

Microhistory and the Study of Parliamentary Debates:  
Victorien Sardou's *Thermidor* and the Theater of Politics

Steven M. Beaudoin  
Centre College

On Saturday evening, January 24, 1891, to the surprise of few, the popular French playwright Victorien Sardou premiered his latest historical melodrama, *Thermidor*, to a very warm reception and glowing Sunday morning reviews. By Monday morning, however, commercial success was in jeopardy. As word of the play's criticism of Robespierre spread through Paris, a number of republicans took offense at what they deemed an attack on the Revolution itself. If they thought they had appeased republican sensibilities with a quick editing session that morning, Sardou, Jules Claretie, the theater's manager, and Constant Coquelin, the play's star, were sorely mistaken. Despite a calm start, whistles and catcalls from the audience disrupted the first act for fifteen minutes. Order was restored only to be disturbed again in the third act, when opponents subjected Coquelin to further insults and a barrage of unsavory objects. The play continued only after the police entered and removed the most ardent of these demonstrators. The next morning, alarmed by this disturbance and the promise of others if the play continued its run, Ernest Constans, Minister of the Interior, suppressed all further presentations of *Thermidor*.<sup>1</sup> A very different stage, the Chamber of Deputies, was now set for a heated exchange over the liberty of the dramatic arts. On January 29, 1891, moderate republican Deputies Francis Charmes, Henry Fouquier, and Joseph Reinach demanded an interpellation on the government's intentions concerning the maintenance of both public order and the liberty of the dramatic arts.<sup>2</sup> What followed, however, was a day-long debate not on censorship, but on the meaning of the French Revolution and its legacy.<sup>3</sup>

According to most of the current work on parliamentary debate, there are three possible approaches for interpreting this discussion, each offering potentially meaningful conclusions. The first emphasizes decision-making.<sup>4</sup> In theory – and in the aspirations of many who designed political systems comprising such institutions – parliaments should be venues for reasoned discourse with the goal of determining the most advantageous policies.<sup>5</sup> In this light, this debate, and the French Third Republic in general, would presumably stand as a lasting monument to

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<sup>1</sup> *Le Temps*, 28 January 1891, p. 1, cols. 3 and 4, p. 3, col. 5; and 29 January, p. 3, col. 5; *La Presse* (Montréal), 31 January 1891, p. 7, col. 1; *The New York Times*, 28 January 1891, p. 1, col. 3; 30 January 1891, p. 5, col. 4; 1 February 1891, p. 13, col. 1; and 15 February 1891, p. 12, col. 2.

<sup>2</sup> An interpellation permits the interruption of the legislative calendar in order to discuss a specific subject.

<sup>3</sup> For the text of the debate, see *Journal Officiel de la République française. Débats. Chambre*, 30 January 1891, p. 147-160.

<sup>4</sup> Scholars who adopt this approach tend to focus on the nature of deliberation within parliamentary debate. For examples, see Jean –Noel Ferrie, Baudouin Dupret, and Vincent Legrand, "Comprendre la délibération parlementaire. Une approche praxéologique de la politique en action," *Revue Française de Science Politique*, vol. 8, 5 (2008): pp. 795-816; William H. Riker, "The Heresthetics of Constitution-Making: The Presidency in 1787, with Comments on Determinism and Rational Choice," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 78, 1 (1984): pp. 1-16; and Jurg Steiner, André Baechtiger, Markus Spoerndli, and Marco Steenbergen, *Deliberative Politics in Action: Analyzing Parliamentary Discourse* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> James Madison differed slightly in this regard however. In his theory of representation he envisioned Congress as an arena in which many different voices and interests would drown each other out and stalemate governance until the best policy decisions had a chance to percolate out of the cacophony.

systemic failure. Scholars have long emphasized the “stalemate” quality of the republic, a regime characterized as having “plenty of brakes and not much of a motor.”<sup>6</sup> And this debate offers ample evidence to support such a conclusion. After discussing the issue for the entire session, the day ended with an *ordre du jour pur et simple*, indicating that nothing decisive had been achieved. Thus, an analysis from this perspective might explore this debate for signs of the structural characteristics that inhibited more effective deliberation and decision-making. The second approach, adopting a linguistic or semiotic methodology, might examine the “signifying” mechanisms evident in this debate, particularly as they pertained to the Revolution’s legacy.<sup>7</sup> This would bolster another paradigmatic interpretation of a Third Republic overshadowed and overwhelmed by the ideological chasms created by the Revolution.<sup>8</sup> From this vantage point, however, this debate is more than just one small battle in the ongoing Franco-French war; it signaled the beginning of a seismic shift in the terms of disagreement, a process that would give the Revolution new relevance in a rapidly changing environment.<sup>9</sup> A semiotic analysis would explore the means by which that process was realized. Finally, a third approach rooted in political sociology interprets parliamentary debate as one of many arenas in which politicians learn and practice their *métier*.<sup>10</sup> An analysis of this particular discussion might explore the participation of various Deputies and its relationship to how individual legislators established their reputations, forged working alliances with colleagues, and maintained associations with constituents in the provinces. This is the methodology that resonates least among existing historical treatments of the Third Republic.<sup>11</sup>

Because the study of parliamentary debate is not a zero-sum game – i.e. the value of one methodology is not necessarily negated by the addition of others – I would like to argue the merit of adding one more methodological technique to our interpretive repertory: microhistory. In a manner somewhat reminiscent of the semiotic school, microhistory approaches debate as a static text, a set moment in time that can reveal the structures that give meaning to both participants and observers. Rather than focus on language and signification however, microhistory, at least as I am applying it, calls attention to the contexts that created the debate and the different functions it could serve for all involved. Ironically, this method underscores the active, constructive nature of debate, emphasizing the power of speech to make and not just reflect “reality”. Ultimately, microhistory explodes the divide between “static” and “dynamic” by drawing attention to the fact that fundamental structures are in constant evolution. When applied to this debate on the suppression of *Thermidor*, this methodology indicates that parliaments can be usefully studied as performative structures where the very contingent nature of exchange

<sup>6</sup> Stanley Hoffman, “Paradoxes of the French Political Community,” in *In Search of France* (New York: Harper, 1963), 17.

<sup>7</sup> This approach is most evident in the collection of essays edited by Paul Bayley, *Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Parliamentary Discourse* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> On the Revolution’s legacy, see the essays in Geoffrey Best, ed., *The Permanent Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) as well as more general treatments of the Third Republic, such as Jean-Marie Mayeur and Madeleine Rebérioux, *The Third Republic from Its Origins to the Great War, 1871-1914*, translated by J.R. Foster (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

<sup>9</sup> For an analysis somewhat along these lines, see Steven M. Beaudoin, “‘Et les beaux rêves d’avenir?’ Victorien Sardou and Fin-de-Siècle Attitudes on the French Revolution,” M.A. thesis, University of Maine, 1990.

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of this approach, see Olivier Nay, “Le travail politique à l’Assemblée. Note sur un champ de recherche trop longtemps déserté,” *Sociologie du travail*, no. 45 (2003): pp. 537-554.

<sup>11</sup> For an analysis of the debate on *Thermidor*’s suppression that comes close to this approach, and whose conclusions mirror some of the conclusions in this essay, see Eugen Weber, “About *Thermidor*: The Oblique Uses of a Scandal,” *French Historical Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2 (Fall, 1991): 330-342.

continuously forces legislators to make and remake essential, constitutive relationships. It is in the acts of speaking and voting that ideology becomes reality, where affinities take concrete form. But ideology does not persistently determine action. Given the unscripted and dynamic quality of such discussions, opinions and affiliations are always exposed to challenge and transformation. The Deputies who mounted the rostrum that cold January day did so as performers and their goal was not to develop or support particular policies; their performances aimed to question, test, and reinforce legislative alliances.

Indeed, it is difficult to see this particular debate as anything but performance. There were no direct policy implications, it was sparked by and carefully played to an audience (in fact, certain deputies even made reference to the press), and the content of the debate had little to do with the motions put forward at its conclusion. More importantly, it reveals key characteristics that scholars of performance studies have underscored as defining qualities of performance. In particular, performances are reflexive and symbolic.<sup>12</sup> They are designed to influence the attitudes and behaviors of others. In the end, then, a microhistory of the debate surrounding *Thermidor*'s suppression offers a number of advantages to scholars of parliamentary debate. For historians, it reminds us of the importance of a carefully researched and nuanced study of the contexts for all debates, from those with seemingly little import to those with significant policy implications. For political scientists, it suggests the value of both a new methodology and an approach to parliamentary debate that emphasizes its constitutive nature. Finally, though beyond the scope of this paper, it may even recommend the addition of yet another methodology, that associated with performance studies.

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Among historians of medieval and early modern history, the techniques of microhistory are well known. Derived principally from the pioneering work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz and applied with great effect by numerous scholars of primarily preliterate populations, practitioners of this method select one "event", frequently a trial, though in Geertz's classic example a Balinese cockfight, and place it under meticulous scrutiny.<sup>13</sup> By contextualizing their subject as thoroughly as possible, these scholars seek to recreate and analyze the cultural systems that made those incidents possible and "sensible" for those who produced it. In one of the most famous examples, *The Return of Martin Guerre*, Natalie Zemon Davis analyzed a 16<sup>th</sup>-century case of imposture to reveal the efforts of ordinary French peasants – both men and women – to "re-fashion" their own lives, a concept usually reserved for those who study Renaissance elites.<sup>14</sup> For devotees, microhistories like Davis' permit historians not only to find entry into the lives of the ordinary men and women who left only rare traces in traditional historical sources, but also to

<sup>12</sup> Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002), chapter 2.

<sup>13</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973). For classic examples of microhistory among medieval and early modern European historians, see Judith C. Brown, *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), Gene Brucker, *Giovanni and Lusanna: Love and Marriage in Renaissance Florence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. by John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou: The Promised Land of Error*, trans. by Barbara Bray (New York: Vintage, 1978).

<sup>14</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983). She explains and defends her methodology further in "On the Lame" *The American Historical Review*, vol. 93, 3 (June, 1988): pp. 572-603.

link those ordinary lives to the great transformations that defined the early modern world (and thus to understand both more fully). In the words of Giovanni Levi, an early theorist of microhistory, “Phenomena previously considered to be sufficiently described and understood assume completely new meanings by altering the scale of observation. It is then possible to use these results to draw far wider generalizations although the initial observations were made within relatively narrow dimensions and as experiments rather than examples.”<sup>15</sup>

Despite such claims, there are some historians who reject this method and the conclusions of those who use it.<sup>16</sup> At the crux of the disagreement is the use of microhistory to recreate the interior, mental worlds of subjects who left few written records. In the case of Natalie Davis, for example, although there is no direct evidence of collusion, the author asserts that Bertrande de Rols did indeed plot with her husband’s impostor to improve her own lot in life – and that the judges who heard the case refused even to entertain such an idea because of the psychic shock such female self-assurance would imply. Davis’ argument rests largely on the context surrounding this case, especially court records revealing countless peasant women who were skilled at bending rules in order to make the most of very difficult situations. Bertrande, according to Davis, was no different than the thousands of women who shared her fate. As one of Davis’ critics contends however, “Such arguments, it may be said, make footnotes to sources quite beside the point. If historical records can be bypassed so thoroughly in the service of an inventive blend of intuition and assertion, it is difficult to see what distinguishes the writing of history from that of fiction.”<sup>17</sup> Yet the bond between the technique of microhistory and the focus on interior worlds is not intrinsic to the methodology. In a more recent example, Edward Berenson uses the trial of Henriette Caillaux for the murder of Gaston Calmette in 1914 to explore the cultural fault lines that divided France during the belle époque.<sup>18</sup> In this instance, the contextualization of a single event allows an analytic gaze to be cast back on to the society (and not the individuals) that produced it.

It is this latter example that informs my use of microhistory in the interpretation of what transpired in the Chamber of Deputies on January 29, 1891. This technique, placing this one day into a context informed by the study of Third Republic politics, the Revolution’s legacy, and even fin-de-siècle cultural life, demonstrates that in this particular instance, parliamentary debate was a performance. To appreciate this however, a fuller description of that day’s discussion is necessary.

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Early in the session, two days after *Thermidor*’s suppression, Henry Fouquier and Joseph Reinach denounced the government for reversing its initial approval of the play. This reversal, they claimed, was politically motivated, sparked by the fear of an interpellation from the

<sup>15</sup> Giovanni Levi, “On Microhistory” in Peter Burke, ed., *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1991), p. 98. For a fascinating article on the dangers inherent in linking microhistory to big structures see Sigurdur Gylfi Magnússon, “The Singularization of History: Social History and Microhistory within the Postmodern State of Knowledge,” *Journal of Social History*, vol. 36 (Spring, 2003): pp. 701-735.

<sup>16</sup> For a good example of such criticisms, see Thomas Kuehn, “Reading Microhistory: The Example of Giovanni and Lausanna,” *The Journal of Modern History*, vol 61, 3 (Sep. 1989): pp. 512-534.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Finlay, “The Refashioning of Martin Guerre,” *American Historical Review*, vol. 3, 3 (June, 1988): p. 569.

<sup>18</sup> Edward Berenson, *The Trial of Madame Caillaux* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992). While he does attempt something like a recreation of Joseph Caillaux’s psychological makeup, going so far as to argue that Caillaux suffered from bi-polar disorder, this is not directly germane to the heart of his argument.

Extreme Left demanding to know not only how the censor could allow the presentation of such an anti-republican play, but also how it could do so when the venue for that play would be the famed and, more importantly, government-subsidized stage of the Comédie-Française.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Reinach refused to believe that the government had no option but to suppress a play when confronted with a public disorder caused by twenty-five to thirty spectators. These viewers, he added, had the right to criticize the play but not to impinge on the liberty of the dramatic arts.

While these claims produced disdain from the Left and support from the Right, conflict truly erupted when Fouquier and Reinach turned their attention to the legacy of the Revolution. Like Sardou, they viewed the play not as a condemnation of the Revolution, but of Robespierre and the Terror. Consequently, they argued that the government was wrong to protect the false sanctity of Robespierre. Rather, it was essential to separate the glorious aspects of the Revolution from the tyrannical. Fouquier insisted that a choice had to be made between Robespierre and Danton: "...that Robespierre was the enemy and the evil genius of the Republic, or ... that the evil republicans were named Barbarous and Danton, and that the true republic is dictatorship and Terror."<sup>20</sup> In his estimation, Sardou had chosen wisely. While Reinach admitted that Sardou's play did not depict the dangers posed by the war and counter-revolution, he insisted that one could not forget the permanence of the scaffold, justice without deliberation, and the slaughter of women, children, and the aged. Finally, to those who felt that *Thermidor* insulted the Republic, he responded that the insult came from those who, taking the revolutionary tribunals for the Revolution, ignored the violent crimes of the Terror.

This view of the Revolution incurred the wrath of many on the Left who frequently interrupted Fouquier and Reinach with such exclamations as "You forget that these men saved France!" and "You would not be French without him!" The first formal response, however, did not assail this interpretation of the Revolution alone, but remained on the immediate question of censorship. Georges Leygues, Deputy for Lot et Garonne, objected to the use of the Comédie-Française, a subsidized stage, for "a long diatribe not only against the Terror, but also against the Revolution." He likened *Thermidor* to an anti-republican political pamphlet. Quoting from the Rightist newspaper *Le Gaullois*, he justified the government's measures by claiming that monarchists, in their own words, viewed the play as a call to action. But the clearest and most controversial response from the Left came from Georges Clemenceau, leader of the Radicals and by far the most dynamic man to approach the rostrum that day. As the saying went, "Everyone feared his pen, his tongue, and his sword," and on this day he unleashed his verbal acumen. He claimed that the Chamber was mistaken if it believed the coming vote a statement for or against Robespierre or Danton. Attempts to divide the Revolution and accept or reject certain aspects were impossible. Nor did he believe that the Chamber could, by this vote, augment or diminish the Revolution's legacy. "Gentlemen," he declared, "whether we want or not, whether it please

<sup>19</sup> The maze of political parties in Third Republic France makes any discussion confusing, a confusion compounded by the particularly annoying trait of using terms that do not truly indicate the political position of the group in question. For the purposes of clarity and brevity, throughout this essay terms such as socialists, republicans, and monarchists will refer to overarching political groupings that ascribed to certain philosophies. More defined political groups (akin but not exactly similar to parties) will be referred to as the Extreme Left, Radicals, Opportunists, Royalists, etc. The lines between these groups were often blurred, however. A group of politicians falling in between the Radicals and Socialist Left, for example, approximately 60 to 100 deputies, is often referred to as the Extreme Left.

<sup>20</sup> This and subsequent quotes from that day's debate can be found at *Journal Officiel de la République française. Débats. Chambre*, 30 January 1891, p. 147-160.

or shock us, the French Revolution is a block... a block from which we can separate nothing – because historic truth will not permit it.” This “truth” explained why *Thermidor*, because it rejected a part of the Revolution, slandered the whole. Furthermore, the Right’s appreciation of the play affirmed its counter-revolutionary content. Knowing it would be impossible to stage a defense of monarchy on a government-subsidized stage, the monarchists hid behind Danton’s memory. After all, he asserted, note who applauds Sardou’s efforts.

Clemenceau also reminded Reinach, who rejected the revolutionary tribunals in operation during the Terror, that they had both had recourse to a similar panel: the Haut Cour de Justice. The analogy surely attracted the attention of many in the Chamber. Like the revolutionary tribunals, when the Senate was convened as a High Court, most constitutional safeguards became impotent. It was an effective means of dealing with various crises and a means that the Third Republic’s politicians were not unaccustomed to using. In fact, the Assembly had recently reverted to this measure during the Boulanger Affair.<sup>21</sup> Clemenceau claimed that he was not ashamed of his involvement in the suspension of certain individual rights when the Republic was endangered. The provision of a High Court had been established and used by men who had feared for the safety of the Republic and the country. Under critical conditions, the founders of the Third Republic and the politicians who followed them, like their predecessors during the First Republic, condoned such revolutionary measures. While Reinach, himself, took issue with this comparison, for many Deputies it was all the more uncomfortable for its accurate reflection of reality.

In further defense of the revolutionary tribunals, Clemenceau displayed the political prowess that established his reputation as a statesman. His provocative invective produced more than just indignation on the Right, it was the type of declaration that toppled governments.

You know, however, in what circumstances it [the revolutionary tribunal] was made. Do you not know where the ancestors of these gentlemen on the right were? ... They were with the Prussians, with the Austrians, and they marched against France ... those who were not with Brunswick, where were they? They were in the Vendée insurrection... and, following the words of Michelet, ‘at the hour when France was at the borders facing the enemy, they were planting a dagger in her back’.”

He went on to say that, yes, some innocents had lost their lives during the Terror, but that the rightists were similarly stained with the blood of innocent victims. Had they, he asked, forgotten the White Terror, the massacre of thousands of revolutionaries after the Bourbon Restoration? “You know,” he asserted, “the White Terror claimed more victims than the other.” Finally, Clemenceau ended his contribution to the debate with his own explanation of *Thermidor*’s controversy:

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<sup>21</sup> The Boulanger Affair refers to the rise and fall of General Georges Boulanger in the 1880s. Although he owed his initial ascent to power to his republican leanings in 1886, when he became Minister of War, politicians grew wary of his growing personal following soon afterwards. When his popularity translated into a political campaign that attracted numerous opponents of the Republic, they responded by leaking reports of his imminent arrest in 1889. To the disappointment of many of his followers, Boulanger responded by fleeing into exile in Belgium, where he later committed suicide on the gravesite of his mistress. In the meantime, the Senate had found him and two of his followers guilty of treason. For more on Boulangerism and its aftermath, see p. 17-19 below.

And now, if you want to know why, after the unimportant event of a bad play at the Comédie-Française, there is such emotion in Paris? Why, at the present time, there is such emotion in the Chamber? I will tell you. It is because that admirable Revolution by which we exist is not finished. It continues still. We are still the actors in it, because it is always the same men who find themselves occupied by the same enemies.... the struggle must continue until the victory is definite.... In the meantime, I will say loud and clear, we will not let the French Revolution be soiled....

This fiery speech aroused the emotions of many in the Chamber. Albert, comte de Mun, leader of the Royalists, spoke for the majority, if not all of the rightists, when he approached the rostrum next and demanded to know whether Clemenceau spoke for the government or simply the Radicals and Extreme Left.

I do not accuse you [Clemenceau] of wanting to revive all of the Convention's violence against us [the nobility].... I believe you want to unite the Revolution's history with that of its crimes, that you reject all of the distinctions others have wanted to make, and I wish to know if all republicans think as you.

He accused Clemenceau of wanting to incite all of the old angers that had cost the lives of so many French during the Revolution. He also likened Clemenceau's speech to that of the Jacobins, who had similarly told the moderates of the Convention that the revolutionary past had to be accepted in its entirety. De Mun insisted on knowing if the government agreed with Clemenceau and if its suppression of *Thermidor* indicated its intention to govern on behalf of the Left, on behalf of those who wanted to claim the violent deeds of the Terror as their heritage.

Throughout these impassioned speeches the government maintained its original stance, that the play was suppressed solely due to the public disorders that surrounded its performance and not because of its view of the Revolution. In an effort to answer the complaints of those who resented the fact that *Thermidor* had appeared on a government-subsidized stage, Léon Bourgeois, Minister of Public Education and Fine Arts, first explained the government's policy on subsidies. Bourgeois, whose politics were only slightly right of Clemenceau's, claimed that subsidies were for artistic and not political reasons. Therefore, the fact that the play was staged at the Comédie-Française never entered into the decision to ban it. The minister then went on to detail the three cases when censorship was necessary: when the work insulted a foreign power; when it issued a direct appeal to public disorder; or when it posed a threat to public morality. Since *Thermidor*, when first reviewed by the censor, did not fit into any of these categories, the government supported it. When its performance created a public disorder however, the government had no choice but to suppress any further production. Ernest Constans, Minister of the Interior, added that the greatest threat, in his view, was the purchase of tickets by demonstrators who planned to protest inside the theater, something that had been reported in the press. The police, he continued, would have been unable to quell this.

For their part, the two ministers directly responsible for the play's suppression were equally ineffective in quelling the furor with these answers. The political stakes justified stronger action. Finally, the leader of the government, Charles de Freycinet, arose to defend his government's position by condemning de Mun for his speech. Freycinet was the consummate Opportunist; he had the ability to paper over most divisions in order to maintain stability, and in

this instance he put all of his weight behind the preservation of his government.<sup>22</sup> De Mun, he claimed, was trying to discern a policy change in what the government had considered routine action. He declared that his government was the government of the *parti républicain*, ruling for the benefit of all: “We are the trustees of the Revolutions’ conquests.... We are the resolute defenders of the Republic and we govern only with those who share our sentiments.” When asked if he was for the Terror, Freycinet alluded to the idiocy of the question. Who, he asked, could say that they were for the “excesses” of the Terror? He closed the debate by demanding that the Chamber understand the government’s action as a measure to ensure public order, nothing more.

Ending debate after an interpellation and returning to the normal legislative calendar required a motion, either an *ordre du jour motivée*, a motion detailing the decision reached on the matter at hand, or an *ordre du jour pur et simple*, signifying that the question had been debated but no course of action had been determined. For this particular debate, the Deputies now had to choose from seven different *ordres du jour motivée*. More important, Freycinet raised the stakes of this vote by making it a question of confidence in the government. He insisted that the government would accept only the adoption of the *ordre du jour pur et simple* – a de facto acceptance of the government’s ban. Like so much in history, perhaps what is most important in each of these motions is what was not said. None of these motions mentioned the Revolution. Instead, they all returned to the original subject, seemingly ignoring the more radical and contentious turn the debate had taken. In the end, the Chamber officially declared nothing over the debate; it adopted the *ordre du jour pur et simple* with a vote of 315 to 192. This vote represented a normal split between republican and monarchist factions in the Chamber.

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On the surface, this debate appears nonsensical, a waste of time. It carried no direct policy implications and the content of discussion had little to do with the motions put forward at its conclusion. Indeed, it is the type of ideologically driven dispute that causes contemporary American voters to dismay of anything substantive ever being accomplished in the US Congress! By applying the techniques of microhistory, however, its significance and thus potential for supporting more far-reaching conclusions about parliamentary debate become more evident. Three contexts in particular, the dominance of the melodramatic trope in public life (especially the press), the structure of French politics, and the political fluidity that followed the demise of Boulangism, demonstrate that the debate’s primary purpose was performative. Occurring just as mass circulation daily newspapers were coming into their own, the Deputies who spoke that January day did so primarily with the goal of embarrassing their political foes and testing relationships in an unsettled environment. In this instance, debate was not a discrete moment of negotiation or deliberation; it was set of performances where political machinations lurked continually and quietly backstage.

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<sup>22</sup> Opportunists were moderate republicans who acknowledged the need for significant reforms to make the Third Republic more democratic, but insisted on the need to make such reforms only when the timing seemed “opportune.”

The late nineteenth century was a golden age for the daily press in France.<sup>23</sup> Technology was advanced enough to permit them to mass produce and distribute far beyond Paris, yet not so advanced as to confront them with the competition that radio and television would later offer. Moreover, the Third Republic's attention to primary education ensured that an ever-growing proportion of the French population was literate by the 1890s. But the mass circulation press of the period was markedly different from its predecessors as recent as the 1860s. The latter consisted primarily of the *presse d'opinion*, affiliated with particular political stances and typically difficult to read. The new press was chiefly about entertainment and *fait-divers*, or current events (usually accounts of murder and other sensational crimes). This approach imposed a new literary style on the popular press, a process that one scholar has termed the *fait diversification* of the news.<sup>24</sup> It emphasized anecdotal narrative and adopted the general trope of melodrama. Indeed, one can liken it to the exaggerated and emotional style that had made Victorien Sardou and those like him so popular at the time. As Edward Berenson has noted, the cost of that popularity was intellectual substance; complex issues boiled down to "an unfolding drama of heroes and villains."<sup>25</sup> This was especially important to editors in France because popular dailies depended directly upon readership for survival. Unlike American newspapers that sustained themselves mostly by selling advertising space, French newspapers at the turn of the century made most of their money through single-copy sales. For the most successful newspapers this meant remaining politically neutral, but their extensive reach nevertheless made them de facto political powers. They chose what issues to place before the reading public and framed the terms by which people would learn and discuss them.

It was in this environment that the debate on *Thermidor* unfolded – and it had an important role in shaping that discussion. Instead of a substantive debate on censorship and public subsidies, a discussion that could have grappled with the difficulty of determining what role the state should legitimately play in the arts, it took a melodramatic turn with moralistic overtones. Both Clemenceau and de Mun cast the issues in life-and-death terms, language that newspapers could easily digest and quickly disseminate to eager readers. Even Freycinet contributed to the sense of drama by refusing to accept anything but the *ordre du jour pur et simple*, while Fouquier and Reinach, the former a founder of one of the first mass-circulation dailies, *le Petit Parisien*, gave the initial decision to ban *Thermidor* an air of conspiracy. In addition, Clemenceau added a crusading element to the debate, identifying himself and his republican allies with the first revolutionaries in an ongoing war against tyranny. Little wonder that Clemenceau made his reputation as the editor of his own newspaper. The fact that he had attended the play's premiere and had made no complaints about its politics immediately afterward makes the performance-like quality of his comments even more apparent.<sup>26</sup> In short,

<sup>23</sup> Much of what follows is from Edward Berenson, *The Trial of Madame Caillaux*, esp. chapter 6. For more detailed treatment of the press, see Claude Bellanger, ed. *Histoire general de la presse française* (Paris: Presse Universitaire de France, 1972) and Michael B. Palmer, *Des petits journaux aux grandes agences: naissance du journalisme modern* (Paris: Aubier, 1983).

<sup>24</sup> The term *fait diversification* is Jacques Kayser's. For more on the term, see his *Le quotidien français* (Paris: A. Colin, 1963) and Madeleine Varin d'Ainville, *La presse en France: genèse et évolution de ses fonctions psychosociales* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1965). Berenson discusses the term on p. 217 of *The Trial of Madame Caillaux*.

<sup>25</sup> Berenson, p. 217.

<sup>26</sup> The journalist Francisque Sarcey recalled seeing him at the theater that evening. According to Sarcey, while Clemenceau seemed to dispute some of Sardou's artistic abilities, he said nothing about the play's content. Sarcey, *Quarante Ans de Théâtre*, vol. 1-6 (Paris: Bibliothèque des Annales, 1900 - 1901).

the thirst for melodrama cultivated by the purveyors of the popular press found willing accomplices in the French Assembly. Politicians were not victims of the melodramatic turn; they were its co-authors.<sup>27</sup> In this sense, they were performing for the press and each other.

Like the press, the structure of legislative politics made such performances both possible and meaningful. Interpellations and the lack of well-defined parties, let alone party discipline, facilitated the interruption of the legislative calendar to raise any issue that might draw attention from colleagues, constituents, and the press. Because Deputies were elected in single-member constituencies, their overriding concern was to appeal to “their” voters regardless of party or coalition. A strong base of local support was all one needed to maintain a long political life in the French Assembly. Moreover, the conservative nature of the electorate and the lack of strong parties made it relatively easy and desirable to topple governments. Any government that proposed major reform, such as social insurance or an income tax, risked a vote of no confidence over a completely unrelated issue, ensuring that the more substantive measure never came before the Chamber or Senate. In some cases, this made it possible for legislators to appear publicly in favor of a certain measure yet work surreptitiously to see that the question never came to a vote. In fact, one of the more damning elements that led to the trial of Madame Caillaux in 1914 was the publication of a letter by her husband Joseph Caillaux in which he boasted, “Today I crushed the income tax bill while seeming to defend it.”<sup>28</sup> There was much in the rules of parliamentary discourse during the Third Republic that made such grandstanding an accepted and effective political strategy.

Sardou himself explained the entire incident in similar terms. In a letter to his father, he blamed the suppression and debate on the personal ambitions of Ernest Constans. Constans was the hero of the Boulanger Affair. Under the government of Pierre Tirard, he had accepted the task of saving the Republic from the Boulangist threat. His efforts at disbanding the *Ligue des Patriotes* and frightening the general into flight proved highly successful. Given this larger measure of accomplishment, and the importance of the victory, Constans was reportedly furious when passed over as leader of the government after the Tirard ministry fell. Instead, he had to content himself with keeping his Interior portfolio under the leadership of Freycinet. Resentful over this loss, and looking for a chance to discredit Freycinet, Constans alerted Prosper-Olivier Lissagaray to *Thermidor*’s content. He was sure that this would make Léon Bouregeois look like a fool and pave the way for Freycinet’s fall. According to Sardou, however, the plan backfired when Clemenceau saved the government by scaring moderate republicans into voting confidence in Freycinet.<sup>29</sup> In the end, Constans, rather than Bourgeois, came out looking the fool, and Freycinet’s government was more secure.<sup>30</sup>

The context that is perhaps most significant, however, is the political turmoil that followed the Boulanger Affair. Debates over the Revolution’s legacy usually centered around

<sup>27</sup> For more on melodrama in French politics, see James R. Lehning, *The Melodramatic Thread: Spectacle and Political Culture in Modern France* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 2007).

<sup>28</sup> Berenson, p. 82.

<sup>29</sup> Victorien Sardou, *Les Papiers de Victorien Sardou*, Georges Mouly, ed. (Paris: Albin Michel, 1934), 384-388; Philippe Erlanger, *Clemenceau* (Paris: Grasset, 1968), 259-291.

<sup>30</sup> It is also tempting to view the debate as a straight-forward dispute over censorship. After all, both Fouquier and Reinach had been opposition journalists during the Second Empire. They would understandably bristle at the suppression of a play simply because it offended a radical interpretation of the Revolution. This argument is flawed, however, by the fact that Fouquier had been the first Deputy to raise the question of accepting or rejecting certain aspects of the Revolution – choosing Danton over Robespierre and thus expanding the dispute beyond the sole question of censorship.

the issue of republicanism or, as was more often the case in the 1880s and 1890s, the related issue of anticlericalism. In such debates, as in the early and mid-nineteenth century, the issues divided politicians into Right and Left factions, monarchists and republicans. Granted, internal divisions plagued both sides, but the Revolution usually provided the needed cohesive. This debate over *Thermidor*, however, does not fit the mold. According to Fouquier and Reinach, Freycinet's government suppressed the play in response to pressure from the Extreme Left. That is why these two moderate republicans issued their own interpellation. In essence, a republican government angered their more radical colleagues by approving a play that they deemed anti-republican. The debate began, then, as an inter-republican squabble. Moreover, the only Royalist to speak at length during the debate was Albert de Mun, and that was in response to Clemenceau's inflammatory remarks, not to address the matter at hand. In short, the debate pitted moderate republicans against the more radical Left on a topic that normally united them.

The roots of this internecine row were firmly implanted in political realignments that followed the Boulanger Affair. In short, for many in the working class, the conservative republican union that had "saved" the Republic from Boulanger revealed the emptiness of Radical promises to address *la question sociale*. Socialism, revitalized by the slow diffusion of Marxist doctrine since the 1870s, now seemed more promising. Indeed, elections in 1893, less than two years after the debate on *Thermidor*, returned 50 socialist Deputies to the Chamber. At the same time, both the rise of working-class activism and the failure of their first attempt to co-opt a popular political movement were leading a number of Royalists to seek common ground with more conservative republicans.<sup>31</sup> The Opportunists, too, feared socialism's growing importance, and this fear drew the two factions closer together. Even before the Boulanger Affair, certain Royalists had offered to drop their goal of a restoration in order to form a conservative alliance with the Opportunists. De Mun, for example, had tried to found a Catholic Party without monarchist overtones in 1888. Pope Leo XIII, however, rejected this initiative and as a good servant of the Church, de Mun complied.<sup>32</sup> The situation changed after the Boulanger Affair. Believing that their only hope of preserving economic and social order was union with like-minded republicans, pragmatic Royalists formed the *ralliement*. This was a concerted effort on the part of certain Royalists, including the comte de Mun, to form a united conservative party within a republican framework. The movement began with the famous Toast of Algiers in 1890, when Cardinal Lavigerie, the Archbishop of Algiers, used the occasion of a dinner given in honor of the French Mediterranean fleet to urge monarchists to support the Republic. This toast received the support of the Pope, who reaffirmed its message with the Papal encyclical of

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<sup>31</sup> In *The Boulanger Affair Reconsidered*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), William Irvine convincingly argues that for the monarchist Right, General Boulanger represented a last attempt at overturning the fledgling democratic republic. Writing as the Boulangist insider "Mermeix", Gabriel Terrail revealed that many Royalists had established extensive links with Boulanger in hopes of reinstating a monarchy. The Royalists adopted this strategy because they had no choice but to seek an alliance with a popular movement by the late nineteenth century. France was undergoing rapid change; the population was becoming urban, secular, and literate, creating an environment in which the Royalists found it difficult to win popular support. They responded to this dilemma by searching for a political mass movement that it could use, a plan for which Boulangism seemed made to order. Unfortunately for them, the strategy failed miserably. Moreover, this political embarrassment became disaster when Terrail disclosed detailed information on the financial ties between the Boulangists and Royalists. The discredited Royalists now had to struggle to survive in the present regime, with dreams of a restoration a distant fantasy. Irvine argues that this strategy would be used again when the Royalists adopted nationalism and fascism.

<sup>32</sup> For other attempts to form a conservative alliance, see Zeldin, I: 646-648.

February 1892.<sup>33</sup> Many Opportunists similarly saw the need for a conservative union. Joseph Reinach and Ernest Constans, for example, warmly welcomed these overtures on the Right. These developments had an important impact on the debate over *Thermidor*.

This debate represented the Radical answer to the new rapprochement between the Opportunists and the Royalists. The *ralliement* and the rise of the socialists had placed the Radicals in an impossible position. They were caught between their own rhetoric supporting lasting solutions to *la question sociale* and a majority of the voting population that preferred conservative republicanism – the Opportunists, after all, still outnumbered them. Moreover, they knew that any government seeking substantial social reforms would easily fall victim to any trumped up issue and a vote of no confidence. In order to solve this dilemma, the Radicals opted to ruin a conservative union by continually calling into question the republican resolve of the Opportunists. If they could not control the government, they could at least prevent the Opportunists from, in their opinions, going too far.<sup>34</sup> *Thermidor* presented the Radicals with a perfect opportunity to do just that. It is clear that many Radicals interpreted the government's initial approval of Sardou's play a government-sponsored attack on the Revolution. When they threatened Freycinet with their own interpellation, his government acquiesced and suppressed the play. Other Opportunists were not as willing to submit as Freycinet, however. It took Clemenceau's fiery speech and the threat of Freycinet's resignation to stop conservative republicans from siding with the Right.

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This use of debate to challenge and cement political alliances highlights a significant function of parliaments; they operate as performative structures. Typically, scholars approach governing bodies, especially parliaments, as prescriptive structures. They are perceived as institutions that embody the values and rules that shape (some might even say determine) the nature and meaning of political interaction. Marshall Sahlins, in his influential *Islands of History*, counters that traditional focus to argue “that such relations are reversible: that customary kinds of acts can precipitate social forms as well as vice versa.”<sup>35</sup> In the case of friendship, for example, it is characteristic to see actions like assistance in times of need as the result of an existing relationship. For Sahlins, it is just as likely that the act of giving aid itself is constitutive – “The one who helps you is *really* your friend: the relationship is even more certainly created by the performance, than is the performance guaranteed by the relationship.”<sup>36</sup> Meaning, therefore, derives from action, not simply from structure. At least two conditions make this possible. (Sahlins indicates that there are more, but does not enumerate these.) First, the process of signification is intrinsically connected to the personal interests of those performing these actions; there is no unreflective divide between pursuing individual goals and creating meaningful structures. Second, this process of symbolic construction rests on a collective set of assumptions and beliefs; others have to understand and share the meanings that your actions are meant to produce. As Sahlins explains, “...meanings inhabit the same universe of discourse and are

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<sup>33</sup> On the *ralliement*, see Alexander Sedgwick, *The Ralliement in French Politics, 1890-1898* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965) and David Shapiro, “The Ralliement in the Politics of the 1890s” in *The Right in France, 1890-1919*, no. 13, St. Anthony's Papers (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962).

<sup>34</sup> Sedgwick, 24 and 118-128; Shapiro, 17.

<sup>35</sup> Marshall Sahlins, *Islands of Time* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. xi.

<sup>36</sup> Sahlins, p. 27.

subject to common conceptual operations.”<sup>37</sup> Two final aspects help to define performative structures. They are temporal and highly contingent. In other words, meanings are not necessarily evident at the exact moment that the actions occur, and similar acts can acquire different meanings at different times.

Although Sahlins develops these ideas in a study of the ways in which sexual relations helped to determine the pre-modern Hawaiian political and social structure, they are nonetheless applicable to understanding the different functions of parliamentary debate. Indeed, parliaments share many of the traits described by Sahlins, and these are evidenced in the debate over *Thermidor*'s suppression. Instead of arising from an existing political coalition, debate that January day played a significant role in restoring and securing arrangements that had begun to fray. Had Clemenceau's fiery rhetoric not shaken the resolve of moderate republicans, perhaps the debate would have helped constitute a new political coalition of Royalists and Opportunists. Regardless of the specific outcome, the larger point is that it was the act of debating that yielded the relationships that structured French politics. Moreover, by using the discussion to cement an alliance that appeared to be weakening, Radicals like Clemenceau married their own personal interests to supporting the government's ban on further performances of Sardou's work, much the same way that Reinach challenged that alliance by raising the issue in the first place. The fact that Sardou himself explained the suppression and debate as the product of political machinations behind the scene also indicates that others, and not just those seated in the Assembly, clearly understood the deeper meanings being constructed in the hemicycle that afternoon. Nor was the contingent nature of what had been accomplished lost on anyone. Freycinet's government was saved, the republican coalition held fast, but for how long and on what terms? As it turns out, the Radicals had little to fear. Despite some setbacks in the wake of the Panama Scandal, over which Clemenceau temporarily lost his seat in the Chamber, the Dreyfus Affair would forever alter the political makeup of France in a few years and place the Radicals firmly in command.<sup>38</sup> That brings us to a new context, however, and a very different set of performances.

To recognize the performative nature of parliamentary debate raises new questions and frameworks for us to explore, but all of that rests squarely on a foundation constructed by microhistory. Like all debates, the confrontation over *Thermidor*'s suppression was something of a palimpsest. What began as a debate of censorship, and then morphed into a clash over the Revolution's meaning, actually had little to do with either. That becomes evident only by applying the techniques associated with microhistory. By reducing the scale of analysis to one debate, such an approach permits a more complete analysis of the myriad factors that shape discussion both inside and outside parliamentary chambers. Indeed, debates ultimately include a wide range of participants, from legislators and staff to the media and constituents, each of whom enters the fray with different purposes and expectations. Microhistory brings to the fore all of the intricate warp and weft of the resulting relationships. In this instance, a fluid political environment and a shifting electoral calculus played a far greater role than a demonstration outside the Comédie-Française in determining the course and outcome of the debate. In addition, placing parliamentary discussions into larger cultural contexts underscores how dominant tropes shape the terms of debate. Given its overarching importance to the press, melodrama gave this

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<sup>37</sup> Sahlins, p. 30.

<sup>38</sup> The Panama Scandal refers to the corruption surrounding the efforts of a French engineering firm to raise funds for the construction of the first canal across the Panamanian isthmus in the 1880s. The press exposed the scandal in September of 1892.

session a dramatic turn that easily rivaled anything that Sardou and his contemporaries could churn out. Finally, such a focus highlights the interplay between structure and individual action, allowing full play for the role of contingency and personality. In this case, Clemenceau's contentious intervention did much to influence the tenor and content of his colleagues' reactions. In short, then, this technique recognizes the pronounced complexities of parliamentary debate, and offers a useful means of assessing the interplay of their various features. Beyond that, it cultivates the conclusion that such discussions can sometimes be usefully perceived and studied as performance. As a result, it is perhaps time to add two new methodologies to our quest to understand parliamentary debate more fully, microhistory and the methodology rooted in the relatively new discipline of performance studies.