

DESERTERS, DRAFT EVADERS AND DEPUTIES

Or how parliamentary history can contribute to subaltern history and vice versa

- **Marnix Beyen** -

Few historical genres seem further removed from subaltern studies than parliamentary history. Certainly with regard to the nineteenth and first decades of the twentieth centuries, parliamentary politics is traditionally viewed as an arena where white, élite men engaged in fierce, sometimes even violent, debates *about*, but not *with*, the people. The cultural turn that has occurred in political – and particularly in parliamentary – history has even widened this gap, since it has tended to deal with political élites as self-contained communities, cherishing and reproducing their own discourses, practices, symbols, and rituals¹. Parliaments were described as institutions more concerned with safeguarding their own autonomy *vis-à-vis* ‘the people’ than with representing them². The people appeared not only to be ‘unfindable’ but parliaments seemed little interested in finding them at all³.

Nonetheless, historians of the parliamentary profession seem to agree that many Members of Parliament spent more of their time doing their constituency work than in political debates or the work of lawmaking. This part of the job consisted of listening to their citizens during audiences (or *surgeries*), reading their letters, and interceding on their behalf with local, regional or national administrations⁴. However, as far as these contacts have been dealt with in the literature, it has been through the lens of clientelism (even fraud and corruption) rather than politics: the citizens, it was assumed, approached their MP in order to receive personal favors; the MP tried to fulfill their requests for electoral (and therefore also personal) reasons. Serving the general interest, which ideally was and is the core business of parliamentary politics, appeared to be totally absent from these interactions. The ‘ordinary citizens’ in this tradition of research appear as consumers and producers in a political

economy satisfying the personal interests of both parties. Their demands are deemed to be social rather than political⁵.

Another research tradition, which focuses on the political discourses addressed by political élites to ‘the people’, does treat constituents as important political actors. Indeed, historians such as James Vernon and Jon Lawrence fruitfully start from the assumption that political discourses and practices have to adapt themselves to the political preferences of local constituencies and must therefore take these seriously⁶. The ‘popular politics’ which these same historians highlight, is articulated within political sociabilities and during collective mobilizations at local level. It expresses itself above all during elections or periods of crisis⁷. The ‘ordinary’ citizen in ‘ordinary’ times remains beyond the scope of these historians’ work⁸. In this respect, even this research tradition seems to share the assumption of

1. The body of recent literature on the history of Western European parliaments is hard to oversee. To name just a few of them: THOMAS MERGEL, *Parlamentarische Kultur in der Weimarer Republik. Politische Kommunikation, symbolische Politik und Öffentlichkeit im Reichstag*, Düsseldorf, 2002; ELIANE GUBIN, JEAN-PIERRE NANDRIN, EMMANUEL GERARD & ELS WITTE (red.), *Histoire de la Chambre des Représentants de Belgique, 1830-2002*, Brussels, 2003; HERVÉ FAYAT, “Bien se tenir à la Chambre. L’invention de la discipline parlementaire”, in *Cahiers Jean Jaurès*, 153, 2005; JEAN GARRIGUES (red.), *Histoire du Parlement de 1789 à nos jours*, Paris, 2007; JOUKE TURPIJN, *Mannen van gezag. De uitvinding van de Tweede Kamer, 1848-1888*, Amsterdam, 2008; ERIE TANJA, *Goede politiek. De parlementaire cultuur van de Tweede Kamer, 1866-1940*, Amsterdam, 2010. 2. See my book review of Turpijn, *Mannen van gezag*, in *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, 125, 2010, p. 102-103. 3. PIERRE ROSANVALLON, *Le peuple introuvable. Histoire de la représentation démocratique en France*, Paris, Gallimard, 1998. 4. YVES BILLARD, *Le métier de la politique sous la IIIe République*, Perpignan, 2003, p.150. 5. See for example FRÉDÉRIC MONIER, *La politique des plaintes. Clientélisme et demandes sociales dans le Vaucluse d’Édouard Daladier (1890-1940)*, Paris, 2007; JENS IVO ENGELS, FRÉDÉRIC MONIER & NATALIE PETITEAU (eds.), *La politique vue d’en bas : pratiques privées, débats publics dans l’Europe contemporaine (XIXe-XXe siècles)*, Paris, 2011. 6. See JAMES VERNON, *Politics and the people. A study in English political culture, 1815-1867*, Cambridge, 1993; JON LAWRENCE, *Speaking for the people. Party, language and popular politics in England, 1867-1914*, Cambridge, 2002. 7. See for example GITA DENECKERE, *Het katoenoproer van 1839. Collectieve actie en sociale geschiedenis*, Nijmegen, 1999. 8. For a recent exception to this rule, see ADELIN BEAUREPAIRE-HERNANDEZ & JÉRÉMY GUÉDI (eds.), *L’entre-deux électoral. Une autre histoire de la représentation politique en France (XIXe-XXe siècle)*, Rennes, 2015.

parliamentary historiography that the level of political awareness among individual citizens throughout the nineteenth and large parts of the twentieth century was very low. Only collective action, guided by 'intermediate politicians', could steer their attention away from the personal to the collective, or even the general, interest. In the historiography dealing with popular politics and collective action, parliamentary élites appear as an object of contestation but seldom as a historical actor⁹. In that sense, parliamentary history and the history of popular politics seem to mirror one another.

An interesting paradox thus arises : although the very notion of 'popular politics' is construed in order to jettison the idea of the 'non-political' citizen, it nonetheless appears to strengthen it; the citizen is only politicized insofar as the very notion of politics is widened so as to include informal practices at a local level, most often geared towards the contestation of official power. As soon as the ordinary citizen comes into contact with 'formal' politics – with those holding political office – they appear to become non-political again, and engage only in clientelist or even fraudulent practices.

This same paradox seems to pervade the tradition of subaltern studies, if less overtly.

Arguably even more than any other research tradition, the Indian subaltern studies project has contributed to widening the very notion of politics. Indeed, historians like Ranajit Guha and Dipesh Chakrabarty have explicitly rejected distinctions between the 'prepolitical' and the 'political', and stressed that all kinds of everyday religious or bodily practices can contain an element of resistance against hegemonic discourses and frameworks¹⁰. However, these practices were primarily studied insofar as they were part of the development of 'collective consciousness' and of 'mass resistance'. As Gayatri Spivak noted in a historiographical essay, the authors of the *Subaltern Studies* project tended to present the "subaltern conscience as an emerging collective conscience"¹¹. The individual subaltern's familiarity with, and involvement in, institutional politics on the other hand receive very little attention within this tradition. Even if subaltern practices are interpreted as intrinsically political, the subaltern himself is at the same time situated outside the sphere of democratic politics¹².

When subalterns are studied in European contexts, this same neglect of institutional politics seems to pervade the debate. Older, Marxist-inspired works on the rise of class consciousness and resistance have been replaced by studies in which the subaltern's resistance to organized politics (even of

9. See for example CHARLES TILLY, "Parliamentarization of Popular Contention in Great Britain, 1758-1834", in *Theory and Society*, 26, 1997, p. 245-273. 10. For an overview, see DIPESH CHAKRABARTY, "A small history of *Subaltern Studies*", in Id., *Habitations of Modernity. Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies*, Chicago, 2000, p. 3-19. 11. GAYATRI SPIVAK, "Études subalternes : déconstruire l'historiographie", in Id., *En d'autres mondes, en d'autres mots. Essais de politique culturelle*, Paris, 2009, p. 348-388, specifically p. 363. 12. See in this regard : VIVEK DHARESHWAR & R. SRIVATSAN, "'Rowdy-sheeters': An essay on subalternity and politics", in SHAHID AMIN & DIPESH CHAKRABARTY (eds.), *Subaltern Studies*, 9, Delhi, 1996, p. 201-231.

the Socialist kind) is stressed above all¹³. In another research tradition on the history of subalterns and marginals, the political, as such, is even more absent. A broad range of studies of non-hegemonic groups, indeed, do not view their object through the paradigm of resistance. Rather than investigating how groups as varied as workers, migrants, and vagrants resist hegemonic discourses, these studies focus on the coping strategies they developed to survive in society. Insofar as hegemonic groups appear in these studies, it is more often the police or legal system than the politicians. Indeed, the coping strategies developed by these subalterns often verge on criminal practices. Police reports or legal archives are a useful source through which to study them¹⁴.

In this contribution, I hope to bridge the gap between a parliamentary history which tends to write 'the people' out of politics on the one hand, and a tradition of subaltern studies which tends to write parliament out of politics – or even to disregard politics altogether – on the other. More precisely, I will try to catch the 'political moment' involved in direct interactions between 'ordinary citizens' and their Members of Parliament. Investigating

this moment, I argue, can enrich our view of both parliamentary history and the history of subalternity. In order to do so, I will start from a micro-historical perspective; beginning with the story of an individual French deserter in Belgium in the years preceding the First World War, the article gradually widens in scope to include first the larger group of French deserters in Belgium and then the even broader group of citizens engaged in writing letters to their MPs. Even while widening the focus however, my empirical examples will remain limited to Belgium and France during the first decades of the twentieth century and hence to a historical context which was characterized by the transformation of parliamentary politics into mass democracy. Nonetheless, in the final part of this article, I hope to demonstrate the relevance of this type of research to general reflections on the nature of subalternity and liminality.

I. A repentant deserter

"Chest : two women's busts; in memory of Marie A.M./ right shoulder : thought A M.T. 1 star/ forearm : 5th Hussars 1892/ Back : woman's bust, 2 women, one man"¹⁵.

13. See, for instance, ALF LÜDTKE, *Eigen-Sinn. Fabrikalltag, Arbeitererfahrungen und Politik vom Kaiserreich bis im Faschismus*, Hamburg, 1993; MAARTEN VAN GINDERACHTER, *Het rode vaderland. De vergeten geschiedenis van de communautaire spanningen in het Belgische socialisme voor WOI*, Tiel, 2005. 14. For some of the many examples, see : ANNE WINTER, "'Vagrancy' as an Adaptive Strategy : The Duchy of Brabant, 1767-1776'", in *International Review of Social History*, 49, p 249-277; Id., *Patterns of migration and Adaptation in the Urban Transition: Newcomers to Antwerp, c. 1760- c. 1860*, VUB, unpublished PhD dissertation, 2007. See also the article of Rik Vercammen and Vicky Vanruyssevelt in this issue. 15. Report of the prison of Liège, 2 December 1909. Brussels, General State Archives of Belgium (GSAB), police files on aliens, file 878100: Augustin Caralp.

When reading this description of the tattoos which covered Augustin Caralp's body, the modern-day reader might easily be tempted to classify the man in question as 'marginal'. This is all the more the case if the reader learns that this description was composed by the prison of Liège in December 1909, where Caralp was detained awaiting trial for carrying illegal weapons. The impression that Caralp was living on the margins of Belgian society is further confirmed by the extensive file that the Belgian immigration police established on this French citizen during his stay in Belgium between September 1908 and June 1913. The story of this nearly five-year period almost reads like a novel in which the main character survives by plying all kinds of minor crafts, by resorting to fantasy, trickery, and deceit and roving through the countryside in the hope of remaining out of the grasp of the police.

Caralp, born in Saint-Étienne in 1882, was first noticed by the services of the Belgian Directorate-General for Public Security in November 1908. We immediately learn that his last residence before coming to Belgium was Aïn-Draham in Tunisia where he had deserted from his garrison. He arrived in Liège, where he was first signaled as a mason's helper, but soon afterwards as a vendor of children's toys and small bronze watches. Although the mayor of Liège wrote that "the behaviour of the foreigner Caralp has so far

not been the object of any unfavorable report", an employee at the Directorate-General of Public Security noted that Caralp "inspire[d] him with no confidence whatsoever"¹⁶. He requested a new report, and in the event that this would be negative, suggested Caralp's expulsion by Royal Decree.

Over the following months, the Director-General's suspicion proved to have a some foundation. Not only was Caralp pursued for theft and carrying weapons in Liège, it also turned out that he had already been twice sentenced in France for "beating, wounding, and rebellion"¹⁷. At a later stage, it would be revealed that Caralp had actually been convicted four times in his home country¹⁸. Having been informed that he was tracked by the police, Caralp began to travel, first moving from house to house in Brussels, later to the Walloon cities of Charleroi and La Louvière. Each time the police discovered his presence, he turned out to have disappeared before they could arrest him. Justice did not wait and, in July 1909, Caralp was sentenced *in absentia* to two months' imprisonment and a fine of 26 Belgian francs for theft with another eight days of imprisonment for carrying weapons¹⁹.

Four months later, in November 1909, Caralp was finally arrested while singing a song, the printed version of which was being sold to

16. Letter of Gustave Kleyer, mayor of Liège to the Director-General for Public Security, 18 November 1908; draft report written at the Directorate-General for Public Security (DGPS), undated. *Ibidem.* **17.** Procès-verbal, 26 March 1909. *Ibidem.* **18.** Draft version of a letter from the DGPS to Henri Frick, mayor of Saint-Josse (Brussels), 21 October 1909. *Le Figaro* of 26 June 1904 testifies that Caralp had been arrested as deserter some days before in the rue Saint-Sauveur in Paris. It is not clear whether this arrest was one of the four mentioned in the DGPS' letter. **19.** Public Prosecutor of Liège to the Minister of Justice, 6 October 1909. GSAB, files of the aliens police, file 878100 : Augustin Caralp.

Bruxelles le 14 Février 1913.

Cher Monsieur Marcel Sembat.

Pardonnez-moi si je prends la plume
et entends libérer le vœu d'envie. Mais voyant qu'il n'y
a que vous pour intervenir sur notre sort, je m'empresse
de vous faire part de quelques-uns de nos vœux Français
qui sont en Belgique. Nos hommes et entre eux tout
comme moi, victimes de femmes, c'est à dire qu'ils ont été
mariés avant de partir pour leur service et que n'ayant
pas réfléchi ils ont servi, bien sûr, vous savez, un peu
plusieurs d'entre eux furent très heureux de faire ou ils
apprennent comme moi le gros succès de Schœlcher Poincaré
car on peut le dire. J'y ai tout simplement que notre France
n'a pas eu que tel homme pour lui et l'Etat ça nous
rappelle les bontés de notre ancien Président Laroche.
Surtout on vante le bon cœur et l'humanité de M.
Poincaré, cependant pour tout les Présidents de la
République il y a toujours eu une amabilité pour les
serviteurs et maintenant on parle de la république. C'est peut-
être rapport à la Bourse Bonnet et aux anarchistes
mais Monsieur Sembat, tout le monde ne se réveille
pas et bon nombre de vœux sont prêts à faire main-
forte à la justice pour les faits de ce genre. Maintenant
nous croyons toujours à une guerre avec l'Allemagne
au sujet des affaires Balkaniques et bien nous sommes
prêts à accueillir votre note sans pour notre mère
Patrie pour rattraper la vengeance de 1870. Tout le sang
bien que nous n'aimons pas les Allemands, si vous
parlez en fait de mon père. Je vous le ferai connaître
et je vous prouverai que nous ne sommes pas si lâches
tout notre famille. J'ai écrit mais je le regrette maintenant
je demande au Gouvernement d'avoir un peu d'intelligence.

Letter written on 14 February 1913 by Augustin Caralp to the French socialist journalist and member of parliament Marcel Sembat. (Source : Fonds Marcel Sembat, Archives Nationales de France, 637 AP/31)

the public by his companion Louis Delprat²⁰. The song contained fictitious confidences to the *procureur de la République* by Madame Steinheil who had, some days before, been acquitted of the murder of her husband but who had gained public notoriety ten years before when the President of the Republic, Félix Faure, had died while she was giving him fellatio²¹. What probably made the song popular with the listeners (among whom, according to the report, there were many children) was the great number of sexual allusions it contained²². The text of the song offers us a first glimpse of Caralp's jocular character.

That same character also appears through the long letter that Caralp wrote from prison to the Director-General of Public Security. He stressed his own exemplary behavior extensively and even (wrongly) asserted that he "had not even had one single fine" during his stay in Belgium. Moreover, he stressed that he had obtained authorization to sing and sell the song from the Brussels police and that he would never have done so had he known that he risked arrest as a result. With the rhetorical question, "selling a song, is that a crime ?", he expressed the belief that he would not be expelled from the country. If that were to occur, however, he asked the Director-General for two small request : firstly that he be given a period of 24 hours so that he could fetch his suitcase, clothes, and his remaining

merchandise from his flat; secondly, that he would have the opportunity to leave Belgium for the Netherlands, rather than for his home-country, "for being a French deserter, I cannot go back to France"²³.

Caralp's subtle *oratio pro domo* did not miss its effect. It was decided that he would indeed have 24 hours to leave the country, and that he could do so at a place of his own choosing. Unsurprisingly, however, he used this freedom to disappear once more. Although his expulsion from the country was now ordered by Royal Decree, the police followed Caralp's tracks in vain for the following three years. He was noticed roaming around the Brussels South railway station, and at the Brussels World Exposition of the summer of 1910, a *procès-verbal* was produced against him because he had beaten an industrial entrepreneur from Liège²⁴. Although a policeman was stationed in front of the Schaerbeek house in which he was living, Caralp was able once more to escape²⁵.

This seems to have been the point at which Caralp left Brussels, together with his mistress Blanche-Hortense Coffers who worked in a Brussels laundry, and started a rather improbable itinerant life for more than two years in different Walloon cities. A child was born to the couple in Liège in October 1910 but in August 1911, Caralp moved in with another woman to Namur. He then stole her

20. Report by the Brussels police, 18 November 1909. *Ibidem*. **21.** On Steinheil, see PIERRE DARMON, *Marguerite Steinheil. Ingénue criminelle ?*, Paris, 1996. **22.** The text of the song can be found in the aliens police's file on Louis Delprat, no. 901320. **23.** Caralp to the Director-General for Public Security, 28 December 1909. GSAB, files of the aliens police, file 878100 : Augustin Caralp. **24.** Brussels police, 'Poste de l'Exposition', Procès-Verbal n° 217, 11 August 1910. *Ibidem*. **25.** Report by the Chief of Police to Auguste Reyers, mayor of Schaerbeek, 22 August 1910. *Ibidem*.

jewels and took them to France where he pawned them at the Mounts of Piety in Nancy and Dijon. In the latter town, he asked his legal wife (named Marie Thoman, undoubtedly the 'Marie' and the 'M.T.' of his tattoos) whether he could return to her. She refused. Caralp, therefore, telegraphed his old mistress, Blanche-Hortense Coffers, who agreed to join him in Nancy. Under several false names, they moved first to Charleroi and later to La Louvière²⁶. Under the name Auguste, Caralp gained certain notoriety among the workers of the mine region as singer of (mostly obscene) comic songs at factory gates or in La Louvière's cabaret, the Alcazar²⁷.

Only in February 1913 did the couple arouse suspicion again, apparently due to indiscrete remarks made by Coffers. The police sergeant who investigated the case made the link between Caralp (who at that moment operated under the name Camille Bousser) and the then-notorious 'tragic gang' (*bande tragique*) of French anarchists led by Garnier en Bonnot. More specifically, the sergeant wondered whether Bousser/Caralp could not have been Charles Bill, a man who had murdered his former employer Blanchet in Nancy²⁸. This last link turned out to be spurious, but soon Bousser was identified as Caralp. Hence, the latter's earlier judicial cases were re-opened. In the beginning of

March 1913, he was arrested for his previous charges and for adopting false names. Since his request to receive 24 hours release before leaving the country was not approved by the Public Security this time, Caralp now repeated his demand to the Public Prosecutor of Mons. He did so once more in a long and moving letter. In order to prove that he was "not a bad boy", he insisted that a police officer accompany him to his flat in La Louvière, where he would fetch some luggage and his harmonium. He even declared himself ready to pay the transport costs of this police agent personally. But, just as in 1910, he begged not to be expelled by the Franco-Belgian frontier. This time, he suggested the Grand Duchy of Luxemburg as an alternative²⁹.

This last request could not be granted, since Caralp turned out to possess only 0,48 francs³⁰. That being the case, the Director-General of Public Security ascertained, "our international obligations forbid us to transfer him to any other frontier than that of his own country"³¹. Exactly how he achieved it remains unclear, but two weeks later, Caralp did find enough money (15,20 francs) to be transferred to the frontier with Luxembourg³². On the 2nd June 1913, Augustin Caralp left the Belgian territory near the frontier village of Sterpenich³³. After that moment, the Belgian security services had no further contact with

26. Testimony by Augustin Caralp, 4 March 1913, part of a separate file entitled 'Bousser-Camille – n° 988380, of whom Caralp has usurped the identity' and integrated in his own file. *Ibidem*. 27. Report by the local police sergeant of La Louvière to Gendarmerie Nationale in Charleroi, 17 February 1913. *Ibidem*. 28. See RICHARD PARRY, *The Bonnot Gang. The story of the French illegalists*, Las Vegas, 1987. Specifically on the murder of Blanchet, see p.140. 29. Caralp to the Public Prosecutor of Mons, 9 April 1913. GSAB, files of the aliens police, file 878100: Augustin Caralp. 30. Director of the prison of Mons to the Minister of Justice, 19 April 1913. *Ibidem*. 31. Draft of a report of the DGPS to Demay, bailiff in Mons, 22 April 1913. *Ibidem*. 32. Director of the prison of Mons to the Minister of Justice, 4 May 1913. *Ibidem*. 33. Report from the Gendarmerie Nationale to the Minister of Justice, 2 June 1913. *Ibidem*.

him and the historian attempting to follow his traces is forced to search for other sources.

In comparison with that of most other foreigners in Belgium, Augustin Caralp's file is extremely rich. Not only does it allow us to follow nearly every (both geographical and social) move that he made in the country, but we can also hear his own voice as he expressed it in his letters to the Belgian legal system and in his songs. From these writings, some of Caralp's personality traits seem to appear : his shrewdness, his "effortless pleasantry" (as one policeman described it³⁴), his apparent obsession with sexuality, and his literary abilities (in spite of his deficient spelling). Political or ideological preferences, on the other hand, can hardly be deduced from this file. To be sure, his song about Madame Steinheil was all the more savory because a French president was involved, but Caralp left all political aspects of the case (for example, its potential connection to the Dreyfus Affair) unmentioned. When Madame Steinheil says that "a President came often to my House/ in order to talk with me about ...politics" for instance, the intention is clearly that this should be interpreted ironically as the following verses make clear. Significantly, the double entendres in the song were printed in bold :

The advice that I gave him
Was generally **swallowed** so well

That he often came to ask me more of it
Since he knew I had a **welcoming mouth**³⁵.

*(Les conseils que je lui donnais
S'avalaien si bien, d'ordinaire
Qu'il venait souvent m'en d'mander,
M'sachant **la bouche hospitalière**).*

It is interesting to highlight the differences with the one letter that Caralp wrote – or at least the one that has been preserved – to the Parisian socialist Deputy Marcel Sembat³⁶. The letter dates to 14th February 1913, the very days the Belgian police had begun to close the net around him, and three weeks before the start of his second and final period of imprisonment in Belgium. The reason for writing Sembat was obvious : with the forthcoming inauguration of Raymond Poincaré as President of the Republic, the new French government led by Aristide Briand had introduced a bill granting amnesty to a broad range of convicts³⁷. In an amendment to the bill, introduced at the end of January, Sembat and his socialist-republican colleague Victor Peytral had tried to add deserters and draft evaders to the list. They had been included in the amnesty proclaimed in 1906 at the inauguration of Armand Fallières, and Sembat stressed that this should be the case again³⁸.

The fact that Caralp knew about Sembat's political actions, does not in itself prove that

34. Police sergeant of Charleroi to the Gendarmerie Nationale, section Charleroi, 13 February 1913. *Ibidem*. 35. GSAB, files of the aliens police File Louis Delprat, nr. 901320. 36. Augustin Caralp to Marcel Sembat, 14 February 1913. Paris, Archives Nationales (AN), 637 AP/31: papers Sembat. With regard to Sembat, see : DENIS LEFEBVRE, *Marcel Sembat. Socialiste et Franc-maçon*, Paris, Bruno Leprince, 1995. 37. On the consecutive amnesty bills in this period, see : STÉPHANE GACON, "La République briseuse des grèves et l'amnistie (1905-1914). Une tentative de régulation politique du conflit social en France", in *Vingtième Siècle*, 125 (2015), p. 17-31.

38. The amendment was discussed within the committee of judicial affairs of the Chamber of Deputies on 10th February 1913, where it was rejected by the Minister of War, Eugène Etienne.

See "Amnistie", in *Le Petit Parisien*, 11 February, 1913.

he systematically followed the developments of French political life. Indeed, it is possible that he was informed by someone in his network about this opportunity to return to France for that, obviously, was the reason why Caralp wrote his letter to Sembat. Since the letter was written during the very days that he was being tracked by the Belgian police, it might very well be counted as one of many coping strategies that this person at the margin of society developed to maintain his liberty.

Nonetheless, a closer analysis of this long letter reveals a high degree of political awareness. First of all, it is noteworthy that Caralp uses the first person plural consistently; he does not speak for himself alone but on behalf of an entire group, i.e. "French deserters that are resident in Belgium". He ascribes to this group a set of collective traits and a more-or-less common life-story. Their reason for deserting is framed entirely apolitically, in the sense that "many of them are, like me, women's victims"; in other words, that they had not escaped their military duties for ideological but purely romantic reasons. When describing their current aspirations, on the other hand, Caralp switches to a nationalistic, and therefore political register. Just like the author himself, all French deserters repented their unpatriotic deeds and were willing "to atone for their past" (*racheter leur passé*) by re-enlisting for military service. This patriotic self-presentation was set within a concise narrative of France's international politics in the past, present, and future: "Now, we still believe in a war with Germany with regard to the Balkan affairs

and, well, we are ready to rush and shed our blood in order to achieve vengeance for 1870". This one-sentence treatise on French contemporary history was accompanied by a crude expression of national animosity in which he involves both the French deserters and his own family: "You well know that we [the French deserters] do not like the Germans, if you want to talk of my father's past, I would make you acquainted with it and prove to you that we are no cowards in our family".

Caralp situated both France's current international challenges and its internal political struggles in a long-term perspective. Among the French deserters in Belgium, thus he asserted, the joy of Poincaré's election as president was great "because we can say that it has been a long time since our France has had such a man as head of state who reminds us of the goodness (*les bontés*) of our former president, Carnot". Given that Sadi Carnot had been assassinated in 1894 and Caralp himself had only been born in 1882, this was remarkable testimony of the fame that had outlived the left-wing, 'populist' Carnot as a kind of antithesis to the self-serving politicians who allegedly populated the Third Republic. In this sense, Caralp's critique can be seen within the growing disquiet, also among left-wing republicans, against the Republic's undemocratic character. One year after Caralp's letter, this critique would receive one of its most famous expressions in Robert de Jouvenel's *La République des Camarades*³⁹.

In the same breath, Caralp expressed his hope that Poincaré would bring staunchly non-

39. See ROBERT DE JOUVENEL, *La république des camarades*, Paris, 1914.

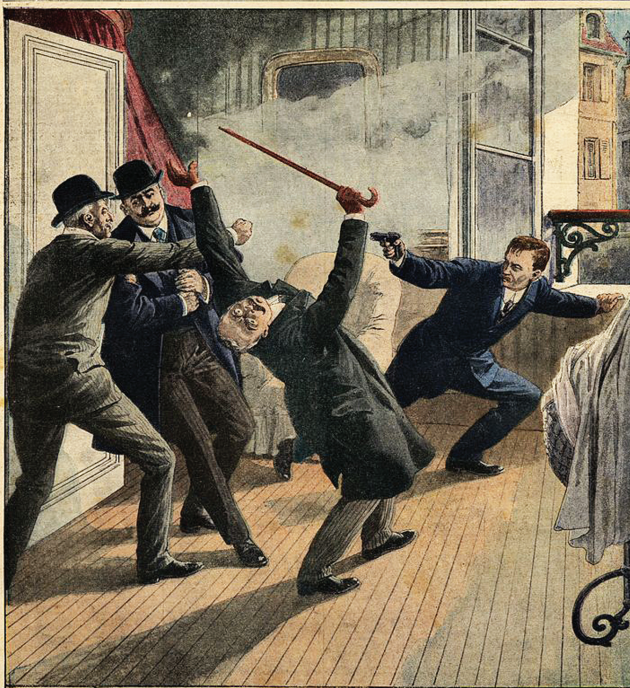
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Voir aux pages 4 et 5 nos grandes gravures en couleurs sur les MASSACRES DE FEZ et les HÉROS DE LA TÉLÉGRAPHIE SANS FIL

The murders committed by the Bonnot gang made headlines in the French national press. (Source : Cover of the illustrated magazine of Le Petit Journal, dd. 5 May 1913)

partisan, republican leadership. Yet, this could only happen if all Frenchmen had reasons to venerate him as president. The deserters, however, would only be prepared to do so if they were allowed to return to their country. As such, Caralp presented the favor he wanted Sembat to grant him as a sacred duty towards the fatherland. Indeed, it was up to Sembat to “make sure that the name of *Monsieur Poincaré* will be respected and venerated by the deserters in the same way as is the case for the whole of France”.

Whether Caralp was well aware that he was addressing this request to a socialist MP – and therefore a political opponent of Poincaré – remains unclear. However, he seemed to appeal to common values of principled republicanism and solid patriotism⁴⁰. He appeared to know that Sembat himself was distanced from the anarchist fringes of the socialist movement; indeed, Caralp blamed these anarchists for the unwillingness of the current government to grant an amnesty to the deserters even if this had always happened at the inauguration of new (and less generous) presidents in the past. He explicitly referred to the gang of Bonnot (mentioned above) and actively stressed the width of the gap that separated the large majority of the deserters from this small group of criminals. Quite a few of these deserters, he asserted, would even be prepared to “offer justice a helping hand for this kind of facts”. Did Caralp somehow know that the Belgian police were attempting to link him with Bonnot’s

‘tragic gang’ and was he trying to free himself of blame ? In my opinion, it seems more probable that it was a pragmatic gesture magnifying a sincere republican conviction. The concluding phrase of the letter should probably be interpreted along the same lines : “Certain of your humanity, the French deserters in Belgium join me in the cry ‘Long live the Republic! Long live Monsieur Poincaré ! Long live France [*sic*] our Mother Fatherland [*notre Mère Patrie*] !’”.

Three years later, it would become clear that Caralp’s patriotism was no ruse. Thanks to a small article in the newspaper *Le Petit Parisien*, we know that he was re-integrated in the French army in August 1916. He had probably benefited from the law of 5th August 1914 which, in preparation of the war effort, granted amnesties to deserters and draft evaders⁴¹. If we believe the article, Caralp did not simply do his duty at the front but was well-known for both his patriotic songs and his bravery in combat. His positive self-depiction in the letter to Sembat thus appears vindicated by war circumstances. On the other hand, military discipline still turned out to be a problem with the newspaper reporting that he had been convicted for desertion a third time. “According to whence the wind blows”, the newspaper added subtly, “Caralp either fights bravely or deserts”. And once again, he turned out to be a ‘women’s victim’. During a quarrel on the street, his new mistress, Rosalie Bigarreau, had betrayed him as a deserter. Although she retracted her evidence

40. On patriotism as a shared value of socialists and ‘bourgeois’ republicans in the decade preceding the First World War, see : JEAN-FRANÇOIS CHANET, “La Patrie et la nation”, in VINCENT DUCLERT & CHRISTOPHE PROCHASSON (eds.), *Dictionnaire critique de la République*, Paris, 2007, p. 224-229. 41. See GACON, “La République briseuse des grèves...”, p. 18.

afterwards, Caralp was sentenced to four years of hard labour⁴².

II. The most valiant sons of the Fatherland

By moving from the personal to the collective and the national interest, and by situating these three levels in a timeframe which includes past, present, and future, Caralp reveals himself as a political actor in his letter to Sembat⁴³. Interestingly, Caralp was only one of the ten deserters or draft dodgers who wrote to Sembat during the same period from their Belgian place of exile. To be more precise, ten letters survive in the Sembat papers which represents a mere fraction of the more than sixty letters addressed to Sembat after news of his intervention in favor of the deserters and the draft dodgers had been published in the press. The bulk of these letter writers were deserters or draft evaders residing either within or outside France; others addressed Sembat to ask whether other classes might be included in the forthcoming amnesty law⁴⁴.

Although the ten letter writers included in this article constituted only a small proportion of the French deserters and draft evaders living in Belgium (who in turn formed only a relatively small part of the allegedly 80,000 French deserters and draft dodgers that had accumulated across the world since the turn of the century⁴⁵), these letters do provide important information for historians trying to reconstruct this specific and understudied group. First of all, given the illegal character of the act of desertion, deserters have the tendency not to leave historical traces in any consistent way. Obviously, the French military archives in Vincennes contain lists of deserters but these are not classified according to their place of exile. The same is also true for the judicial files in these same archives, which moreover concern only those deserters who returned to their home country and were sentenced. Conversely, in the Belgian archives of the aliens police, one cannot single out the deserters, let alone the French deserters. The one million files that have been kept for the period until the First World War are classified alphabetically and only by opening them can

42. "Chronique judiciaire. Le déserteur Caralp", in *Le petit Parisien*, 19 August 1916. 43. With regard to the importance of time in the definition of the political sphere, see : KARI PALONEN, *The struggle with time. A conceptual history of 'politics' as an activity*, Münster, 2006; ID., "Political times and the rhetoric of democratization", in KARI PALONEN & OTHERS (eds.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to the politics of democratization in Europe*, Farnham, 2008, p. 151-165. 44. See, for instance, Bordères to Sembat, 23 January 1913 (request to include postmen convicted for syndicalist action in the amnesty); Guillen, Secrétaire Général de l'Assemblée Générale des Agents des PTT, to Sembat, 28 February 1913 (request to create also an 'administrative amnesty', enabling state employees who had been convicted for syndicalist actions, to regain the right to promotion within the administration); Liptay to Sembat, 28 January 1913 (request to extend amnesty to the writer, who had been convicted for distributing pornographic – but according to himself only 'eugenic' or 'Malthusian' – ideas). All letters in Paris, AN, 637 AP/31. 45. The figure of 80,000 circulated above all among journalists and politicians who wanted to warn against the phenomenon. In a long article in *La Revue du Mois*, however, the figure was relativized as being the result of an unjustified sum of very diverse categories. See DR. LOWENTHAL, "Bilan des troupes métropolitaines de combat. Problèmes des 'embusqués'", in *Revue du Mois*, 8, 1913, p. 589-609, particularly p. 603. I did not find any figures with regard to French deserters in Belgium during this period, but together with Switzerland, Belgium was considered to be their main destination. See CH. DESPLANCQUES, "Désertion", in *Les Temps Nouveaux*, 14/35, 26 December 1908.

one trace the background of the foreigners involved. Moreover, files were only kept of those foreigners who either actively asked for inscription in the foreigners' register or were discovered by the police. Since deserters had every reason to remain under the authorities' radar, one can expect that only a relatively small portion of the total is represented in the files.

Self-evidently, the letters preserved in the Sembat papers in the Archives Nationales are even more selective. They only provide us information with regard to those deserters or draft evaders who took the initiative to write to this specific deputy. For a prosopographical analysis of this group, they are entirely inappropriate. But they do amend some shortcomings of the other remaining sources. First of all, they show that not all French deserters who escaped to Belgium were followed by the aliens police. Of the seven deserters who signed their letters to Sembat legibly, only two can be retraced with certainty in the latter's archives – both because of their involvement in petty crime⁴⁶. Probably the other five never registered in a Belgian locality and never attracted police suspicion.

Suspicion was not only a primary criterion for deserters to be included in the aliens

police's files, it also determined the sort of information these files provided. The legal system searched for proof of guilt in the first place, and considered the deserters only worth of interest insofar as they represented potential (or actual) criminals. The letters to the MP, on the contrary, sprang from the initiative of the deserters themselves and were meant to build up a relationship of confidence. With this confidence, the petitioners aimed to inspire the MP to take political measures in their interest. The letters therefore abound with biographical details, digressions on their political opinions and personal considerations. Even if individually these should not necessarily be accepted as historical fact, together they offer us a unique view of the concerns and the practices that were dominant within this group. Insofar as the history of desertion has been investigated so far, it has been mainly from the point of view of military history – more particularly as a refusal to fight⁴⁷. Letters such as those written to Sembat can however move us toward a hitherto unwritten social, intellectual, and political history of this group⁴⁸.

To a large extent, these letters together confirm the image that emerged from that written by Caralp – without being as explicit or sharing his idiosyncrasies. Most of the petitioners tended to write on behalf of all French deserters and

46. Apart from Caralp, that is also the case for Edouard Halphen (file 875126 in the archives of the aliens police). 47. See for example CHRISTOPHE JAHR, *Gewöhnliche Soldaten. Desertion und Deserteure im deutschen und britischen Heer, 1914-1918*, Göttingen, 1998; ULRICH BRÖCKLING & MICHAEL SIKORA (eds.), *Armeen und Ihre Deserteure. Vernachlässigte Kapitel einer Militärgeschichte der Neuzeit*, Göttingen, 1998. 48. A microhistorical, and highly idiosyncratic, attempt has recently been made by FABRICE VIRGILI & DANIELÉ VOLDMAN, *Histoire de Louise et de Paul, déserteur travesti, dans le Paris des années folles*, Paris, 2011.

draft dodgers or, at least, of those residing in Belgium. "Be aware, Monsieur Sembat", one of them wrote, "that there are thousands of young people here who anxiously follow your efforts each day"⁴⁹. Nearly all of them presented their desertion as a sin of youth or as an act driven by necessity, committed at a moment when "the Motherland was not in danger"⁵⁰. They proclaimed their patriotism in the most lyrical terms, and stressed their willingness "to pay for their errors" by taking up the arms again in this period of increasing international tensions. Or, as Henri Morel exclaimed on behalf of his compatriots: "There is not a soul among us whose eyes do not moisten at the tones of the *Marseillaise* or at the sight of our three colours and of that flag that we abandoned in a moment of aberration; we adore it as an idol and we would all be present, please believe us, when it must be defended!"⁵¹.

The letters were not only characterized by fierce passions of shame and patriotism. Many of the writers also demonstrated a fairly good knowledge of the political situation in France. One of them presented himself as an "ignorant of politics", but nonetheless appeared well aware of the ongoing debates. "They speak about a natality crisis but by giving amnesty to the deserters and the draft evaders, how

many young people would not return to fill the gaps?"⁵².

Only one of the letters made a clear and normative distinction between the deserters and the draft evaders; whereas the latter group consisted of youngsters inspired by anti-patriotic doctrines (since they refused to go to the barracks), the writer argued that deserters were generally courageous Frenchmen who revolted against the inhuman circumstances in the barracks. "The bad Frenchmen", he concluded, "are those who believe that the French deserters forget France; those who can believe that 80,000 men who have left their heart and the best of themselves on a soil which is theirs would not have the manly courage, when the hour comes, to defend that soil"⁵³.

Many of the letter writers did not limit themselves to explaining their predicament but explicitly referred to the political action that should be undertaken by Sembat. Some of them suggested that he should (or at least could) use their letters in his parliamentary speeches. In the words of Édouard Halphen, "If my letter can be useful to you in order to help convince the opponents of this amnesty, you can share my letter with your colleagues"⁵⁴. Others pointed to specific

49. [unreadable] to Sembat, 11 February 1913. AN 637 AP/31: Papers Sembat. 50. Henri Morel to Sembat, undated. *Ibidem*. 51. Léon Morel to Sembat, 25 January 1913. *Ibidem*. Also quoted in: MARNIX BEYEN & MAARTEN VAN GINDERACHTER, "General conclusion. Popular Nationhood – a Companion of European Modernities", in MAARTEN VAN GINDERACHTER & MARNIX BEYEN (eds.), *Nationhood from Below. Europe in the Long Nineteenth Century*, Basingstoke, 2012, p. 250. 52. [unreadable] to Sembat, 11 February 1913. *Ibidem*. About the 'natality crisis' as a central obsession of the Third Republic, see: PATRICE BORDELAIS, "La famille, le couple, le foyer", in DUCLERT & PROCHASSON (eds.), *Dictionnaire critique...*, p. 494-498. 53. M. Bussy to Sembat, 18 February 1913. *Ibidem*; the figure of 80,000 was also used by Léon Morel in his letter to Sembat, 25 January, 1913. *Ibidem*. 54. Edouard Halphen to Sembat, undated. *Ibidem*.



Picture of Augustin Caralp, extract of Bulletin central de signalements, August 1913. (Source : File n° 878100, Archives générales du Royaume, Police des Étrangers)

anomalies in the planned amnesty laws and exhorted Sembat to tackle them. During a meeting with the parliamentary committee for juridical reforms, for instance, the Minister of War had considered the possibility of granting amnesties to draft evaders who had left France before their 18th birthdays⁵⁵. However, as Jules Charpentier explained, “it is easy to remain abroad without enrolling on the population register. How then will those who have neglected to do it be able to prove their absence from France before that age?”⁵⁶.

Observing the government’s reticence to accept Sembat’s entire proposal, Raphaël Bernard begged him at least to continue the struggle on behalf of the specific group of deserters who had served for at least two years in the army. Interestingly, Bernard presented himself as the spokesman of a group of six men who were in the same situation. They had met during a larger meeting which had brought together some 23 deserters and draft evaders somewhere in Brussels to discuss their strategies with regard to the amnesty law⁵⁷. The fact that such a meeting could take place shows that a kind of political sociability developed among at least some of the French draft evaders and deserters in Belgium, resulting in a specific set of political practices.

III. Self-inflicted subalterns ?

Apparently not all the exiled draft evaders and deserters in Belgium were economically and socially as marginal as Augustin Caralp. Unlike him, most letter writers seem to have been active in the regular economic life of Brussels⁵⁸. As a group, however, they can still be described as subalterns in the Gramscian sense of the word. Indeed, by escaping from military service, they physically and morally situated themselves outside the French political nation and its hegemonic discourse without being able to fully integrate within its Belgian counterpart. Undoubtedly – and in spite of the motivations mentioned in the letters to Sembat – the act of deserting had often been a reaction against their pre-existing subaltern position : they had been ordinary soldiers resisting, or trying to escape from, the oppressive nature of military hierarchy. At the same time, the very act of desertion made their subaltern position official. It deprived them of political rights in their home country and prevented them from gaining a legal status in their host country. Even their ability to oppose the political and military system was seriously eroded by the act of desertion⁵⁹. More or less willingly, they silenced their own voice in society.

55. See for example “Amnistie”, in *Le Petit Parisien*, 11 February, 1913; “L’amnistie”, in *Journal du Loiret*, 13 February 1913. 56. Jules Charpentier to Sembat, 12 February 1913. Paris, AN, 637AP/31. 57. Raphaël Bernard to Sembat, 11 February 1913. *Ibidem*. 58. Although a sharp complaint about the economic situation of the deserters – especially of the married men among them – can be found in the letter of an anonymous deserter to Sembat, 25 January 1913. *Ibidem*. 59. This was also observed by the contemporary journalist Charles Desplanques, “Désertion...” : “For the deserters in Belgium and Switzerland (...) it is impossible to do the slightest thing, create the weakest of propaganda, since the threat of arrest and expulsion is perpetually hanging above their heads. Inevitably they bury themselves, happy if they still manage to find work”.

Through the partly self-inflicted nature of their subaltern position, the deserters and draft evaders were subalterns of a specific kind. This specificity seems to have determined the way in which some of them approached the deputy Marcel Sembat. Understandably, the letters they wrote to him were all about trying to undo the consequences of their own past decision and therefore also about making an end to their subaltern position. It is thus hard to fit them in one of the paradigms outlined in the introduction to the article. Their way of addressing the deputy can neither be seen as a pure coping strategy nor as an act of resistance against the hegemonic discourse. Instead, the letters highlight complex forms of politicization and compliance with hegemonic discourse. More specifically, they catch the deserters while gathering political information and using it – individually and collectively – both to form an opinion and to improve their situation. Their attempts to re-enter the national community consisted of adopting the hegemonic discourse in a hyperbolic way and of searching for a powerful ally within the hegemonic élite. Through their individual and collective efforts, they wanted the deputy to give them back a voice in French society.

Ultimately the law of 31st July 1913 excluded both the deserters and the draft evaders from the presidential amnesty. And yet, these groups did succeed in making their voice heard in the French Chamber of Deputies. Indeed, when the amnesty law was discussed

in the Chamber on 29th March 1913, Sembat explicitly referred to “a file of letters which have reached me in great numbers since the amnesty question has started to fill the newspapers”. He did not quote any specific letter but depicted the general image that emerged from them – an image that faithfully translated the content and tone of the letters that have survived. “In none of the letters”, Sembat asserted, “did I find any bravado nor anything other than the expression of their regrets and their hope for an act of pity and of mercy that will open up the frontiers of their country”. Their desertion, in other words, was not inspired by anti-militarism or anti-patriotism but by “passionate or sentimental” reasons⁶⁰.

The fact that they succeeded in making their voice heard in Parliament raises the question of whether these deserters can still be considered ‘subalterns’. Were they sufficiently voiceless to be labeled as subalterns, a category whose main characteristic, according to Gayatri Spivak, is that they “cannot speak”⁶¹? Opponents of Sembat’s amendment somehow voiced this same concern, even if they could not yet use the word ‘subaltern’. They hinted at the existence of a rich syndicate that supported the deserters, paying for their upkeep and even stimulating further desertions. In his fierce reactions to these allegations, Sembat eagerly underlined the truly subaltern position of the deserters: “Do you really believe that one deserts by syndicate?” (*Vous croyez qu’on*

60. *Journal officiel de la République française. Débats parlementaires. Chambre des députés : compte rendu in-extenso*, 29 March 1913, p. 1292. 61. GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK, “Can the subaltern speak?”, in CARY NELSON & LAWRENCE GROSSBERG, *Marxism and the interpretation of culture*, Chicago, 1988, pp. 271-313, particularly p. 308. With regard to the impact of this essay, see : ROSALIND MORRIS (ed.), *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, New York, 2010.

déserte par syndicat ?) he asked rhetorically. Not only was the act of deserting, in his view, entirely apolitical, it was also political suicide. Many of the deserters, he stressed, had escaped to far-off places like the Pampas or “the profundity of Flanders” where they could not receive newspapers or information about French political affairs. Obviously, this characterization contradicted the highly politicized nature of the letters to which he himself referred – none of which had been sent from the Flemish countryside. In order to convince his opponents of the politically unthreatening character of the deserters, however, Sembat had to present them as unpoliticized, marginal, and powerless.

IV. A space of liminality between the political and the social ?

Rather than enabling us to reach a definitive conclusion about the ‘subalternity’ of the deserters, both the letters and the Parliamentary proceedings – and particularly the combination of both – show us the existence of an intense and dynamic interaction between the ‘hegemonic’ and the ‘subaltern’ world.

Both the Members of Parliament and the politicized deserters served as intermediary figures between these two spheres. The post-colonial cultural theorist Homi Bhabha has already stressed the importance of such a “third space of liminality”, dominated by ambivalence and mimicry⁶². Less explicitly, that same border zone has been explored by historians analyzing the contribution of colonial (and therefore ‘subaltern’) subjects to the metropolitan war effort in 1914-18 and the changing hierarchies it entailed⁶³. Only rarely has the notion been applied so far by historians dealing with European societies.

Indirectly, this liminal space does appear in the relatively extensive literature that has been dedicated to the request letters sent by the poor to the different strata of executive power (from municipal bureaucrats to provincial governors and the King)⁶⁴. In this literature, it has been stressed that the letter writers tended to copy the ideology and worldview of the addressee in order to strengthen their case. In spite of this adoption of what James C. Scott has called the “the public transcript” in their letters, it is nonetheless assumed that

62. See for example HOMI BHABHA, *The location of Culture*, London/New York, 1994. 63. See for example SANTANU DAS, “Heart and Soul with Britain? India, Empire and the Great War”, in JORN LEONHARD & ULRIKE VON HIRSCHHAUSEN (eds.), *Comparing Empires. Encounters and Transfers in the Long Nineteenth Century*, Göttingen & Vandenhoeck, 2011, p. 479-499, and RICK FOGARTY, “Race and Sex, Fear and Loathing in France during the Great War: Colonial Soldiers, European Women, and the Anxieties of Empire”, in *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques*, Spring 2008, p. 50-72. 64. See for example T. SOKOLL, “Negotiating a Living: Essex pauper letters from London, 1800-1834”, in *International Review of Social History*, 45, 2000, p. 19-46; MAARTEN VAN GINDERACHTER, “Jean Prolo, waer bestu bleven ? Speuren naar bronnen van ‘gewone mensen’ in 19^{de}-eeuwse archieven”, in *Verslagen en Mededelingen van de Koninklijke Academie voor Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkunde*, 114, 2004, p. 19-30; STEVEN KING, “‘I Fear You Will Think Me Too Presumptuous in My Demands, but Necessity has no Law’: Clothing in English Pauper Letters, 1800-1834”, in *International Review of Social History*, 54, 2009, p. 207-236.

these letter writers in private generally turned to 'hidden transcripts' of resistance⁶⁵.

Letters to Members of Parliament seem to have been largely overlooked in this context. As the case of the deserters and the draft evaders indicates, however, these letters can offer us a fuller view of the interactions between the sphere of the subaltern and that of the élites. Unlike the holders of executive offices to which the pauper letters were written, the members of the legislative power themselves occupied a theoretical middle ground between 'the people' and 'the state'; representing the people meant making the people present in the process of decision-making. As I indicated in the introduction to this article, parliamentary historians have tended to neglect this aspect of parliamentary politics and to focus on its self-referential features. However, in the case above, Sembat did translate the aspirations of a segment of the people into concrete parliamentary activity. The subaltern group of deserters and draft evaders therefore appears as an agent in the process of parliamentary representation.

It is certainly possible that the degree of political agency was higher among the deserters and draft evaders (as 'self-inflicted subalterns') than among other groups in society. There is however no reason to believe that the same trend did not influence other

social groups. In order to detect the agency of the people in the process of parliamentary representation, it would be necessary to extend the scope of research far beyond deserters' and draft evaders' letters alone and engage in a systematic investigation of letters received by MPs. As I have suggested elsewhere, this would be a huge but fruitful undertaking⁶⁶. The file of letters related to Sembat's amnesty amendment, for instance, made up for only a tiny proportion of the many thousands of letters that he received during his nearly thirty years in parliament (1894-1920). At the height of his career, he received an average of more than 300 letters from ordinary citizens each month. And Sembat was only one of the many thousands of parliamentarians that modern history has produced- first in Europe, then also in the rest of the world. Obviously, the volume of letters generated in this context must be no less than gigantic.

Even if only a minor fraction of these letters has been preserved, they would open up a world which goes far beyond the people's attempts to satisfy their material, financial or professional needs. Moreover, as the case of the French deserters in Belgium shows, this could extend far beyond the constituency of the MP involved, even into foreign countries. At least in these cases, a clientelistic trade-off was impossible since the MP could not expect to receive direct electoral rewards by

65. See for example: MAARTEN VAN GINDERACHTER, "Public transcripts of royalism. Pauper letters to the Belgian royal family (1880- 1940)", in GITA DENECKERE & JEROEN DEPLOIGHE (eds.), *Mystifying the monarch. Studies on discourse, power and history*, Amsterdam, 2006, p. 223-23; ÉLINE DE KEULENAER, 'Hij doet aanmerken dat hij van goed gedrag en zeden is'. *Public en hidden transcripts in Oost-Vlaamse armenbrieven, 1882-1926*, unpublished Master thesis, University of Ghent, 2006-2007. 66. MARNIX BEYEN, "Clientelism and politicization. Direct interactions between deputies and 'ordinary citizens' in France, ca. 1890-ca. 1940", in *Tidsskrift for historie*, 8, 2014, p. 17-32.

supporting the claims of citizens who had been deprived of the suffrage.

Arguably, these letters leave largely out of sight the 'true' subalterns; namely those 'first men' (as Albert Camus would have it⁶⁷) who were illiterate and who remained entirely unacquainted with the institutions, discourses, and memories of the hegemonic culture. However, even these people may occur in the letters insofar as their case was argued by intermediaries addressing the MPs. Their concerns were probably voiced even more loudly during the audiences which many of these MPs organized at a regular basis within their constituencies. Unfortunately, the traces of these semi-private conversations have been almost entirely lost to the historian⁶⁸.

What the surviving letters reveal is a world in which people representing various shades of subalternity, as well as people to whom the label 'subaltern' does not fit at all, tried to force entry into the hegemonic culture by appealing to their Members of Parliament. In many cases, they did so with the sole intention of furthering their own interests, in others they tried to adapt the hegemonic culture itself to collective needs or to what they conceived of as the general interest. In those latter cases, 'ordinary people' served as political agents. Obviously, the character

and the success of these initiatives depended on many variables: the shrewdness or cultural understanding of the letter writer and the accessibility or the moral principles of the MP were important in this respect but institutional settings, and the political traditions within countries and/or constituencies, mattered at least as much. The most successful political interactions of this type did result in actions undertaken in the public sphere (in parliament) and sometimes even managed to influence the process of political decision-making⁶⁹. But even those interactions that did not leave the private sphere (the letters) can help the historian hear the voice of those who have often been considered voiceless. By taking these sources seriously, parliamentary history can make an important contribution to subaltern studies. Unavoidably, however, it would also further destabilize the very notion of subalternity; they would show that not all subaltern behavior can be interpreted as either coping strategy or act of resistance. By recognizing that fruitful political interactions could take place between subalterns and Members of Parliament, subaltern history and parliamentary history can transform one another. Each would undoubtedly lose a part of its disciplinary 'purity' but together they would help us better understand the workings of politics in modern societies.

67. ALBERT CAMUS, *Le premier homme*, Paris, 1994. 68. On these audiences, see MARNIX BEYEN, "Lieux de politisation, lieux de corruption ? Les permanences parlementaires à Paris, 1890-1921", in FRÉDÉRIC MONIER & JENS-IVO ENGELS (eds.), *Corruption et patronage politique*, Paris, 2014, p. 167-183. 69. In addition to the example presented in this contribution, I also elaborate another in "De politieke kracht van het dienstbetoon. Politieke interacties tussen burgers en volksvertegenwoordigers in Parijs, 1893-1914", in *Stadsgeschiedenis*, 7, 2012, p. 74-85.

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