

Transcript of special episode: Ordinary Citizens and the French Third Republic

JH: Welcome to CALLIOPE speaks, where we're tapping the phone calls of French history and eavesdropping on the elections of the past

In this special edition, we sit down with team member Karen Lauwers, who just published a new book. It's entitled "Ordinary Citizens and the French Republic", and in it, Karen examines the negotiations between People and Parliament that took place in the first decades of the 20th century. The book reimagines democratization as a range of practices that bridge the gap between top-down institutional parliamentary representation and unorganised grass-roots politics.

It also makes room for the opinions of 'ordinary citizens' about what representation was, and how it should be done. And it contains a number of illuminating stories of conversation and negotiation between these ordinary citizens and their representatives. One of these stories begins in 1936: it was election time, and Louis Marin, the representative for the department de Meurthes et Moselles, receives a rather curious letter.

KL: During election times deputies often received letters just to congratulate them. Sometimes it was purely a congratulation, but most often it was a congratulation disguised as a more personal question about a very personal financial situation, but even then the description about the election times and how men or women perceived taking part in the elections is very interesting in and of itself. There were a few women writing to Louis Marin, congratulating him first with his election results. He had been winning once again, and they explained that they had been sitting by the radio waiting anxiously for the result to come in. And 1936 is an important year in this regard, because for his particular party or political group, it had become more and more difficult to win.

But Louis Marin won every time. And so women were placing bets and they wrote it in their letters as well that they had made a bet with one of their male peers and that they had won because they knew that Louis Marin would win. And others were anxiously waiting by the radio because this year was an exciting year. Since his other party members didn't really do a good job in other departments. So they were waiting while their fathers and brothers were at the cafe, the local cafe and talking and waiting there to hear the results. So even though the men and the women were in separate spaces and the men were at the bar and the women were at home in their private space, listening to the radio, both performed a political act, basically, uh, both were politically aware. They wanted to actively gather knowledge. And even though it was tied to this one specific deputy, it was to express their support, their political support for a deputy, perhaps to get something done for further along the line. I think we cannot really ignore this as being a political act or being politically aware because even though it was performed in a private space, as opposed to the male public space, it still expressed the form of creativity of political knowledge, of wanting to be part of politics. And so, yeah, it's also an example, an anecdote that I liked very much there and it shows how important it is to not only focus on the written word as in, on the discourse itself, but also on the descriptions of performative acts and on what works and perhaps failed at times and how people try to creatively solve these problems, not necessarily in a written way, but also by performing different actions. Or even for example, another woman described that she was standing in the metro and reading over the shoulder of one of her fellow passengers, because she couldn't afford a newspaper.

She didn't know what was going on with the results, but still she found a way to find out very soon, who had won by secretly looking over the shoulder of one of her fellow passengers. And even just the fact that she wanted to mention this and wanted to mention how she had found out about the results shows this

closer connection, this feeling of proximity towards their representative and their active engagement in politics in a certain way.

JH: The focus of this history of democracy and representation is on creative strategies to be politically active, for example by enacting modes of proximity to politicians...this is a very different story than the one we know about democracy, which often centers on the evolution of legislation or narratives of growing transparency...but this book turns away from such neat storylines of progress or of clearly delineated democratization. It is much more interested in questions of struggle and of crisis.

KL: What I'm interested in is how women, and men as well, dealt with a failing democracy with a democracy in crisis, which is also still a very popular topic nowadays in the present, like is democracy in crisis currently?

And to answer that question, it's very interesting to look at the past as well and to how people dealt with it in the past. And in the French case, it's very different from the British case, because we know Britain from its suffragettes. But my question was like, why didn't this phenomenon exist in France? And how did French women cope with the lack of votes and how did they think they were represented or not properly represented? And what struck me for example, was that they asked basically the same questions as their male peers, but also used a very similar language. Referring to the representative as their representative, believing that they had some sort of an influence on, of course their male family members who were allowed to vote. And by being an active member of society, doing the right thing. So looking into their interpretation of rights and duties and values of the Republic. And of what representation was to them. That's what interests me the most, when I look into letters, letters, or petitions from ordinary citizens.

JH: The 'ordinary citizens' that Karen has studied, take center stage in her book, and they appear as very active historical players. Rather than relying on theoretical or legislative definitions on who was a citizen, or who counted as a citizen, we're invited to focus on the actions – and the writings – of ordinary people and we find out that 'doing politics' could consist of a number of activities, and not just of casting a vote.

This brings a lot of people into the story of citizenship that we would perhaps not expect...such as, for example, some very politically active friars and nuns.

KL: So yes, nuns in the third Republic were the biggest outcasts of this Republic because for starters, women didn't have the rights to vote. It was only introduced in 1944 and the actual vote came in 45.

And because of the laws of the early 20th century, the, of the laicization and the separation of church and state congregants were not allowed to teach. And so this caused that nuns were the greatest outcasts of the Republic by being a woman and being a religious woman at that. And so it was very surprising to me to find a lot of letters from nuns representing their whole convent, or even speaking on behalf of a Bishop in their letters to individual deputies, to individual members of parliament. And so I analyzed a lot of letters from individual citizens to individual French députés and I'm calling them citizens because in the French third Republic, they were said to be citizens, but of course, by lacking the vote, they were not really political citizens. And even their financial individuality was also curtailed. So they were French citizens, but not fully. It was interesting to see how before even having the vote before even being fully represented in parliament, to see what they thought was proper representation, how they thought they could mobilize their representative in parliament. For example, one of these women, I think you were referring to, uh, this woman who in 1936, wrote a message to Louis Marin, conservative representative. She was not a nun herself, but she mentioned in her letter.

that she performed an act that was to her, the only way in which young French women were able to contribute to the nation, to serve the nation. And that was by driving several crippled friars to the polls. And so she wrote it in a very, in a lovely metaphorical way. By saying that she offered him a bouquet of votes. Because she had driven several crippled fryers to the polls. And so those were actual votes, which he would otherwise not have. And so even though she couldn't offer her own vote, she had provided him with multiple others by men who would otherwise not have voted. So it's a very creative way in which he still contributed to the vote and to politics in general, but also an explanation of a lack. So what I'm interested in basically is this failing democratization.

JH: Many of the characters in this book do creative work in defining citizenship for themselves, not as an ideological or intellectual exercise, but practically working out what kind of things a citizen would do...and one of the things a French citizen did, was to *talk* to one's own representative. Often, that conversation happened in written form, through personal letters. And Karen, being the thorough historian that she is, has done a deep dive into the correspondences of 4 deputies of the Chamber, uncovering the kind of relationship that was established between ordinary citizens and their deputies by analyzing the tone and language of these letters.

KL: The letter writers of the time in France or citizens in general, there was a very high degree of literacy among French citizens of the time because they had compulsory schooling until at least the age of 14. And there was at least a very basic degree of literacy. They also had these manuals, which the middle class at least would have been interested in. And these manuals literally stated: Let's get rid of this so-called beautiful language of earlier times, and just write as if you would speak to a person in the same room, which is also what they seem to be doing. And yeah, these manuals, they didn't really include example letters for addressing a député. So they did include examples for writing to a minister and writing to a protector, for example. And the député was somewhere in between. Sometimes he accumulated mandates and was a minister at the same time. Other times he was perceived as this protector. And so citizens creatively combined this language of writing to a protector, but also to a friend who was sitting next to them. Or to a higher up minister and this resulted in very creative, but also very strange looking sometimes combinations of language, and also often referring to earlier interactions as well, because these letters are so often the result of something else that was lacking, of a lacking performance. The first part of my book is actually revolving around the whole material aspect, the materiality and performativity of contacting a député.

And this could have been outside of the letters as well, but of course the remaining sources are the letters that reflect a failing connection on a different level. For example, some citizens wrote in their letter that hey have been standing on the doorstep of the député in question and had knocked on his door, but that unfortunately he wasn't there. And so that's why they wrote this letter because yeah. How could they otherwise contact him. Other letters refer to an earlier phone call in which the député would have said, apparently that, okay, write me a letter about this, or write a follow-up letter. So they are referring to earlier connections live during a phone call, a meeting during which they shook hands, or like I said, a failure to find him.

And even these failures are very interesting because they also inform us of what people actually thought a representative had to do to properly represent them. Because for example, there were again women, surprisingly, who wrote a letter to Louis Marin, who was residing in Paris at the time, but he actually represented a different district in the east. And so a few women who were in Paris at the time, they try to contact him at his home. They knocked on his door and in their letter they said: Well, unfortunately, we

couldn't find you there, but don't worry. We understand. We understand that you had to represent your people in their district. And so the interesting part about this, is that they focus on representation.

They explicitly refer to representation, but they understood it in the context of being in the district you represented instead of being in the parliament. Being in the chamber where you would actually represent the people. It's because these letters speak of failures and successes, that it becomes interesting to study representation through that lens of these letters.

JH: "Ordinary Citizens and the French Republic" tells stories of failure and success, of proximity and missed opportunities, of what could be seen as either clientelism or clever practices of creative citizenship...and also of a struggle to fully agree on what representation really was or where and how the work of representation was to be carried out

KL: You can also see in the letters and especially their responses, if they are preserved, at least, that the deputies struggled with this themselves, with this balance of being in Paris, but also being in their constituency and writing about: you cannot really hold me accountable for being in parliament where I'm supposed to be, where you elected me to be, and still saying that: Okay, but I will try my best to come back nonetheless, because I do understand. So the struggle is also visible in these responses. I find it interesting to do the research on both sides and especially on this interaction between both sides, between parliament and the people. Because for example, for these French representatives, there are very specific biographies, for example, about a center right or an extreme right representative. And in the scholarship, they are described as either extreme rights or very moderate, and they don't seem to come to an agreement. And so I find it interesting to then look into what citizens actually thought of these representatives.

JH: Calliope speaks is a podcast based on the project "Vocal Articulations of Parliamentary Identity and Empire", which is funded by the European Research Council. You're hearing me, Josephine Hoegaerts, and of course Karen Lauwers, who is a researcher in the project, and whose book was published by Palgrave Macmillan. The music in this episode was composed and performed by Bram Aerts.