CLIENTELISM AND POLITICIZATION

DIRECT INTERACTIONS BETWEEN DEPUTIES AND 'ORDINARY CITIZENS' IN FRANCE, CA. 1890-CA. 1940[1]

■ MARNIX BEYEN

Placing the adjective 'new' before the name of an existing historiographical *genre* is an ambitious, and therefore risky business. Those who claim to do 'new political history' do not form an exception to this rule. They exhibit themselves to the predictable critique that 'new political history' is only a label, not corresponding to any clear-cut reality, but only serving to distinguish themselves from the 'traditional' and 'old-fashioned' political historians. Moreover, the encompassing and in itself meaningless term 'new' suffers from its short expiry term. The term 'new political history' was coined at least twenty years ago – how, in that case, can it still be new?

Without any doubt, the critics are right to a large extent, and I can even follow the pleas for 'an innovative classicism' in political history, as they can be heard nowadays.[2] Therefore, I wouldn't want to present my own research as *new* political history – even if I would have done so ten years ago. However, I would still like to turn one of the main critiques against new political history into a challenge. Instead of reproaching the concept a lack of clarity, I would rather see an opportunity in it to return to an older dream of 'integral' – or to put it more modestly, of 'integrated' historiography.[3] More specifically, I believe it is possible to combine approaches of 'old-fashioned' institutional history with insights from social history, historical anthropology, urban history, cultural history and discourse analysis in order acquire a better understanding of the working of power and decision-making in the past.

---

[1]   The term 'ordinary citizens' is consequently used in this contribution in a non-normative way, including all citizens without a political mandate. It is meant to be more encompassing than 'voters' or 'constituents'.

[2]   See, for example François Cochet in his introduction to Romain Ducoulombier (ed.), *Les socialistes dans l'Europe en Guerre. Réseaux, parcours experiences, 1914-1918*, Paris: L'Harmattan & Fondation Jean Jaurès, 2010, p. 7.

[3]   See, for this plea, see Jon Lawrence, 'Political history', in: Stefan Berger e.a., *Writing history. Theory and Practice*, London: Arnold, 2003, p. 183-202, particularly p. 195-199.

COMBINING BOTTOM-UP AND FROM BELOW-PERSPECTIVES
TO POLITICAL HISTORY

In order to reach this goal, I will focus on what can be seen as the heart – at least in theory – of modern democratic politics, that is to say on national parliaments. Doing so, I join what has been called the 'rediscovery of institutions'. This rediscovery has first been pleaded for by the sociologists James March and Johan Olsen, who refused to consider institutions as mere 'mirrors' of society, but stressed their creative and transformative power. Therefore, they also took the symbolic aspects of institutions seriously.[4] Particularly this last aspect coincided with the then predominant tendency among historians to stress the importance and the agency of cultural representations in various fields of history. At this crossroad between sociological neo-institutionalism and the cultural turn in historiography, political historians developed a renewed attention for the history of parliamentary institutions. They have focused on parliaments as juridical constructions (with their own procedures, rules and competences), as cultural constructions (with their own rituals and forms of self-representation) and as social groups (consisting of people with ever more different social and professional backgrounds).[5]

If these 'new' parliamentary histories tend to treat parliaments as largely autonomous worlds, many of them nonetheless also pay attention to their fundamental relationship with the world they were deemed to represent, and thus to the process of representation itself. Historians and political theorists alike have stressed the fact that the nature of parliamentary representation changed drastically from the end of the nineteenth century under the impact of a rapidly growing electorate.[6] Nonetheless, the electorate itself remained largely outside the

---

[4] See their seminal work *Rediscovering Institutions. The organizational basis of politics*, New York: The Free Press, 1989. On the importance of symbols, see p. 47-52.

[5] 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: Droste Verlag, 2002; Eliane Gubin, Jean-Pierre Nandrin, Emmanuel Gerard and Els Witte (ed.), *Histoire de la Chambre des Représentants de Belgique, 1830-2002*, Brussels: Chambre des Représentants, 2003; Hervé Fayat, 'Bien se tenir à la Chambre. L'invention de la discipline parlementaire', *Cahiers Jean Jaurès*, no. 153, 1999, p. 61-89; Jean Garrigues (ed.), *Histoire du Parlement de 1789 à nos jours*, Paris: Du May – BDIC, 2007; Jouke Turpijn, *Mannen van Gezag. De uitvinding van de Tweede Kamer, 1848-1888*, Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 2008; Erie Tanja, *Goede politiek. De parlementaire cultuur van de Tweede Kamer, 1866-1940*, Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Boom, 2010.

[6] See for example: Bernard Manin, *Principes du gouvernement représentatif,* Paris: Champs, 1995; Frank Ankersmit, *Macht door representatie*, Kampen: Kok Agora, 1997; Bill Schwarz, 'Politics and Rhetoric in the Age of Mass Culture', *History Workshop Journal*, 46, 1998, p. 129-159; P. Rosanvallon, *Le peuple introuvable. Histoire de la représentation démocratique en France*, Paris : Gallimard, 1998, p. 129-159; Henk de Smaele and Jo Tollebeek (eds.), *Politieke representatie*, Leuven : Leuven University Press, 2002.

focus of their empirical studies. Some authors, like Jon Lawrence, did direct the focus toward the 'interface' between the party politicians and their electorate by focusing on political dynamics in local constituencies.[7] Even in these studies, however, more attention goes to the way 'the people' appears in the electoral discourses of local party candidates than to the political expressions of the voters themselves. The dynamic interaction between party candidates and the electorate has also formed the object of numerous studies on 'electoral culture', which concentrate most of all on the forms and techniques of campaigning or on the actual voting process.[8]

The voice of 'ordinary people' outside electoral periods, in other words, has so far remained largely unheard in the history of political representation. Ever since the groundbreaking studies of Maurice Agulhon, a growing politicization among the 'anonymous' has been assumed rather than empirically researched.[9] Only among labor historians, a longstanding tradition exists to recover private thoughts and mentalities of militants and even non-affiliated workers in the past. Most of these studies point toward vernacular adaptations and even partial rejections of ideological messages at the grassroots.[10] Recently, researchers have started broadening the scope of this approach from below, by investigating how various segments of society reacted to ideological currents or events.[11] Methodologically, this attempt is based on a painstaking search for, above all, lowbrow writings from 'ordinary' people and public opinion reports. Once more, these researches revealed forms of politicization that were distinct from those aimed at by political elites.

A more or less outspoken assumption of these studies is that these alternative forms of politicization did indirectly also alter the dynamics of parliamen-

---

[7] See, above all Jon Lawrence, *Speaking for the people. Party, language and popular politics in England, 1867-1914*, London: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

[8] See for example Alain Garrigou, *Histoire sociale du suffrage universel*, Paris: Points-Seuil, 2002; Yves Déloye en Olivier Ihl, "Des voix pas comme les autres. Votes blancs et votes nuls aux éléctions législatives de 1881", *Revue Française de science politique*, no. 41, 1991, p. 141-170; Margaret Lavinia Anderson, *Practicing democracy. Elections and political culture in imperial Germany*, New York: Princeton University Press, 2002; John Lawrence, *Electing our Masters. The Hustings in British Politics from Hogarth to Blair*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009; Thomas Mergel, *Propaganda nach Hitler. Eine Kulturgeschichte des Wahlkampfs in der Bundesrepublik 1949–1990*, Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag 2010.

[9] Maurice Agulhon, *La République au village*, Paris: Plon, 1970.

[10] See most notably Alf Lüdtke, *Eigen-Sinn. Fabrikalltag, Arbeitererfahrungen und Politik vom Kaiserreich bis in den Faschismus*, Hamburg: Ergebnisse Verlag, 1993.

[11] See, for example, Natalie Petiteau, *Les Français et l'Empire (1799-1815),* Paris: La Boutique de l'Histoire Editions, 2008; Maarten Van Ginderachter and Marnix Beyen (eds.), *Nationhood from Below. Europe in the Long Nineteenth Century*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012; Jens Ivo Engels, Frédéric Monier et Natalie Petiteau (ed.), *La politique vue d'en bas: pratiques privées, débats publics dans l'Europe contemporaine (XIXe-XXe siècles)*, Paris: Armand Colin, 2011.

tary representation. As soon, however, as direct contacts between MPs and 'ordinary' citizens are effectively investigated, they are not seen as a constitutive part of these processes of representation, but much rather as a clientielistic trade-off, verging on corruption and fraud. Even if these contacts are considered to be an important aspect of the power-brokering of politicians,[12] they seem nonetheless to be written out of the histories of politicization from below. This becomes manifest in the otherwise highly inspiring volume *La politique vue d'en bas*, edited by Jens-Ivo Engels, Frédéric Monier and Natalie Petiteau. The first part of the volume is dedicated to 'the politicization of the anonymous' and deals with visions about politics as they are expressed in lowbrow (published and unpublished) writings of all sorts; the second part, entitled 'corruption and the public good' does not only contain several articles with regard to the changing boundaries of corruption and on the corrupt networks of certain MPs, but also one on the 'clientelistic' relationship of a concrete MP with his constituents. The possibility that forms of politicization can take place within – or even arise from – direct contacts between MPs and 'ordinary' citizens seems not to have been taken into consideration by the editors and the authors of the book. Even less did parliamentary historians envision the possibility that these direct contacts may have impacted upon the process of parliamentary representation.

Precisely those two possibilities, however, form the starting-point of my own research. Politicization, defined as a growing critical awareness of power-relationships in society, does not only arise in mediated ways, as the consequence of an increasing literacy and a democratization of the press. It can also come about in contexts which can easily be stamped as 'clientelistic': 'ordinary' citizens addressing the MP of their constituency, are unavoidably – though in varying degrees – confronted with the world of politics and invited to engage with it. Conversely, these direct interactions can also have a thorough influence on the act of parliamentary representation, which should therefore not be considered to be a process in which an MP (more or less informed by the mass media) imagines his or her electorate and/or 'the nation', and subsequently acts according to it. The attitude of ordinary citizens to parliamentary politics has been more than that of a passive voter, a requester (and receiver) of support, an object of political representation or a complainer about politics. Retracing the grammar of representation and of politicization as they develop in the direct interactions between MPs and ordinary citizens, such is the ambition of my research. In my approach, therefore, elite perspectives (those of *high politics*) and perspectives from below meet each other in a dynamic way.

---

[12]   See, for example, Yves Billard, *Le métier de la politique sous la IIIe République*, Perpignan: Presses universitaires de Perpignan, 2003; Frédéric Monier, *La politique des plaintes. Clientélisme et demandes sociales dans le Vaucluse d'Édouard Daladier (1890-1940)*, Paris: La Boutique de l'Histoire, 2007.

By choosing this approach, I do not only want to challenge existing ideas about politicization and of representation, but also the more general paradigm of modernization in which they fit. The most canonical representative of this paradigm was undoubtedly Max Weber, who depicted a process in which a traditional, 'rule of notables' was gradually (and at different paces in different countries) replaced by a modern form of mass politics. In the rule of notables, relationships between voters and MPs were dominated by 'natural' social hierarchies and geographical proximity; in the age of mass politics, on the other hand, the lead was taken by professional politicians who operated at a national level. In principle, their legitimacy was based on rational electoral procedures instead of tradition. Much more deciding factors for the power of politicians, however, were either (in rare cases) charisma, or the financial and logistical support of ever more powerful 'party machines'.[13] During the last decades, the Weberian thesis has been disputed from different angles. Authors like the already mentioned Jon Lawrence, for example, have shown that local political traditions lived on powerfully, even in modern political parties. Conversely, French historically oriented political scientists have demonstrated that even typical representatives of 'notabiliary' politics in nineteenth century France, such as the conservative Normandian baron de Mackau, engaged in modern political practices.[14] In my own research, I want to focus on politicians belonging to those left-wing parties who are most often seen as carriers of modernization, nationalization and democratization of party politics, and investigate to which degree their everyday practices fitted within this 'modern' political paradigm.

STRUCTURES OF REPRESENTATION

The historian who is engaging in this approach is necessarily also confronted with the methodological problems connected with it. Needless to say, the main problem of history from below is that of the sources. The ordinary people who addressed their MPs were often barely literate, and preferred personally to meet the politician rather than to send them letters. In many countries throughout the twentieth century, MPs organized these contacts in a more or less formalized and regular way in the form of 'consultation hours' or 'surgeries' ('permanences' or 'réceptions' in French, 'zitdagen' in Dutch). It is not improbable that many MPs did keep at least some short records of these contacts, but only few of them seem to have been preserved. And when they are preserved, they do not bring us into di-

---

[13] See particularly Max Weber, *Politik als Beruf* [1919], Leipzig, Duncker & Humblot, 1992.

[14] See Eric Phélippeau, *L'invention de l'homme politique moderne. Mackau, l'Orne et la République*, Paris: Bélin, 2002. Compare also: Jean Joanna, *Du dilettante au spécialiste. Pratiques politiques des députés français au XIXe siècle*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1999.

rect contact with the voice of the 'ordinary citizens', but only with its recording by the MP or his secretary.[15]

Notwithstanding this possibility of meeting the MP of their constituency personally and often in spite of their poor writing skills, many 'ordinary' citizens did (and probably still do, although things are changing in the digital era) engage in writing letters to him (or her). Throughout the late nineteenth and most of the twentieth century, most MPs in European countries appear to have received annually thousands of such letters. Historians of the French Third Republic, for example, seem to agree that dealing with these letters (replying to them, interceding on behalf of the letter-writers) was by far the most time-consuming aspect of the work of an average MP.[16] Nonetheless, only few of them seem to have considered these letters sufficiently important to keep them in a somehow consistent way. And even if they did so, it seems very probable that archivists at a later stage have decided to throw them away, since they judged these traces of ordinary citizens of no interest for future generations.

Each study of these letters will, therefore, have to a certain degree a random character. It will always remain impossible to extrapolate from the study of the remaining letters general insights about the direct interactions between MPs and 'ordinary citizens' and about the political dynamics evolving from them. On the other hand, those letters that did remain are so abundant that it is extremely time-consuming to examine them in such a way that we can extract sensible insights from them. Indeed, however anecdotic each and any of these letters may seem when studied in itself, when we examine them together and with the aid of combined methodologies, they teach us an enormous lot about politics in past societies. Ideally, the kind of study that I propose should be carried out "in a broad comparative way, by preference in the context of a European research network. Such an encompassing research project could wield important insights into possible differences between the 'grammars of parliamentary representation' in different European countries.

In the current contribution, however, I will highlight my methodological choices – with their opportunities and their possible pitfalls – referring to the empirical research that I have done so far with regard to a relatively small range of left-wing MPs who were active in French politics during the last decades of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth century.[17] Needless to say that

[15] On these 'permanences' in early twentieth Paris, see Marnix Beyen, 'Lieux de politisation, lieux de corruption? Les permanences parlementaires à Paris, 1890-1920', Frédéric Monier, Olivier Dard and Jens Ivo Engels (eds.), *Patronage et corruption politiques dans l'Europe contemporaine*, Paris: Armand Colin, 2014, pp. 167-183.

[16] Billard, *Le métier de la politique*, p. 150.

[17] More precisely Paul Painlevé, republican-socialist deputy for the 5th arrondissement in Paris, 1910-1928; Marcel Sembat, socialist deputy for the 18th arrondissement in Paris, 1893-1922; Jacques-Louis Dumesnil, republican-socialist deputy for Fontainebleau (Seine-

even within this small research field, comparison is important. Nonetheless, by limiting the scope to one national case, at least one possible variable is removed: the institutional and electoral context, which is the same for all MPs of one country operating during the same period. It goes without saying that the interactions between MPs and 'ordinary' citizens can be at least partly determined by the electoral law according to which they were elected. Even the fairly limited results I have for France seem to corroborate this hypothesis. During the bulk of the period that I studied, France organized its legislative elections under a regime of general male suffrage at the level of the (fairly small) *arrondissements*. Every four years, each of these constituencies elected one deputy according to the 'first past the post'-system, if necessary after two ballots. Only during the relatively short period between 1919 and 1927, the electoral constituencies were widened to the level of the *départements*, each of which delegated several deputies to the Palais-Bourbon according to a primarily proportional distribution of the votes. This change of the electoral system was the result of long campaigns waged by those who wanted to abolish what they called political *fiefs*, i.e. semi-feudal strongholds in which clientelistic relationships between deputies and their voters prevailed. The sample of letters that I gathered so far, does indeed witness a considerable decrease during this short period. Moreover, in the letters stemming from that period, formulas like "my" or "our deputy" seem to become less frequent. This seems to indicate that the change of electoral system did provoke an altered relationship between the MP and the members of his constituency. The direct, geographically determined identification appears to have diminished. The electoral framework became less favorable to a 'politics of proximity', but did this also mean that the degree of clientelism decreased in favor of a politicization of the masses?

The answer to this last question can only be affirmative if we assume that close contacts between MPs and 'ordinary' citizens are by definition – or at least predominantly – clientelistic. If we want to test this assumption critically, we have to weigh the importance of other variables carefully. One of these variables is in any case the nature of the constituencies involved. Particularly, the difference between rural and urban constituencies turned out to impact heavily on the 'grammar of representation'. The former were characterized by a fairly small amount of voters scattered over a relatively large surface (with only a certain density in a small provincial town), the latter by the opposite relationship. The bigger towns were divided in several electoral constituencies, each of them corresponding more or less to one or two quarters. In Paris, most of the twenty *arrondissements* were even divided into two or three electoral constituencies. This obvious difference did matter a lot for the kind of relationship that citizens could engage in with

---

et-Marne), 1910-1935; Léon Blum, socialist deputy for Narbonne (Aude), 1929-1942; Louis Antériou, republican-socialist deputy for Privas (Ardèche), 1919-1931.

their deputy. Urban citizens were most often within walking distance of their MP, whereas most of the rural citizens had to travel several miles to actually meet him. For the Parisian citizens, this distinction was even more important, for their MP stayed within reach even during the periods in which the parliamentary sessions took place. Their rural or provincial counterparts stayed during these periods in hotels in the capital, far removed from their constituencies.[18]

The consequences of this difference can be detected in the personal archives of the MPs nearly at first glance. Indeed, it was even reflected in the way they filed their letters coming in from 'ordinary citizens'. While Parisian deputies such as Paul Painlevé and Marcel Sembat filed them in a purely chronological order, rural MPs such as Jacques-Louis Dumesnil and Léon Blum kept separate records for each of the communes of their electoral district. More importantly, this distinction implied most often also structurally different contacts between the MPs and their constituents. On the countryside, the letters were most often written by local notables belonging to the same ideological family as the MP. In this respect, a further distinction should be made between notables with and without a political function. Whereas the latter (judges, lawyers, physicians...) most often tried to promote their own career or that of their relatives with the help of their MP, the former (particularly mayors) most often sent requests on behalf of specific (groups of) citizens within their locality, or of their locality as a whole. In most cases, they requested the MP to defend these private or local interests either at an administrative level or in Parliament. If Frédéric Monier ascribes a 'ternary structure' to the relationship between MPs and their constituencies, this is certainly true for the majority of these contacts as they took place on the French countryside.[19]

The situation in urban, and especially metropolitan constituencies was fundamentally different. The relative accessibility of the MPs contributed to their being approached in more direct ways by a broader variety of citizens. The proportion of requests addressed to the MPs by mediators was much lower, and moreover these mediators seldom belonged to local elites (but were just slightly more literate than the friends or family members for whom they asked a favor). On the contrary even, the deputy often served as a mediator between the citizen and the local administration, for instance when the latter refused to pay the social allocation to which the former felt entitled. In these cases, the structure of the relationship between the MPs and their constituents can be called 'binary' rather than 'ternary'.

In terms of the tension between politicization and clientelism, the difference between a 'binary' and a 'ternary' structure is ambiguous. On the one hand, a binary structure seems to allow for a higher level of politicization, since it brings

---

[18] See, in that regard, Pierre Guiral en Guy Thuillier, *La vie quotidienne des députés français entre 1871 et 1914*, Paris : Hachette, 1981.

[19] See Monier, *La politique des plaintes*, p. 42.

the 'ordinary' citizens in closer contact with a representative of national politics; on the other hand, these contacts are even more intimate than those in which an intermediary was involved – thus creating even more possibilities for corruption and fraud. In order to gauge the degree of clientelism and/or politicization in these contacts, we have to subject the letters in which they have left their traces to a multifaceted analysis, combining a wide array of methodologies. These methodologies have to approach the interactions both from the side of the 'ordinary' citizen and from that of the MP, and try decipher how they encroached upon one another.

COMBINED INTERESTS AND STRATEGIES:
'ORDINARY CITIZENS' APPROACHING THEIR MPS

Among these methodologies, the most obvious one is the macro-historical survey of the letter-writers' (and/or of the intermediaries') social background. The term 'social background', in this respect, should be interpreted in its most general way. Obviously, it should imply categories such as gender, professional activities, literacy, age and place of residence. Given the disparate character of the sources – and of their preservation – such a survey cannot lead to the exhaustive databases on which analyses would ideally be based. Unlike typical serial sources like forms to be filled in by applicants or by public servants, letters to MPs do not follow strict guidelines. Sometimes, the social data of the letter-writers are not or only incompletely contained in the letters, or can they only be extracted or extrapolated from them while reading the entire letter. Even in spite of these imperfections, the letters do allow us to get an impression of the composition of the group of letter-writers, and to answer questions with an obvious political relevance. One of these questions concerns the degree to which non-voters were able to participate in the democratic process. As far as the French context of the first half of the twentieth century is concerned, this question applies first and foremost to women, given the existence of general male suffrage. Nonetheless, the question is equally relevant for citizens without the French nationality or for those which had been stripped of their voting rights. To which degree did these groups compensate for this lack of electoral power by engaging in direct contacts with the MP of their constituency? A general survey of the sources does in any case reveal that especially women actively engaged in writing letters to the MPs of their constituency.

Even within the group of potential voters, though, further differentiations should be made. Did an MP only receive letters from voters residing within his own constituency (as seems to have been the case for most of the rural MPs), or was he also addressed by citizens from other neighboring or even far-removed constituencies (as was the case for both metropolitan MPs in my sample)? And if the latter was the case, why did they recur precisely to him? Was it because he had gained in parliament a specific reputation with regard to a specific domain (as was the case with Paul Painlevé, who as a mathematician was a reputed ex-

pert in the field of aviation; or with Sembat, who built up a reputation as a parliamentary expert in postal matters)? Or was it because of his party affiliation?

This latter question enables us indirectly to fathom the relative strength of geographical and ideological affiliations. Would citizens in single-member constituencies address rather to their local MP, even if he did not belong to the party of their choice, than to a more congenial MP in a neighboring constituency? If this would be examined for a longer period, one might be able to make conclusions about the varying degrees of political consciousness and of the local anchorage of political parties. For that same reason, it is equally important to distinguish between letters written by one individual, and those written by groups of people sharing a same interest. As such, we can follow processes of political syndicalisation, and examine to which degree they were infiltrated by party politics. It makes a difference, for example, whether a letter was written to an MP by the syndicate of butchers of the Parisian 5th arrondissement, or by the Radical-Republican Syndicate of the Butchers of the Département de la Seine. These data can help us to remind that not all 'political' collectivities in the past followed national party lines from the start.

Hence, the study of direct interactions between local MPs and 'ordinary citizens' can indirectly contribute to the 'new' approach of the history of political parties. As mentioned earlier, this new approach emphasizes the importance of local varieties in partisan culture. The letters written to MPs can shed an even better light on these local varieties if apart from the data with regard to the social background of their authors, also those with regard to their political engagements are inventoried. Without any doubt, in this regard we are even less likely to get any 'objective' or complete figures. Indeed, whether or not these political engagements were actually mentioned was dependent on more or less strategic choices of the letter-writers involved. But this in itself is of course part of the process of politicization.

The political commitments referred to could be more or less active. On the most active side, the letter-writers could refer to their involvement in campaigning committees or other party associations – although even within this category different degrees existed. A less active form of political activity was that of voting (albeit in systems without the obligatory vote, even this required an active choice). The question whether or not letter-writers referred to their electoral behavior (or to that of their husband) is an important element when we try to gauge the degree of clientelism involved in their interactions with their MPs. If they did not present themselves as actual voters of the MP – and this seems to have been the case most often – they introduced at least an element of uncertainty into the exchange relation, since they remained silent about their gift in exchange for the action they expected from their MP. But even if they did refer to their voting behavior, this could be in a more or less clientelist – and therefore, less or more 'politicized' – way. If they presented themselves as traditional (ideologically mo-

tivated) voters for the same MP, this indicated a certain degree of political consciousness. By referring, on the contrary, exclusively to their vote during the last elections, and/or throwing up the prospect of a vote (or a non-vote) during the next elections, they maneuvered the MP immediately into a clientelistic trade-off.

When trying to weigh the proportion of clientelism and politicization in the interactions between MPs and 'ordinary citizens', it does not suffice to inventory and analyze the latter's references to their vote, as one of their potential gifts. Self-evidently, we should also chart their requests. And first of all, we should ask whether their letters did contain any request at all. Although they certainly form a minority, MPs did also receive letters in which the author only offered help (for example in an electoral campaign) without explicitly expecting anything in return. Others wrote letters to their MP in order to congratulate him for his action in Parliament (speeches, introduction of bills, and so on). By paying attention to these latter cases, too, we get an insight into another aspect of politicization, *viz.* the knowledge by 'ordinary citizens' of political institutions.

Among the actual requests, we can discern between at least three different (though not mutually exclusive) categories: a) those concerned with a purely personal interest of the requester and/or of one of his *protégés*; b) those concerned with the *collective* interest of a certain social or professional group; and c) those concerned with what was constructed as the 'national' or 'general' interest. Self-evidently, whereas the first category fits within a clientelistic relationship, the second and above all the third show at least a certain political consciousness. It goes without saying, however, that not every request can be entered univocally in one of these categories – or that one letter can contain requests belonging to different categories. And even a purely personal request can be motivated with reference to general political notions such as 'social justice' or even 'republicanism'. Even by simply noticing inequalities between himself and his neighbors, a letter-writer could make a political statement while demanding in the first place to get a favor. As such, a mobilized soldier wrote in November 1914 to his Parisian MP Painlevé, complaining that his wife did not receive the social allowances which were necessary for her survival. 'What makes me nauseatic', he added, 'is that I have next to me people who have immense possessions and who do receive allowances for their wives and children. It is simply shameful.'[20] Another soldier's letter, written during the last year of the war, reveals to which degree the language of favors, the language of justice and that of the general interest could mutually reinforce one another. According to this soldier, the enterprise where he had worked before the war had summoned him to take up his old position again, but his superiors had unrightfully refused to offer him military deferment. He therefore addressed his MP in the following terms: 'If currently I am soliciting your jus-

---

[20] Albert Blancafort to Painlevé, 11 November 1914. Paris, Archives Nationales (AN) 313 AP 48.

tice, it is because knowing that I would be more useful elsewhere depresses my already burdened health, and because they who are at the interior should rather come to replace us, while all the favors should be given to those who are there [i.e. at the front] since the beginnings'.[21] Clientelism and politicization, in these cases, are hard to disentangle.

Next to the object of the request, the kind of action required should equally be examined. In the case of personal requests, it was most often the intercession in favor of the letter-writer at a local or other state administration that was demanded from the MP. In the other two categories, however, genuinely parliamentary action could be requested. In some cases, letter-writers could even propose the more or less exact wordings of a speech that an MP should hold, of an interpellation that he should address to the minister, or of a bill that he should introduce in Parliament.[22] In these - admittedly rare – cases, we are confronted, of course, with an extensive knowledge of parliamentary procedures by 'ordinary citizens'.

As has been asserted before, an extensive and complex mapping of the data extracted from the letters enables us to ask – and potentially also to answer – a whole range of questions. This is certainly the case to the extent that data with regard to the letter-writer can be linked with data regarding the nature of their requests (and/or 'gifts'). Did women, for example, approach the MP in a different (more or less clientelistic) way than men? Did explicit political commitment exclude purely personal requests?

However, nearly all the lines of analysis that I have sketched in the former paragraphs make clear that a purely macro-historical mapping of the data contained in the letters, cannot suffice. The hermeneutic, micro-historical analysis of well-chosen letters remains necessary. In that sense, the political historian should also be a *cultural historian* with a strong feeling for language. Even for this kind of 'low-profile' texts, the insights from the linguistic turn remain important. The letters to MPs should be treated as a specific literary *genre*, in which 'ordinary' people present themselves to their MPs.[23] Constitutive for that genre is not only the way they address this MP at the start and the end of their letter, but also these letters' narrative structure. More or less implicitly, these letters often can be read as short autobiographies through which 'ordinary people' try to make themselves

---

[21] L. Calment to Sembat, 9 March 1918, Paris, AN, 637 AP 177.

[22] An elaborate example can be found in the letter of a *gendarme* (whose name is unreadable) to Painlevé (15 March 1914), in which he listed all the arguments that the latter could use in a parliamentary speech ('never a republican deputy had a more beautiful cause to defend') tending at the abolition of the 'feudal' *'caisse des gendarmes'*. Paris, AN, 313 AP 47. Another example is elaborately discussed in: Marnix Beyen, 'De politieke kracht van het dienstbetoon. Interacties tussen burgers en volksvertegenwoordigers in Parijs, 1893-1914', *Stadsgeschiedenis,* no. 7, 2012, p. 74-85.

23 See, in this regard, Camillo Zadra en Gianluigi Fait (eds.), *Deferenza, rivendicazione, supplica: le lettere ai potenti* , Treviso: Pagus edizioni, 1991.

into meaningful objects and/or participants in the political arena. In order to re-inforce their claims, they used different rhetorical strategies, by which they tried to convince the MP that their request was not simply driven by self-interest, but by a concern for justice or equality. Through these linguistic means, in other words, 'ordinary citizens' could try to delineate legitimate political demands from pure clientelistic requests. One of those strategies that would deserve a study of its own, is the rhetorical question. Again, the example of a mobilized soldier address-ing Painlevé from the frontline can serve as a more or less randomly chosen, but illustrative example. In the letter, he did not request a favor for himself, but for of a brother-in-arms, whose wife was unemployed: 'Who, however, could more right-fully claim an allowance? [...] Wouldn't it be horrible if he risked his life, with the idea that the Fatherland let his wife and his little daughter starve?'[24]

WON IN TRANSLATION: MPS RESPONDING TO 'ORDINARY CITIZENS'

With regard to the socialist MP of the Département de la Nièvre Jean Loquin, the French historian Aude Chamouard asserted: 'the deputy, by choosing to make intercessions to certain requests and not to others, can give a political sense to them'.[25] Implicitly, she suggests that this decision was determined first of all by the degree to which the requests fitted within the general political program the MP wanted to achieve. In that sense, she still excludes the 'ordinary' citizen from the political domain: whereas he or she addresses social demands to the MP, the latter turns them into politics. As I have tried to show in the former paragraphs, however, the requests themselves could also contain a political moment. The de-gree to which the political appropriation of the demands by the MPs was deter-mined by the degree of politicization already present in the letters, is extremely hard to assess. In theory, it would be possible systematically to trace the trajecto-ries followed by the requests that reached the MPs, before answering questions such as: Did the MP only support requests which were legitimized in 'political ways', while leaving the 'purely' clientelistic ones unanswered? Or did opportun-istic calculations of the potential electoral gains determine his choice?

This kind of research, however, would require time-consuming and often frustrating investigations in a wide array of archives. Indeed, only rarely do the deputies' personal archives contain the replies they received from the national, departmental or local administration were they interceded. Even harder to find are the answers written by the MPs to those who approached them. Nonethe-less, the papers of Marcel Sembat do contain the draft versions of the replies he or

---

[24] Jean [unreadable first name] Delbas to Painlevé, 28 October 1914, Paris, AN 313 AP 313 48.

[25] Aude Chamouard, 'Le député socialistste, agent de mobilisation nationale et de paix sociale: l'exemple de Jean Loquin dans la Nièvre', in: Romain Ducoulombier (ed.) *Les socialistes dans l'Europe en guerre. Réseaux, parcours, expériences, 1914-1918*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 2010, p. 177-191, quotation p. 190.

his secretary wrote during the last years of his career (1919-1922). These drafts show several instances where the MP explicitly refuses to take action, and thus sets the limits between political representation and clientelistic bartering where the letter-writer had refrained from doing so. To one of those many letter-writers who begged Sembat to provide him with free train tickets, the latter answered for example that 'the influence of the deputies does not go so far that they can obtain train tickets for all those who wish to have them'.[26] By stressing this and by enumerating the conditions which had to be fulfilled in order to be entitled to free tickets, the MP also acted – or tried to act – as a political educator for those who addressed him.

The MPs could, however, play their politicizing role also in much more active ways. The most obvious way to do so, was to translate the complaints of the letter-writers into parliamentary interventions. These acts of translation can be detected fairly easily by comparing the discussions in the Parliamentary Proceedings with the letters received on the same topic by the MPs. Doing so, we can broadly distinguish between two categories of acts. At a first level, the MPs could defend concrete measures that had been proposed by their local interlocutors for the sake of their constituency. This is what Jacques-Louis Dumesnil, MP for Fontainebleau, did when after the big floods that had devastated his region in 1910 he exhorted the Ministry to take the necessary measures 'reclaimed by the locals'.[27] That same Dumesnil acted at a 'higher' level, however, when some weeks later he pleaded against the trust of dung-producers who tended to strangle the local farmers financially. Although he was often confronted with this problem within his constituency, he did not refer to this local context in his speech on this occasion. Much rather, he translated this local problem immediately to the level of national politics.[28]

Generally speaking, the rural MPs that I have studied acted most often on the first level, whereas their metropolitan colleagues opted more frequently to move to the second level. This was most obviously the case for Marcel Sembat. His career-long engagement in favor of reforms of the postal services in France was at least partly inspired by the letters he received from inhabitants of his constituency who complained about the absence of a post-office in their neighborhood.[29] In a similar vein, his struggles for the six-days' working week and of the right of state employees to have access to their personal files, were fed by the complaints

---

[26] Sembat to 'Monsieur Chambon', 2 June 1913, Paris, AN, 637 AP 177.
[27] Parliamentary speech of November 24, 1910, see 'Notice sur les travaux législatifs de J.-L. Dumesnil député de Seine-et-Marne (radical-socialiste)', s.d., in Melun, Archives Départementales de Seine-et-Marne, 769F13.
[28] Parliamentary speech of December 8, 1910, ibidem.
[29] See especially Paris, AN 637 AP 26.

he received in this regard from local laborers and employees.[30] Often, more or less literal echoes of these letters can be found in his parliamentary interventions. For Sembat, parliamentary representation meant translating private and local concerns into themes of national interest.

CONCLUSION

Far from being an abstract and pre-ordained system, the grammar of parliamentary representation is continuously constituted throughout a myriad of concrete practices and interactions between the MPs and the citizens they represent. In these interactions, self-interests, collective interests and 'the general interest' are combined in dynamic ways, which makes it impossible to draw a hard border between 'clientelistic' and 'political' relations. From the small sample of MPs with which I have tried to illustrate my methodological approach, it does seem as if the activities of rural MPs contained rather more clientelistic aspects than those of their metropolitan colleagues. At first sight, this would plea in favor of a synchronic re-interpretation of the weberian modernization thesis: instead of a rule of notables being succeeded by an era of modern mass politics, a countryside ruled by notables would in that interpretation have co-existed with 'modern' politics in the larger cities.

Nonetheless, the source material should also warn against such a 'temporalization of space'.[31] If this contribution paid only marginal attention to the modern aspects of rural political life, it did shed light on the clientelistic aspects or metropolitan politics. The relationship between Parisian MPs and the inhabitants of their constituency could in many respects be called 'paternalist' or nearly 'feudal', the former functioning in many ways as protectors of the latter (who were often explicitly called *protégés*). The small size of the metropolitan constituencies rendered this kind of intimate relationship even more probable than in the larger rural constituencies. Consequently, local affinities mattered probably more than ideological ones in the interactions between metropolitan MPs and their constituents.

And yet, this contribution has tried to show that precisely from these 'paternalist' interactions political dynamics could emerge with an impact on a national level. In that sense, studying these interactions is not only relevant for those interested in the historical anthropology of politics, but also for those wanting to get a better understanding of the structural transformations of the state in the course of the twentieth century. Indeed, if recently historians have rightly stressed the importance of networks connecting politicians and intellectuals in the genesis of the welfare state, this contribution contains a plea equally to con-

---

[30] All these letters preserved in Paris, AN 637 AP, resp. 27 ('Notes secrètes') and 28 ('Repos hebdomadaire').

[31] The term is borrowed from: Sebastian Conrad, 'What time is Japan? Problems of Comparative (intercultural) Historiography', *History and Theory*, no. 38, 1999, p. 67-83.

sider the networks between MPs and 'ordinary' citizens in this regard. MPs were constantly informed by 'ordinary citizens' of the inconsistencies and the hiatuses of the social policies, and could hence plea for improvements and refinements. Of course, the question remains to which degree this constellation was specific for the Paris of the first decades of the twentieth century (or even more specific for the left-wing MPs that I studied). Undoubtedly, many conditions were fulfilled to make these interactions particularly fertile in this context: small, single-member constituencies, a century-long revolutionary tradition among the Parisian lower classes, a metropolitan atmosphere in which political knowledge circulated quickly because of a vibrant press, political parties which were relatively weakly developed (compared to other European countries) and thus left much space for personal initiative of the MP. Finding out whether these factors contributed to the rise of a genuinely unique grammar of representation might be a challenge for large-scale comparative research in the future.

MARNIX BEYEN

SENIOR LECTURER

MEMBER OF POWER IN HISTORY

CENTER FOR POLITICAL HISTORY

UNIVERSITY OF ANTWERP

BELGIUM

ABSTRACT

Clientelism and Politicization: Direct interactions between deputies and 'ordinary citizens' in France, ca. 1890-ca. 1940

This contribution contains a plea to consider the direct interactions between MPs and 'ordinary citizens' as an integral part of the complex phenomenon of political representation in modern democratic societies. During these interactions, the MPs and their respondents do not only defend each their personal interests, but often also articulate ideas about collective interests or even about the common good. As such, they are constitutive for the dynamic field of politics. By taking them into account, the Weberian thesis about a linear evolution from the 'rule of notables' to modern mass democracy should be reconsidered.

The article proposes a multifaceted way of studying these interactive contacts, illustrating its method by focusing on a small group of left-wing MPs in France between 1890 and 1940. At a first stage, the letters received by the MPs are used in order to draw a social profile of the 'ordinary citizens' approaching their political deputies, to map their motives for doing so, and to trace the political knowledge and concepts articulated by them. In a second move, the interventions of the MPs in parliaments are scanned in search of explicit or implicit references to their contacts with these ordinary citizens.

One general outcome of this preliminary research seems to be that these contacts follow a strikingly different pattern in rural than in urban or metropolitan constituencies. In the latter, the 'ordinary citizens' approached the MPs generally in a more or less direct way, whereas on the countryside these contacts were most often mediated by local administrations. As a result, these urban interactions tended much more than their rural counterparts to spur political dynamics.