and disinfected. In the meantime, to replace the cancelled stage performance, The Dreyfus Affair was broadcast on radio from the Eiffel tower... The Paris correspondent of a German national paper in Berlin reports: ‘The reaction of the audience was extraordinary. It is astonishing how alive people’s memory of this affair is which unleashed such passions. The stalls were clearly divided into parties for and against Dreyfus, for and against the leaning of the play.’

The demonstrations of the royalists recur every night. Their spiritual fathers, the leaders of the Action française, pride themselves on equalling the activities of the German nationalists who have stopped the showing of the remarkable film All quiet on the Western front with violence and stink bombs. The Action française celebrates the clashes in the theatre as their victory and encourages its readers to hold demonstrations more regularly and in greater numbers. Their slogans are successful. Their victory cannot be denied. The Laval government gives in. The performances are stopped. The monarchist papers declare their triumph in giant letters: ‘A victory for the Camelots du roi. The performances of the Boche-play at the ‘Ambigu’, which have been forcefully prevented by the Camelots du roi over the last few days will be discontinued on order of the police prefect.’

Censorship does not exist in France, neither does the law permit the police prefect to give such an order. Yet it was sufficient for him to declare that he could not guarantee peace and order and provide troops of several hundred men every night. It was sufficient for the director of the theatre to receive numerous letters daily – threatening, as the Petit Parisien reported, to bomb his theatre or set it on fire if he continued to play the piece. He subsequently went to see the police prefect and asked for the protection he was entitled to. After this meeting, in which the police prefect in no way prohibited the performances, the director withdrew the play from his repertory.

A survey approaching numerous personalities of public life - senators, MPs, writers and artists - asked whether they were for or against the performances. The outcome was that, like 30 years ago, there were two parties diametrically opposed to each other. Nationalist writers like Claude Farrère or Rosny the Elder spoke out against it. General Oberfils stated: ‘it is wiser to let such embarrassing affairs be forgotten in the silence of history’. Meanwhile, the dramatist Lenormand, Zola’s friend and biographer Paul Brulat, Clemenceau’s colleague at the Aurore Urbain Gohier, and the president of the Deputies’ Chamber Ferdinand Buisson asked in surprise with what right such a play was being suppressed or its performances sabotaged by a small, politically irrelevant group. None of them objected to it. The young Jean Painlevé, son of the former prime minister, answered: ‘The Dreyfus Affair is a symbol which stays alive and must do so.’

19th March: In the chamber, MP Guernut questions the Laval government about the ‘ban’ of the Dreyfus Affair. He asks if the government intends to leave the streets to organised gangs or if Laval intends to do anything about securing the freedom of speech and assembly as well as the independence of theatres – which are all inextricably linked to the republican order. MP Planche then states that they are obviously witnessing a renaissance of ‘French chauvinism’. He exclaims that the former frontline fighters who are now pacifists demand the immediate revival of the play. Laval interrupts him: ‘The theatre can resume the performances whenever they want.’
MP Planche: ‘I will hold you to your word. It is nonetheless true that the police prefect has forbidden the performances.’

Laval: ‘There has been no such order!’

M. Herriot, leader of the radical socialists, intervenes. He accuses the government of playing the case down, but that it remains abominable and grotesque. Laval’s statements, he says, are mere excuses. It is true that the play has not been formally banned, but it has been declared that if the theatre carries on performing, it is at its own risk. ‘This equals a ban!’ exclaims Herriot, then turning against a ‘policy of needle pricks’, which, he says, has distorted the true face of France and has something unbearably ridiculous about it.

Laval stresses again that there has never been a formal ban. On the contrary. During the 32 performances that have taken place, he has provided the theatre with several hundred-strong police units. The theatre is free to revive the play at any time. Even though he has to point out that Dreyfus’ son himself had demanded for the performances to be stopped. Furthermore, he has to state that the film *All quiet on the Western front* is strictly banned in Germany, whereas it is shown in the entire French territory. Under such circumstances, how can there be talk of an infringement on the freedom of theatre? He finishes by saying he wishes that *The Dreyfus Affair* may continue to be performed under peaceful circumstances. ‘However, if the performances should trigger more violence, if public order should suffer, who could blame the police prefect if indeed he did order the play to be stopped? The freedom of the theatre is granted; but only if public order is respected.’

26th March: The Théâtre l’Ambigu resumes the performances. There are new demonstrations by the Camelots du roi, encouraged by Léon Daudet of the Action française. Proper fights ensue. The papers report: ‘Violent scuffle at the theatre. Another theatre battle in Paris’… ‘Pacifists put Dreyfus-troublemakers to flight’. A Berlin paper writes: ‘One of the young men who shouted and threw stink bombs, a certain Count de Harcourt, was grabbed by the pacifist frontline fighters and dragged onto the stage. They bared his bottom in front of the whole audience and gave him a good spanking.’ For oddity’s sake, it shall be mentioned that the count initiated legal proceedings and chose the socialist Paul-Boncour as his lawyer.

31st March: The paper *Frankfurter Zeitung* reports from Paris: ‘The director of the theatre has today written to the play’s translator, saying that they had the satisfaction of performing *The Dreyfus Affair* without major interruptions last night, but that it was enough now, that he, the director, could no longer bear to witness how the Parisians were fighting each other like bitter enemies in his theatre. Thus he was ending the run.’

We see: what was once played out as a tragedy is repeated as a farce. Also in 1931, the republicans, tired of fighting, backed down against a few hundred active enemies of the republic. Led by Léon Daudet, the violent nationalists who still consider Dreyfus guilty, Zola damaging, and Colonel Henri a patriotic hero are the factual winners – even though they are a tiny minority. The republic settles for a compromise. It does not deem it worthwhile to carry on fighting. So it bows to the demands of nationalist ‘phraseurs’. In 1931 as in 1901, when Waldeck-Rousseau passed the – as Zola called it – despicable amnesty law to calm down the population.

Times change. Yet people do not change with them.

Notes on Appendix 50.
