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CRUCIBLE OF FRENCH ANTICLERICALISM: THE CONSEIL MUNICIPAL DE PARIS, 1871–1885

During the Third Republic, despite the disaster of the Commune, the city of Paris continued to exercise an incalculable influence over the destiny of the French nation. That was true not only because Paris was Paris, the solar plexus of the francophone universe, but also because the Commune had embodied one important aspiration that was shared by millions of French citizens of various political persuasions: the urge to secure a tradition of strong municipal government. We know that this was by no means an exclusively Parisian impulse, although it doubtless had a unique importance there.[1] Uniqueness was guaranteed after 1871, if for no other reason, by law, which stipulated that Paris was the only metropolis of France without a mayor, to be administered by the Prefect of the Seine in conjunction with the popularly elected Municipal Council of Paris. Although extensive documentary evidence of the workings of the Paris city government is housed in the Archives of the Seine, there has been remarkably little study of that subject.[2] What follows can only be a brief glimpse into the inner chambers of civic administration in the French capital; but this should be sufficient to evaluate how crucial a role was played by the Municipal Council of Paris in the early Third Republic.

The disarray of Paris in wake of the Commune lasted for several months, during which the charred shell of the Hôtel de Ville served both as symbol and symptom. Not until early August 1871 did the Prefect of the Seine call the CMP into extraordinary session, explaining simply that »the situation is extremely difficult.«[3] The Council's first act was to elect a provisional president. Seventy ballots were cast: 69 for Eugène-Joseph Vautrain and one for Georges Clemenceau (quite possibly his own vote). This election is a trifle worth retaining, even though its significance could not have been known then to any member of the Council. By 1875 Clemenceau would be elected president of the CMP, and his progress within its sessions during those early years is our best clue to the emerging character of municipal government in Paris under the republic. We know that he had been mayor of the 18th arrondissement during the volatile events on Montmartre that touched off the explosion of the Commune; and his efforts to mediate between the communards and the Thierist regime in Versailles are well documented. Yet, curiously, the relaunching of his political career in the

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[1] See Louis M. Greenberg, Sisters of Liberty: Marseille, Lyon, Paris, and the Reaction to a Centralized State, Cambridge (Mass.) 1971.

[2] After three-quarters of a century, the standard work is still that of Henri Chrétien, De l'organisation du Conseil Municipal de Paris, Paris 1906. Little has been added for the period after 1870 by Pierre Bernheim, Le Conseil Municipal de Paris de 1789 à nos jours, Paris 1937.

[3] Procès-verbaux du Conseil Municipal de Paris (hereafter cited as CMP), 4 August 1871. During repairs of the Hôtel de Ville in the early 1870s, Council sessions were conducted in the Luxembourg palace.

Municipal Council has been usually ignored or misunderstood, despite the fact that the CMP provided the base for his rise to national prominence.[4]

At the outset, however, it was Vautrain who held the floor. His inaugural speech as president of the Council expressed »the firm [and] absolute intention not to broach political questions and to reserve them for the National Assembly, which alone should address them. (Vigorous approbation).«[5] Thus the CMP was ostensibly to steer an apolitical course befitting the representative body of a city that had choked on political excess only a few months before. And, for the balance of that year, so it seemed. The Council went through the routine business of establishing eight subcommittees, with ten members each, to deal with finances, streets, schools, aquaducts and sewers, property, taxes, and the like. The multitude of problems to be coped with was compounded by a crushing deficit in the municipal budget, more than 50 million francs, a huge albatross left from the foreign and civil wars just concluded.[6]

Precisely this financial liability provided Clemenceau in early 1872 with the theme for his opening assaults on the cautious leadership of the Council. His objection was that the city had no binding legal obligation to provide buildings for religious purposes. Nor should the municipality be forced to support religious personnel. Admittedly, a law of 1837 imposed such payments on Paris, but »laws are variable, [whereas] there are principles that are written in the human conscience and that are above the law.« To be more precise, the existing legislation violated two fundamental principles: »liberty of conscience and . . . communal independence.« Hence, Clemenceau contended, the CMP should simply refuse to appropriate credits to the Church and leave it to the Assembly to assume full responsibility.[7] These statements promptly evoked the kind of hostile retorts they were probably intended to elicit, especially from the Prefect of the Seine, Léon Say, who argued that support for Clemenceau's proposal would give the appearance of being motivated »not by a desire to reduce expenditures in the budget but solely by political bias.«[8]

Therewith the lines were drawn and the issues already defined that would preoccupy the Municipal Council for more than a decade. Clemenceau had unfurled the twin banners of anticlericalism and municipal autonomy. Léon Say's response, in turn, was

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[4] »There is little record of his activities; his role, like that of the Council, remained subordinate and unimpressive.« Thus, in full innocence of the archives, wrote Geoffrey Brunn, Clemenceau, 2nd ed., Hamden (Conn.) 1962, p. 29. Clemenceau's municipal activity has been described as »important«, without further explanation, by Gaston Monnerville, Clemenceau, Paris 1968, pp. 87–8. We are informed only that Clemenceau became »chairman« (sic) of the CMP by Edgar Holt, The Tiger. The Life of Georges Clemenceau 1841–1929, London 1976, pp. 33–35. The most capable of Clemenceau's recent biographers has nothing more to add than this correct but cryptic remark: »His inaugural speech [as president of the CMP] stressed the conflict between the Republican ideal and clericalism.« David Robin Watson, Georges Clemenceau. A Political Biography, London 1974, p. 63.

[5] CMP, 4 August 1871.

[6] CMP, 18 November and 1 December 1871. Under the law of 14 April 1871 the CMP was composed of four members from each arrondissement, a total of eighty, who met in regular session four times a year and who served a four-year term. The number of councillors was later raised to ninety and the term lengthened to six years. See Chrétien, De l'organisation (note 2), pp. 58–79; and Bernheim, Le Conseil Municipal de Paris (note 2), pp. 135–37.

[7] CMP, 29 January and 24 February 1872.

[8] Ibid.

an assertion of the primacy of the central government and a warning against an eruption of secular zeal. It is crucial to keep this conflation of issues in view, because it meant that the steady advance of anticlerical opinion within the CMP could not fail to promote a challenge to the authority of the national parliament and the cabinet.

In retrospect, the early stridency of anticlericalism in the Council and the rapidity of its coalescence are both astonishing. In October 1872 Vautrain barely managed to retain presidency of the CMP by a margin of 38 to 30. Meanwhile Clemenceau came within three votes of being chosen secretary, and his close associate Henri Allain-Target narrowly missed election as second vice-president. Rhetorically as well as statistically, their strength was growing. Clemenceau renewed his assault on municipal allocations to the Church, the continuation of which was »all the more shocking«, he said, because »Paris is the commune of France that ... contains the most freethinkers.« Thus all citizens were being taxed for the benefit of a special interest group, a practice that should be discontinued. Allain-Target seconded Clemenceau in a manner that could not have been more explicit about what was ultimately at stake: »It is time that the question of the separation of Church and State be resolved, and the denial by the Municipal Council of the requested appropriations can only hasten that resolution.« The date of that prescient statement was December 12, 1872; and on that day, for the first time, a religious item was striken from the municipal budget: 31,200 francs to indemnify lodgings for priests. To be sure, this measure was only a tentative beginning but it was also a disquieting omen.[9]

The termination of the Thiers presidency in May 1873 and the creation of a new regime under Marshal MacMahon and the Duc de Broglie provided the circumstances of confrontation: on the one hand, the consolidation of the so-called government of moral order, conservative and frankly Catholic; on the other, the emergence of political and religious radicalism within the CMP. In January 1875 Clemenceau was elected secretary of the Municipal Council, gaining 62 of 73 votes; and in November he became president, winning 39 of 54 ballots cast (with 12 abstentions). Allain-Target meanwhile received an absolute majority as vice-president. It was a Radical sweep, and Clemenceau made the most of it in his inaugural address:

> The dominant trait of our municipal policy – and especially in that we are the true representatives of Paris – is to be profoundly imbued with a secular spirit; that is to say, consonant with the traditions of the French Revolution, we want to separate the sphere of law, to which everyone owes obedience, from the sphere of dogma, which is espoused by only a fraction of the citizenry. On this basis the great struggle has been joined, of which we are the anxious witnesses and which will characterize the end of the century ... We await the shock.[10]

Actually, the controversy developed more slowly and more silently than Clemenceau imagined. Paris was dazzled by the more sensational episodes of the decade: the war scare of 1875, the seize mai crisis of 1877, and the world's fair of 1878. During that time anticlerical gains in the CMP were steady but unspectacular: there were further cuts in municipal appropriations for religious purposes and numerous city schools were converted from sectarian to lay instruction. Some impetus was perhaps

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[9] CMP, 1 October and 12 December 1872. The 31,200 francs were restored in 1873 under pressure from the Broglie cabinet; but that appropriation was steadily reduced by the CMP thereafter.

[10] CMP, 29 November 1875.

meanwhile dissipated when, during the general republican electoral triumph in 1876, Clemenceau and Allain-Target gained seats in the Chamber of Deputies and resigned from the CMP. Yet the course of the Council had been set and a conflict with the government became irrepressible as the MacMahon presidency was approaching its final days in December 1878. Acting on a motion by councillors Morin and Combes, a subcommittee of the CMP decided to »invite« the Prefect of the Seine to proceed »without delay« to effect a total secularization of the teaching staffs of all communal schools in Paris. The reply of the Prefect, Ferdinand Duval, was evasive: in such matters he was obliged to act »not as mayor of Paris but as a representative of the government«; he would therefore need to consult with Minister of Education Agénor Bardoux. This statement drew a sharp retort from Morin: »the duty of the Prefect is to conform to the intentions of the Municipal Council.« Morin went on to accuse the government of procrastination on the school question. In communes all across France, he claimed, the secular demands of municipal councils were being thwarted by disobliging prefects. Morin then cited a list of grievances against congregationist instructors who acted as »agents of the clerical party«, who propagated »a spirit of rebellion against the republic«, who committed excesses of corporal punishment with school children, and who were guilty of »numerous cases of immorality« which revealed »the danger of monastic celibacy«. Not surprisingly, the subcommittee's motion for secularization was thereupon passed.[11]

Ten days later, on December 24, 1878, the Prefect of the Seine returned with a letter from the Minister of Education denying the competence of the Municipal Council to designate teaching personnel in the public schools; such aggrandizement, the letter stated emphatically, was »without foundation«. To this statement the municipal councillors responded with manifest hostility. The ensuing debate became emotional, with one Council member finally declaiming that »congregationist instructors, obedient to an occult pressure, have declared war against republican institutions. It is the duty and the right of the Council to combat such enemies.« Thereupon, a motion to limit the salary of all clerical personnel to a legal minimum was adopted by a margin of 64 to 3.[12]

Although hardly an insurrectionary act, this ballot constituted another challenge to the Prefect of the Seine and was intended, through him, to send a message of defiance to the government. But both the challenge and the message soon proved to be gratuitous. In January 1879 control of the Senate (as well as the Chamber) fell into republican hands; Marshal MacMahon ceded the presidency of the republic to Jules Grévy; and meanwhile the ostentatious reconciliation of Bismarck's Germany with Leo XIII's papacy signaled the end of the Kulturkampf and the beginning of a time when French anticlericals no longer needed to endure charges that they were acting as agents of the Kaiser.[13] Both domestic and international circumstances thereby became propitious for those policies long advocated by the Council. Appropriately, the

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[11] CMP, 14 December 1878.

[12] CMP, 24 December 1878.

[13] This interpretation of foreign and domestic affairs will be elaborated in the forthcoming sequel to my study of »The German Influence in France after 1870: The Formation of the French Republic«, Chapel Hill 1979.

government designated as the new Prefect of the Seine Ferdinand Hérold, a former member of the CMP, a parliamentary deputy from the Department of the Seine, and a notorious freemason. In his first session with the Council, Hérold stressed his credentials as a devout Parisian and expressed delight that he was back among his »old comrades in arms.« It was clearly a speech of rapprochement, yet not entirely without equivocation: »I do not believe in the infallibility of legislators. Let us therefore attempt to change the law if it is bad. But the law is the law; as long as it exists, it must be obeyed.« Then, apparently aware that his statement might strike Council members as somewhat fainthearted, Hérold offered a word of reassurance. If progress were slow, he concluded, »do not fear that I shall forget to march.« Council President Thulié reciprocated in kind. He emphasized the shared objective that »the faculty of our schools be exclusively secular«, and he observed that Hérold's appointment as Prefect represented »a serious guarantee for the future«.[14]

The future did not, however, follow effortlessly from this cordial scene inside the Hôtel de Ville. Instead, two factors recreated a mood of confrontation. One was the appearance of Jules Ferry as an innovative and influential Minister of Education and Religion. While agreeing with the principle of secularization, Ferry was unwilling to allow the CMP to dictate either the specific policies or the pace of educational reform. In short, the Municipal Council was not the National Assembly. »If the judicial question is simple«, Ferry instructed Hérold, »the question of conduct is much more complex.«[15] This obiter dictum implied that the right of the central government to appoint teachers to the public schools was definitively established by law; only in the application of policy should the Prefect of the Seine show any willingness to negotiate with the Municipal Council. At the Hôtel de Ville Hérold defended Ferry's statement and attempted to explain it: »He will proceed slowly in order to act more surely; he will advance step by step in order not to retreat.«[16] Thus Ferry's firm principles were evident, but they included a gradualist approach that would avoid precipitous action and the appearance of religious persecution.[17]

The second factor was a further radicalization of the CMP itself. Council sessions during the summer of 1879 were punctuated with reports of ugly incidents of childbeating in the congregationist schools of Paris. Such stories did not fail to arouse open anger among the councillors and to serve as justification for demands that secularization be forced to a rapid conclusion. A formal motion that every priest and nun in the primary schools be replaced forthwith by a lay teacher was introduced in

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[14] CMP, 1 February 1879. Thulié may well have recalled Hérold's earlier statement in the Council that »like Clemenceau« he favored »the separation of Church and State«. He also insisted, however, on his respect for law and order. Ibid., 12 December 1872. See Gabriel Hanotaux, Histoire de la France contemporaine (1871–1900), 4 vols. Paris 1903–1908, IV, 426.

[15] CMP, 27 February 1879. In his instructions to Hérold, Ferry left no doubt about competence: »C'est à l'Etat seul, par l'organe du Préfet, qu'appartient la décision.« But he cautioned against overly zealous application of policy: »Tout ce que donnerait au changement des maîtres le caractère d'une révolution violente, d'une mesure excessive et précipitée, ou l'apparence d'une persécution, compromettrait la réforme même.« Ferry to Hérold, 27 February 1879, Archives Nationales, Paris, F[17] 9196.

[16] CMP, 27 February 1879.

[17] Hanotaux, Histoire (note 14), IV, 597–616. On Ferry's legislative program, also see Antoine Prost, L'enseignement en France, 1800–1967, Paris 1968, pp. 191–203; and Jean-Marie Mayeur, Les débuts de la Troisième République 1871–1898, Paris 1973, pp. 111–19.

July and approved unanimously, save one vote, in August.[18] From that time forward, the Municipal Council displayed increasing impatience with what it viewed as a dilatory performance by Ferry's ministry. The youth of France, as one councillor expressed it, was still »infested with clericalism and superstition«; republicanism could not emerge triumphant until »the day when the separation of Church and school has been accomplished« and French children were no longer exposed to »ridiculous dogmas . . . that the world was created in six days by who knows what God with a large beard.«[19] Again, the Prefect of the Seine was called upon to answer for the government. Hérold pleaded for one more year of time, explaining that he could not suddenly conjure away practical problems of personnel, equipment, and »a minority of the population«. Despite these plausible excuses and other rhetorical felicities by the Prefect (»We are too strong not to be patient«), the Council reaffirmed its demand that complete secularization of the schools be accomplished »with the least possible delay«.[20]

The resulting disaccord reached its culmination in December 1879. Repeated assurances from the Prefect continued to be treated with open skepticism by the Council. As one of his severest critics remarked to his face, Hérold simply seemed confused.[21] Not only was his gradualism unacceptable to the CMP, the ultimate objective of most councillors went far beyond anything as yet contemplated by the government. The real issue was not only secularization of Parisian schools but withdrawal of all government financial support for the Church. Acting as a reporter on the Council's budget for 1880, Jules Roche estimated the total worth of religiously owned property in the city of Paris to be in excess of 240 million francs; calculated at a rate of five percent, the »annual sacrifice« of the municipality was thus more than 12 million francs. In Roche's opinion, the Municipal Council should exercise its »incontestable right« to refuse such payments and thereby »combat religious influence at its very origin«.[22]

For his part, the Prefect of the Seine made no attempt, as unsuccessfully in the past, to argue the merits of the case. Instead, he pointed to three drastic consequences. First, to adopt Roche's resolution would be contrary to law and would thus constitute a legislative act, which was beyond the competence of the CMP. Second, such a measure would force the prompt expulsion of priests and nuns from their lodgings, which would at the least be premature. Third, the total result would be to alter fundamentally the terms of the religious question in France. Addressing Roche, Hérold asked rhetorically: »What does the reporter want? A revision of the Concordat?« In fact, the answer could no longer be in doubt. After some further altercation, the Council approved the motion to divest the Church of all municipal property »au plus tôt«

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[18] CMP, 31 May, 5 July, and 7 August 1879. It is instructive to quote a characteristic incident: »Thulié dit qu'il vient d'être informé qu'à l'école congréganiste de la rue Decamps, un enfant a été frappé et que de nombreuses contusions ont été constaté par le médecin. Il y a quatre mois, dans cette même école, un enfant fut maltraité et blessé au front. En présence de cette récidive, l'Administration jugera sans doute qu'il y a lieu de transformer d'urgence cette école en école laïque.« Ibid., 31 May 1879.

[19] The speaker was Aristide Rey. CMP, 8 November 1879.

[20] Ibid.

[21] CMP, 1 December 1879. Hérold's antagonist on this occasion was Sigismond Lacroix.

[22] CMP, 17 December 1879.

and to eliminate all religious appropriations from the municipal budget of Paris.[23] The conflict between the capital city and the central government thereby reached its most extreme point; and the anticlerical issue, first urged in the Municipal Council of Paris by Georges Clemenceau in 1872, thus attained seven years later its ultimate formulation.

Categorical disapproval of the Municipal Council's position by the national government was immediately forthcoming. Within hours the Minister of the Interior, Charles Lepère, appeared before the Fench Senate and characterized the CMP's decision as »an absolutely illegal action«.[24] Then, on December 23, 1879, the Prefect of the Seine entered a session of the Council to read a decree of annulment sent by Jules Ferry and countersigned by Jules Grévy: »The Municipal Council of Paris has exceeded the limits of its jurisdiction.« For once the chamber was silent and the meeting was quickly adjourned.[25] By no means was the crisis ended, however, nor was the spirit of radical opposition suddenly drained from the Council. But once the government had firmly resolved to draw a line, the terms of the conflict were unmistakably altered and the CMP found itself on the defensive. Three issues of the early 1880s may illustrate this change.

First, a campaign was mounted within the Municipal Council in 1880 to rescind the award of municipal property for the construction of the basilica of Sacré Coeur, a measure that had been ratified by the Assembly in July 1873 at the outset of MacMahon's presidency. The specific occasion for such a belated objection was the recent publication of a statement by the Archbishop of Paris, Monsignor Guibert, in which Sacré Coeur was described as a symbol of national expiation. The draft of a counter-statement, supported by the entire Municipal Council except three members, was sent to its subcommittee on religious affairs. This document castigated Sacré Coeur as »a permanent insult to the intelligence and to the patriotism of Paris and of France, a place devoted to displays of political and religious fanaticism, [and] a constant provocation to civil war . . .« Noting that the Municipal Council of Paris had not been consulted during the parliamentary deliberations of 1873, the resolution urged that the land-grant be abrogated by the republic and the terrain on Montmartre be offered to »a work of national interest«.[26] In early December 1880 the motion was adopted by the CMP in a formal vote. One of its sponsors lamented that a cathedral was being constructed as a deliberate provocation in a section of the city »that counts among the most anticlerical and most republican of Paris«. He suggested that the Council should simply reject the 1873 law and then require the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies to draw the consequences.[27] It goes without emphasizing that such posturing was completely ineffectual and only served to underscore the Council's inability to alter the moderate policy of the Opportunist government then in power.

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[23] Ibid.

[24] Journal Officiel de la République Française, 21 December 1879. Lapère also said: »C'est à moi de faire respecter les lois de l'Etat par le conseil municipal de Paris et par d'autres . . . Dans cette délibération, le conseil municipal s'est complètement fourvoyé; il a, dans cette délibération, violé la loi et je ne crains pas de le dire.« Ibid.

[25] CMP, 24 December 1879.

[26] CMP, 7 October 1880.

[27] CMP, 2 December 1880.

A second issue was the institution of a mayoralty for the municipality of Paris. The structural rationale for such a proposal was manifest: since the Prefect of the Seine, just as any other French prefect, was by definition an agent of the national government, the city would need its own executive in order to assure even a modicum of municipal autonomy. As we have repeatedly observed, frustration of the desire by councillors for a more rapid secularization of schools provided the primary impetus for an innovation of this sort. No matter how sympathetic to the Municipal Council a Prefect of the Seine might be, he was legally bound to implement a policy decided elsewhere than the Hôtel de Ville. By the 1880s it was customary for every Prefect of the Seine to be recruited from Paris and to be responsive to the Council's wishes. Yet the decisive criterion of any bureaucracy – to whom does a functionary report? – remained unaltered. Among those to favor the creation of a mayor was Clemenceau's old friend Charles Floquet, who had succeeded Hérold as Prefect of the Seine but who then resigned the post abruptly in July 1882, as he explained to the Council, because of »my fidelity to the principles of municipal liberty that I have defended all my life«. The Council thereupon voted (49-0 with 25 abstentions) to request that Floquet withdraw his resignation.[28] But the disaffection between Floquet and the French cabinet on the question of a mayoralty for Paris was irremediable. The Council's lack of leverage was again evident. To make matters worse, Floquet's replacement was a career bureaucrat by the name of Oustry, heretofore Prefect of the Rhône. This selection of an outsider, remarked the president of the Council in extending a chilly welcome to him, had »broken brusquely with tradition«. In Oustry's own opening statement to the CMP, he professed with some optimism »an absolute devotion to the interests of the State and of the city of Paris«. Referring to the secularization of Parisian schools, he promised to move forward »as a soldier who goes into battle«.[29] Yet Paris still had no mayor, and the Prefecture of the Seine remained, even more unambiguously than before, an extension of the central government.

The third question that agitated and finally divided the CMP in the early 1880s was control of the police. Allegation about monarchist plots in Paris during January 1883 prompted one councillor to present a motion »that the Prefecture of Police be abolished and that the municipal police be placed under control of the Council«. From the Prefect of Police, Jean-Louis Camescasse came a curt rejoinder: »this question being beyond the prerogatives of the Municipal Council, I regret to announce to you that I shall be unable to respond.«[30] This rebuff, in turn, brought accusations that the government and the Prefecture of Police were shielding monarchists – »enemies of the republic« – even while vigorously persecuting socialists. But there was also some expressed feeling among councillors that the CMP was indeed out of its political depth in this instance and that it would be prudent not to aggravate the situation by a further defiance of governmental authority, especially if it were likely to fail. The ballot

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[28] CMP, 24 July 1882.

[29] CMP, 6 November and 8 November 1882. See BERNHEIM, Le Conseil Municipal de Paris (note 2), pp. 138–40.

[30] CMP, 29 January 1883.

reflected such mixed sentiments: 30 for the motion, one against, and 39 abstentions.[31] Evidently the radical edge of the Council was being blunted. That impression was reinforced in the autumn of 1883 by the appointment of a new and dynamic Prefect of the Seine whose name literally remains odious to every Parisian: Eugène-Réné Poubelle.[32] Like his less combative predecessor Oustry, Poubelle was deliberately imported by the French cabinet from outside Paris in order to enforce the government's will. Both he and the current Council president Mathé began by exchanging the usual pieties. The former expressed hope »for the Municipal Council and the Prefect to cooperate and to prevent antagonism«; whereas the latter stated the Council's anticipation that Poubelle would defend the interests of »this great republican city whose rights have been disregarded for such a long time, despite our constant recriminations«.[33] But neither side was actually disposed to halt the drift of conflict nor able to alter its now predictable course. In February 1884 the outcome was announced to the Council by Mathé with a certain bitterness: »Despite our conciliation, gentlemen, a fundamental and serious blow has been struck against municipal prerogatives: the government, motivated by a sentiment of distrust toward Paris, has had voted by the Chamber of Deputies an integration of the Prefecture of Police to the State.« He added: »In the name of the Parisian populace, we energetically protest.«[34] Yet the issue of the police, like that of religious property and of the Paris mayoralty, was clearly beyond the competence or power of the Municipal Council to determine.

The Council had become the victim of its own success. The adoption of the Ferry educational reforms and the progressive secularization of Parisian public schools in the 1880s deprived the CMP of its most unifying and impelling mission. As Council president Mathé remarked, the Council's role had increasingly become confined to »expediting current affairs«, among which he specified housing, labor relations, metro construction, and garbage collection.[35] The last of these, as every modern resident of Paris can testify, may assume truly mountainous proportions. Precisely that issue broke over the Council in the winter of 1884, providing Poubelle with an unsought opportunity to immortalize himself and with a convenient excuse finally to crush the pretentions of the Municipal Council.

Sanitation had of course been a chronic problem in Paris for centuries. The worst hygenic conditions of the early 1800s, created by a rapidly burgeoning population and marked by outbursts of cholera, were ameliorated during the Second Empire by Baron Haussmann's reconstruction of the city, which relieved some crowding and provided more adequate sewerage.[36] Yet the Parisian habit of setting garbage into the streets, and

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[31] Ibid. The police issue is well summarized by André DANIEL (ed.), L'année politique 1884, Paris 1885, pp. 11–14.

[32] Poubelle had served with the French artillery during the German siege of Paris in 1870. Thereafter he was a prefect under Thiers until May 1873. He became a prefect again in 1878, first in the Doubs, then at Marseille (Bouches-du-Rhône), whence he was called to Paris. He remained Prefect of the Seine from 1883 to 1896. La Grande Encyclopédie, vol. 27, speaks only of his »politique conciliante« with the Municipal Council of Paris during those years. Poubelle ended his public career as the French ambassador to the Vatican, 1896–1898.

[33] CMP, 22 October 1883.

[34] CMP, 4 February 1884.

[35] Ibid.

[36] See David H. PINKNEY, Napoleon III and the Rebuilding of Paris, Princeton 1958.

often leaving it there for days, had persisted. To deal with this matter, Poubelle chose a moment of hiatus after the Municipal Council had terminated its 1883 sessions and before civic elections were held that would return a new slate of councillors in May 1884.[37] The Council's political status was thus in suspension when it convened in special session to debate Poubelle's highly unpopular prefectoral decree that required residents of Paris to dispose of garbage in metal containers – henceforth to be derisively named poubelles – which should not be placed on the street until shortly before the scheduled passage of a collection vehicle.[38] Irate council members gathered to object to the autocratic manner in which the ordinance was being imposed, to denounce »the oppressive legality that paralyzes every initiative of the representatives of the city of Paris«, and to protest the government's »violation of the rights of universal suffrage«. One leftist councillor even charged that the awkward political situation of the Council was another evidence of »reactionary and clerical tendencies« in the government, the deliberate goal of which was »to sow discord in the republican party«. Two motions were presented for debate: one, to encourage parliamentary deputies from the Department of the Seine to interpellate the cabinet on the question of municipal rights; and the second, for the Council itself to censure the government. If one were to believe orators in the Hôtel de Ville, another major crisis was imminent.[39]

The reality was that a credible challenge by the Municipal Council of Paris had long ceased to be a threat to the French government. Poubelle's reply to the CMP was a deflating negative: both motions were illegal. The Municipal Council could not pretend to extend its political clout beyond its own meeting chambers. »Your decisions«, he told the councillors bluntly, »have but one executor, the Prefect.« Moreover, the Council had no right to pass judgment on governmental policy. To persist in doing so was »to usurp a part of the national sovereignty«. Amidst the ensuing protests one Council member rose to exclaim: »And you, monsieur le prefet, you are usurping . . . the functions of the mayor of Paris.«[40] Such theatricality continued during subsequent Council sessions, but to no avail whatever. Poubelle was

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[37] The unusual delay in electing a new slate of municipal councillors in Paris was related to the passage on 5 April 1883 of a new French municipal code, which, although not directly applicable to Paris, had some bearing on voting procedures there. See the summary by DANIEL, L'année politique 1884 (note 31), pp. 79–82.

[38] Poubelle's decree drew strong protests especially from Parisian ragpickers (chiffonniers), who feared unemployment and destitution as a result of its strict enforcement. And as one editorial commented: »Il n'y a pas que les chiffonniers que la récente ordonnance préfectorale, interdisant le versement des ordures ménagères sur la voie publique, met en émoi. Les propriétaires et les concierges, dont elle engage la responsabilité, s'en émeuvent également.« Le Temps, 2–5 January 1884. The regulations were quite specific. Containers could have a capacity of no less than 40 liters and no more than 120 liters. If circular, their diameter could be no more than 55 centimeters; if rectangular, the dimensions could not exceed 50 by 80 centimeters. They must have two handles, be galvanized, painted, and properly maintained, with an indication of the street address on each one. Enforcement of the ordinance provoked public demonstrations as well as confrontations between »chiffonniers« and sanitation workers, all of which was reported by the daily press: »L'enlèvement des ordures ménagères et les chiffonniers«, and »L'arrêté de M. Poubelle sur les ordures«, ibid., 17–18 January 1884.

[39] CMP, 1 February 1884.

[40] Ibid.

unmoved, while municipal elections approached that were soon to change the composition and character of the CMP. At the final meeting of the retiring Council, President Mathé had to concede in his concluding remarks that a »frankly republican« municipal administration had not been achieved; and »as for those of us whose mandate will expire in a few moments, we protest one last time against the feeling of mistrust that weighs on Paris. (Prolonged applause).« According to the transcript of the CMP, the meeting began breaking up with outbursts of »Vive la République! Vive Paris!« But the last voice recorded in the minutes was that of M. Poubelle: »I declare the session adjourned.«[41]

The history of the Municipal Council of Paris in the early Third Republic presents in miniature two of the most fundamental problems of nineteenth-century France. In religious terms, the central issue was support of the Concordat versus separation of Church and State. The records of the CMP demonstrate clearly how Parisian Radicals prefigured the much more moderate republican leadership of the republic in urging a policy of secularization in public education. The actions of the Municipal Council were both a provocation and a prod to the national government. One cabinet after another attempted to contain an increasingly virulent anticlericalism in Paris which was seeping steadily into the mainstream of French politics. The Ferry laws thus represented, among other things, a victory for the Municipal Council. But that culmination proved costly, since it deprived the Council of its most compelling crusade. The vital impetus of the 1870s was lost in the decade thereafter. Another entire generation would pass before the full implications of anticlericalism were realized by the separation of Church and State. For the time being, in the mid-1880s, the French government still preferred to pull up its defenses around the Concordat, and the impotence of the Municipal Council was revealed.

In political terms, the focus of debate was the authority of centralized government versus local autonomy. Both the weight of French tradition and the recent disaster of the Paris Commune fell heavily in the balance against the ambitions of Municipal Council. Hence there was always something essentially quixotic about the efforts of municipal councillors to defy the Prefect of the Seine or to modify the pattern of French administration to suit their own purposes. The religious question temporarily camouflaged these elementary facts of French politics, but once sanitation replaced secularization as the substance of conflict, the pretentions of the Municipal Council could be appraised at their true worth.

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[41] CMP, 26 April 1884.