**Between Justice and Politics:**
*The Ligue des droits de l’homme, 1898-1945*

**Roundtable Review**

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William Irvine has hitherto trained his considerable skills as an historian on the Third Republic's political Right. His first book examined the policies of the Fédération Républicaine, a conservative group, arguing that for the Federation during the 1930s the defence of the existing social-economic order increasingly took precedence over other issues, notably national defence. His second book focused on the pre-war Boulanger Affair in which he maintained that the Boulangist movement was quickly co-opted by the old conservative, monarchical Right whose leaders recognized the need to transform themselves in what was becoming an age of mass politics. Shortly afterwards, in a reassessment of the Croix de Feu/Parti Social Français, Irvine suggested that this mass organization might well be viewed as fascist and that French fascism, by extension, should be seen as a far more important phenomenon than many scholars had contended.¹

Given Irvine’s obvious taste for critical argumentation, his decision to examine the Ligue des Droits de l’Homme, a venerable institution of the Third Republic associated with the Left rather than the Right, is all the more welcome. And, true to form, Irvine, in this crisply-written and vigorously argued book, offers a sharp and largely unflattering portrait of the League that is likely to prove provocative. Although founded at the time of the Dreyfus Affair to defend individual rights, the League, according to Irvine, quickly became something far less inspiring: a platform for the politically ambitious, a patronage machine, a local talking shop, a forum for the airing of petty grievances. But Irvine has a more fundamental criticism of the League. In a version of Julien Benda’s Trahison des Clercs, he accuses the League of sacrificing its principles on the altar of politics and of Centre-Left politics in particular. Despite its claim to stand above the political fray, the League threw itself into political battles on behalf of governments and issues that had little, if anything, to do with the defense of civil liberties. If increasingly bitter divisions within the League was one result of this betrayal, another was the loss of its political-moral compass, culminating during Vichy in the involvement of leading pre-war members in collaboration.

As Irvine’s book is already the subject of a thorough H-France review by J.P Daughton, I will limit myself to raising a few questions in the hope of encouraging further discussion.² Was


the League a failure? Although Irvine does not explicitly say that it was, his argument certainly points in this direction. But, if so, this begs the question of a failure for whom? Presumably not for most of the League’s leaders who chose to participate in partisan politics. Even if the League’s leadership could not foresee the consequences of its initial decisions, there is no evidence that it desired a League along the lines of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) – a leaner, more focused organization that remained aloof from day-to-day politics. Nor was the League necessarily a failure for its many members seeking a local lieu de sociabilité, support for a job application, or political contacts. Even the counterfactual argument that an ACLU-type League would have been more successful, is open to question on two counts. First, it is not obvious that such a League would have been any more united. As Irvine’s brief sketch of the ACLU’s history indicates, the attempt to detach principles from politics would likely have been contested by members, some of whom would have interpreted any such attempt as a political choice while others would have decried what they saw as the wrong political choice. It also worth adding that the ACLU has been and is seen by many Republicans as extremely partisan, which is to say pro-Democratic. Would not a French version of the ACLU have been similarly attacked by the Right in France? Second, it is not clear that an ACLU-type League would have succeeded in better defending civil rights or, more concretely, women’s suffrage, the rights of religious congregations, and freedom of the Press. Such a League would have been much smaller and arguably unable to wield much influence on politicians in what was a parliament-centered political system. In any event, the argument rests on a counterfactual that would need to be much further developed to be convincing, although here obvious methodological problems would arise. In the absence of a more elaborate counterfactual argument, the most that one can confidently say is that an ACLU-type League would likely have been more faithful to its founding principles, but this does not get us very far.

Perhaps more important than whether the League was a failure is the question of why it developed the way it did. Irvine traces the League’s history up to 1945, identifying the years 1906-11 as the critical period when the League became “more or less exclusively a formation of the Left.” (40) But he has less to say about why this happened, largely, I suspect, because of the book’s resolute focus on the League itself. In the conclusion Irvine remarks that the League “had been the quintessential example of the political culture of the Third Republic.” (220) Unfortunately, however, little effort is made to link the two subjects, for if Irvine is right then more discussion is needed of the Third Republic’s political culture (or cultures) in order to understand the League’s evolution and its place in French politics. More to the point, such a discussion would help to answer the question of whether the League’s politicization could reasonably have been avoided. Although there is no need to bandy about national stereotypes, the Third Republic’s politics do appear to have been deeply partisan with clear divisions between political camps or traditions, even if the borders between the Right and Left were sometimes permeable. To be sure, one might claim that there was a widespread consensus in support of a “bourgeois Republic” and that political fireworks were largely rhetorical exercises, serving to disguise a common

commitment to the defence of the social-economic order.³ But such functionalist arguments tend to overlook the subjective aspect of politics, the role of beliefs, prejudices, passions, and historical memory. All these elements work to create divisions, and all of them were amply in evidence during much of the Third Republic’s life. In this context, it is asking a great deal of people who are politically aware to remain detached from politics.

Take the case of the League’s commitment to the defence of the Republic. For Irvine this was largely an excuse for inaction. As he writes: “For far too many in the League, leaders as well as rank as file, la république en danger was an intellectually lazy shortcut serving no purpose but to spare them the possibly inconvenient political consequences of living up to their professed beliefs.” (110) Perhaps this was the case for some, but was it for all or even most members. Odile Rudelle and Serge Berstein, among others, have argued that the Republic’s early, embattled years left lasting marks on successive generations of Republican politicians which predisposed them to view the Republic as a vulnerable, frequently endangered creation. The result was the dominance of the “republican model”, a rigid form of republican ideology that fostered a defensive reflex in which criticism of the regime was interpreted as anti-republican.⁴ Although Rudelle and Berstein use this “republican model” to explain the paucity of political reform during the Third Republic, the more important point for our purposes is the possibility that many Republicans and presumably League members were convinced that vigilance was called for. Irvine contends that there was no clerical peril after the 1880s and suggests that the army was largely apolitical before 1940. (109-110, 231, fn. 23) The latter claim in particular is open to doubt, but more generally one might ask if it is wise to refer to an objective political reality that is separate from the beliefs and understanding of people at the time.

Given the political context, is it all that surprising that for many members the League claim to be the “conscience of democracy” entailed defending the Republic against its real and perceived enemies, which in turn meant participating in day-to-day politics? And participation required getting one’s hands dirty – making compromises, establishing priorities, and even choosing the lesser of two evils. This is not to defend all the League’s choices. As Irvine intimates, it is difficult to see how the pros and cons of automobile insurance fell within the League’s remit, however broadly the latter was defined. But it is to suggest that many, if not most, League members might not have perceived the contradiction, which Irvine insists existed, between “being a defender of civil liberties and a committed member of the political left.” (4) Arguably for them, principles divorced from politics were as deplorable as politics divorced from principles.


There are two final questions. The first one concerns the League and Vichy. Irvine describes the wartime collaboration of many pre-war members with Pétain’s regime and the German occupiers as an especially black mark on the League. But did this phenomenon have much to do with the League and its pre-war activities? Did not the trauma of defeat in 1940 play a greater role, seemingly discrediting earlier beliefs and positions – for League as well as for non-League members? True, as Irvine recounts, the question of the proper response to Nazi Germany and, ultimately, of war and peace was fracturing and even poisoning the League well before the defeat. But these questions also tore apart political parties, dissolving previous divisions between the left and right and, in some cases, prefiguring the new political alignments under Vichy. The League’s experience, in other words, reflected that of French politics in general, which suggests that the problem lay not so much with the League but with the intractable nature of the issues involved. Equally to the point, the extremely contentious nature of foreign policy during the 1930s indicates that the issue was too urgent to ignore, the stakes simply too great, for League members to have followed Irvine’s advice and declare that “it is simply not our issue.” (159)

The second question concerns the League’s relationship with political parties on the Left. Irvine remarks that for much of its history one of the League’s self-assigned tasks was that of “holding together the diverse fractions of the Left.” (77) This raises the question of why the League existed at all. Why were its members not content with membership in a political party such as the Socialists or the Radical-Socialists, both of which fulfilled some of the social and patronage functions of the League? Why, in short, did so many people join the League? Any answer at this point is speculative, but perhaps it had something to with a perceived need at the local and national levels to group together in some organized form the various elements of the Left. And, if so, perhaps this testifies to a perceived need for unity against the Republic’s enemies on the Right and within the Church and Army. From this perspective, the League might be seen as a type of Rassemblement Populaire/Front Populaire avant la lettre, which also might help to explain its apparent loss of steam from the mid-1930s, when the need for the League became less apparent.

All told, more on the Third Republic’s political culture and politics would have been welcomed. But this is to take nothing away from an excellent study, one whose clear and provocative thesis will, one hopes, stimulate further research into the League and the larger political context surrounding its activities.

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