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France and Fascism

February 1934 and the dynamics of political crisis

Brian Jenkins and Chris Millington

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Brian Jenkins and Chris Millington's book offers a highly original and engaging treatment of a hitherto neglected, yet vital chapter in French history, and should be required reading for anyone seeking to understand the dynamics of 1930s Gallic politics and society, the roots of the Vichy Regime, and indeed transnational trends across the European extreme Right during the interwar era.

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Jenkins and Millington provide us with a remarkable and authoritative account, by far the best to date, of the development and dynamics of this historic episode, which left an indelible mark on twentieth-century France. In the process, with rigour and precision, they refute traditional interpretations of these events. The lessons of this book probably apply well beyond this period of history.

Michel Dobry, *Professor Emeritus at the Sorbonne, Paris*

The 6 February riots were a turning-point in modern French history, yet they have been invoked far more than they have been studied. Confronting the myth-making of the 1930s and more recent interpretations of *le six février* head on, Brian Jenkins and Chris Millington set this pivotal event in a broader French and European context. This engaging and accessible work will fascinate scholars and students of modern European history and politics.

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France and Fascism

France and Fascism: February 1934 and the dynamics of political crisis is the first English-language book to examine the most significant political event in interwar France: the Paris riots of February 1934. On 6 February 1934, thousands of fascist rioters almost succeeded in bringing down the French democratic regime. The violence prompted the polarisation of French politics as hundreds of thousands of French citizens joined extreme right-wing paramilitary leagues or the left-wing Popular Front coalition. This 'French civil war', the first shots of which were fired in February 1934, would come to an end only at the Liberation of France ten years later.

The book challenges the assumption that the riots did not pose a serious threat to French democracy by providing a more balanced historical contextualisation of the events. Each chapter follows a distinctive analytical framework, incorporating the latest research in the field on French interwar politics as well as important new investigations into political violence and the dynamics of political crisis.

With a direct focus on the actual processes of the unfolding political crisis and the dynamics of the riots themselves, *France and Fascism* offers a comprehensive analysis which will be of interest to undergraduate and postgraduate students, as well as scholars, in the areas of French history and politics, and Fascism and the far right.

Brian Jenkins, now retired, was most recently Senior Research Fellow at the University of Leeds.

Chris Millington is Lecturer in History at Swansea University.

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France and Fascism

February 1934 and the dynamics of political crisis

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2015
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN: 978-1-138-86033-9 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-315-71652-7 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Wearset Ltd, Boldon, Tyne and Wear

Contents

Acknowledgements

For the generous funding that made research for this book possible, Chris Millington thanks the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship scheme, the Cardiff School of History, Archaeology and Religion, the Institute of Historical Research and the Scouloudi Foundation. He thanks the Union nationale des combattants for granting access to its archives, and Hugues de La Rocque for permitting him to consult documents from his grandfather's collection at the Archives nationales in Paris.

A version of Chapter four was published as 'February 6, 1934: The veterans' riot', in *French Historical Studies*, vol. 33, issue 4, pp. 545–572. © 2010, Society for French Historical Studies. Reprinted by kind permission of the publisher, Duke University Press. Extracts from *From Victory to Vichy: Veterans in Inter-War France* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012) reprinted with permission of publisher.

Brian Jenkins wishes to acknowledge that extracts from the following journal articles appear in some chapters of this book: 'The *Six Février* 1934 and the "Survival" of the French Republic', *French History* (2006) 20 (3), 333–335. Copyright 2006, The Author. Reprinted by kind permission of Oxford University Press. 'The right-wing leagues and electoral politics in interwar France', *History Compass*, 5/4 (2007), 1359–1381. Copyright 2007, The Author. Reprinted by kind permission of Wiley Publications. 'Plots and Rumors: Conspiracy theory and the *six février* 1934', *French Historical Studies*, vol. 34, issue 4, pp. 649–678. Copyright 2011, Society for French Historical Studies. Reprinted by kind permission of Duke University Press.

Abbreviations

ARAC	Association Républicaine des Anciens Combattants
CGT	Confédération Générale du Travail
CSAR	Comité Secret d'Action Révolutionnaire
FC	Fédération des Contribuables
KPD	Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands
PPF	Parti Populaire Français
PSF	Parti Social Français
SFIO	Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière
SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands
UF	Union Fédérale
UNC	Union Nationale des Combattants

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Introduction

False perspectives, false conclusions – the historiography of the *six février* 1934

Brian Jenkins

The Paris riots of 6 February 1934 were the bloodiest encounter on the streets of the capital since the Paris Commune of 1871. On that night, tens of thousands of extreme right-wing paramilitaries, veterans of the Great War, Communists and not a few curious bystanders marched on the Chamber of Deputies, where the lower house of the French parliament was in session. Obstructed by police stationed on the bridge over the Seine, the protesters turned to violence. Police lines came under sustained attack as projectiles rained down upon them and the front ranks of officers struggled to hold back the crowd. Officers twice opened fire, killing 14 people. The Chamber was successfully defended yet unrest continued for days afterward and a further 12 people died. The week following the riot, which subsequently became known as the *six février*, was the bloodiest period of political violence of the interwar years.

The context of the events was complex and multifaceted. The world economic Depression was, of course, the inescapable backdrop, and the failure of successive French governments to alleviate its effects in the early 1930s was largely due to misguided deflationary policies which merely exacerbated the downward spiral. The problem was further compounded after the May 1932 elections by the fact that the Socialists, on whose parliamentary support the governing Radical Party relied, were deeply unhappy about the social consequences of these policies, and a succession of governments foundered on this disagreement. The failure of the Radicals to achieve a durable working relationship with their Socialist allies considerably increased public disillusionment with the political system: the cabinet of Camille Chautemps, which took office in November 1933, was the fifth government in 18 months. This pattern of governmental ineffectiveness and instability provoked a rising tide of social activism from groups protesting against public expenditure cuts and tax increases. In the words of the historian Jacques Chastenet, 'public service unions, employer federations, taxpayer and retailer associations, war veteran leagues. Sovereignty is tending to shift from parliament to these pressure groups'.[1]

The 1932–34 period was also characterised by intense ideological ferment, and the quest for alternative models of social and political organisation. Many of the so-called *non-conformistes des années 30* drew on ideas that were strikingly similar to those circulating in foreign fascist milieux, though they were at pains

to give them a distinctly French pedigree. This ideological turmoil was soon to surface in the mainstream political arena in France, not least within the two parties whose electoral coalition had won a majority of seats at the May 1932 parliamentary elections.[2] The Radical Party's 'Young Turks', and the so-called 'Neo-Socialists' who broke away from the main Socialist Party (SFIO) in November 1933, were admittedly a mixed bunch, but they included elements who were attracted by authoritarian models of government.[3] Similarly, many of the projects for constitutional revision that were circulating in France at the time, while claiming to envisage reform of the Republic rather than the regime's demise, had a decidedly authoritarian flavour.[4] This process of ideological transfer and appropriation brought a European dimension to French political conflict between the wars. Hitler's accession to power in January 1933, and the rapid construction of the Nazi dictatorship, was after all symptomatic of a pan-European wave of authoritarian Nationalism, which was undermining liberal democracies in the early 1930s in the wake of the world Depression.

The most visible and alarming sign of political disaffection was the rise of the extreme right-wing leagues. The Action Française was the oldest of these, dating back to the Dreyfus Affair at the turn of the century, and it provided the model of the combative extraparliamentary 'league' formation. From the mid-1920s it had to contend with competition on the extreme Right from Pierre Taittinger's Jeunesses Patriotes (1924) and Georges Valois's short-lived Faisceau (1925). Two further leagues appeared in 1933, Jean Renaud's Solidarité Française and Marcel Bucard's Francisme. In the meantime, the Croix de Feu war veterans' association had been taken over by Colonel François de La Rocque in 1929 and turned into a fully-fledged league-style political movement. The *six février* 1934 would offer the leagues a dramatic opportunity to display their extraparliamentary force.

The fears aroused in conservative circles by the presence of the Left in government greatly enhanced the capacity of the right-wing leagues to mobilise support. However, the process that would pave the way for the *six février* was triggered by an issue that did not seem closely related to the prevailing social and economic climate or to the major political preoccupations of the day – the so-called Stavisky Affair. Alexandre Stavisky was a small-time fraudster and socialite of Ukrainian Jewish origin, whose shady financial dealings were already well-known to the police and judicial authorities. In December 1933, he disappeared from Paris in an attempt to avoid arrest. In the weeks that followed, a right-wing press campaign led by *L'Action Française* was to claim that Stavisky had donated to Radical Party funds, that his business operations had been endorsed by several Radical politicians, and above all that he had escaped justice thanks to the patronage of friends in high places, not least Georges Pressard, the chief prosecutor of the Paris judicial police, who happened to be none other than the brother-in-law of the current Radical Prime Minister, Camille Chautemps. When news came on 9 January that Stavisky, cornered by police in a house at Chamonix, had taken his own life, it was widely alleged that Stavisky had been silenced to prevent disclosure of compromising connections.

Throughout January 1934, the traditional theme of Republican corruption became the focus for a prolonged assault on the political establishment by the right-wing press and the extraparliamentary leagues, and a month of anti-government street demonstrations in the capital eventually saw the resignation of the Chautemps cabinet on 27 January. The incoming premier, Edouard Daladier, further antagonised right-wing opinion by removing the popular Paris Prefect of Police, Jean Chiappe, and as a result further demonstrations were called for the evening of 6 February to coincide with Daladier's investiture in the Chamber of Deputies. The ensuing street mobilisation involved the right-wing leagues (Action Française, Jeunesses Patriotes, Solidarité Française, Croix de Feu) and war veteran associations, primarily the Union Nationale des Combattants (UNC), which provided the largest single contingent.

Daladier, whose government had won three successive votes of confidence while these events unfolded outside, wavered between resistance and submission throughout the morning of 7 February. Eventually, persuaded by political colleagues and by officials in the army and police departments that if he stayed he risked provoking a rising tide of violence, he tendered his resignation. Violent demonstrations on the evening of 7 February claimed four further lives, and a similar number died during the Communist mobilisation of 9 February. It was on that day that the former President of the Republic Gaston Doumergue agreed to form a 'government of truce' based on the well-tried coalition formula of *union nationale*, detaching the Radicals from the Socialists in favour of a Centre-Right parliamentary majority. However, given the circumstances that had brought it to power, the Doumergue government was widely regarded on the Left as 'pre-fascist', and in response the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT), France's main trades union council, called a 24-hour protest strike for 12 February, while first the Socialists and then the Communists planned demonstrations for the same day. The now legendary 12 February mobilisation in Paris and the provinces was a massive success, marked by spontaneous displays of grass-roots unity between Socialist and Communist participants, and while this did not bring immediate reconciliation at leadership level, the date has nonetheless acquired iconic status in the memory of the French Left as the birthplace of the anti-fascist Popular Front.

On methodology

The elusive significance of the six février

The events described above were the subject of my doctoral thesis more than 35 years ago[5]. When I embarked on my research in the 1970s, it seemed to me there was something rather strange about the way historians treated the *six février* 1934. While general histories of the Third Republic or the interwar period invariably paused to acknowledge it as a critical moment, a key turning point, a catalyst for the Popular Front, a prefiguration of the divisions that surfaced in 1940, the events themselves had received very little detailed attention in the post-war

period, just a couple of academic essays and two brief historical accounts, but no scholarly monographs, no substantial work of historical analysis, a far cry from the voluminous literature on other *moments clés* like Boulangism or the Dreyfus Affair.[6] It was also in striking contrast to the passionate interest the *six février* had aroused at the time, the plethora of journalistic accounts and polemical tracts published within a year of the events, not to mention Laurent Bonnevay's detailed summary of the findings of the parliamentary Commission of Enquiry.[7] Forty years on, with all the documentary evidence that was available, one might have expected some fresh insights, new perspectives, or at least a degree of intellectual curiosity on the part of historians. Instead, the handful of authors who did address the subject remained mesmerised by the question of whether or not there had been any kind of conspiracy or plot against the regime, taking their cue from the 1934 parliamentary Commission of Enquiry into the events, which spent much of its time investigating such allegations. This narrow preoccupation was counter-productive in terms of serious political analysis, as we shall see, but the question 'riot or conspiracy?' (*émeute ou complot?*) was commonly presented as the key point of debate.

The answer to that question was still a contested one in the early 1970s. Marcel Le Clère[8] certainly gave some credence to the notion of a plot, thus partially endorsing the Left's allegations at the time[9], as well as the verdict of the postwar Commission of Enquiry, which described the riots as a 'meticulously prepared insurrection'.[10] Indeed, Le Clère specifically takes issue[11] with René Rémond's argument – developed a few years earlier – that there had been no concerted plan of action and that consequently the *six février* should be regarded as no more than a street demonstration that got out of hand.[12] It was Rémond's position, however, that soon gained the ascendancy and became the accepted wisdom, to the extent that even the left-leaning journalist Jacques Fauvet, in his history of the French Communist Party, would dismiss the riot as 'a mere street brawl brought to an unfortunate end by gunfire'.[13]

The emergence of an orthodoxy

This sceptical stance was further reinforced by the publication in 1975 of Serge Berstein's volume on the events which, despite being little more than a collection of documents with an extended commentary, was eventually adopted as the definitive and orthodox interpretation.[14] Berstein fleshed out Rémond's argument somewhat by drawing clear lines of distinction between the various organisations that participated in the demonstrations – their ideologies, programmes, motivations and (by derivation) their supposed intentions – concluding that these differences made any collusion around an agreed set of objectives unlikely. Instead, Berstein presented a different hypothesis, namely that an (ill-defined) group of conservative politicians *exploited* the riots in order to engineer the eventual outcome, namely the return of the Right to power in the shape of the Doumergue government.

There are some strange anomalies in Berstein's argument. Unlike Rémond, he does not belittle the events. He recognises the scale of the background political

crisis, and the insurrectionary climate that prevailed in the capital for several days. Furthermore, Berstein acknowledges that Daladier's capitulation created a 'vacance du pouvoir'[15] and that the supposed Hôtel de Ville plot envisaged not just the Right's return to power, but 'a ministry of public safety … the abdication of the parliamentary Republic … an authoritarian government'.[16] Curiously, Berstein does not address the issue of whether the Doumergue government actually measured up to these criteria! It is only in a later article that he explicitly endorses Rémond's position – that the *intentions* of the majority of the demonstrators can be read from the *outcome* of the events, namely the Doumergue government.[17]

Some of the flaws in this whole line of analysis only became clear to me much later, but even when I was preparing my thesis I found aspects of the consensus view rather disconcerting. In particular I was puzzled by Rémond's insistence that the outcome (the Doumergue government) somehow *proved* the limited ambitions of the mobilisation, and his willingness to discount out of hand so much of the evidence that pointed in a very different direction. My own research suggested, on the contrary, that for many participants the removal of the Daladier government was a minimum requirement rather than the ultimate objective, and that there was much more to play for.[18] Given the scale of public anger and disillusionment, the formula of *union nationale* was no longer widely regarded as the panacea it had been in 1926, and in the wake of the riots and Daladier's resignation, the situation was (to quote from my thesis) 'a dangerously *fluid* one'.[19] The appointment of Doumergue may temporarily have defused the political crisis, but it is tendentious in the extreme to see this as proof of *satisfaction*, let alone of *intention* on the part of the demonstrators.

Equally bizarre was the assumption that if there was no plot, then the regime was in no danger. This obsession with conspiracy obscures other vital considerations: the mood, the motives, the level of anger of the demonstrators, the options that opened up in the course of the political crisis. Here it is worth recalling the conclusions of Laurent Bonnevay, chairman of the 1934 parliamentary Commission of Enquiry, whose book *Les journées sanglantes de février 1934* (1935) summarises the commission's exhaustive investigations. Bonnevay himself was a centre-right politician who can in no way be presented as sympathetic to the Left, and whose book closes with a tribute to the efforts of Gaston Doumergue. But while he does not specifically align himself with the charge of conspiracy, he offers ample evidence of collusion between the leagues and argues that the deployment and timing of the different marches suggests a coordinated assault.[20] Furthermore, his narrative makes no attempt to play down the climate of political emergency that followed the riots, claiming that Doumergue's political 'truce' had averted 'the convulsions of an atrocious civil war'.[21] This impressive array of evidence, and Bonnevay's 'feel' for the political mood of the time, was still treated with respect in the 1960s by historians like Maurice Chavardès and Le Clère, and as we have seen, even to some extent by Berstein's 1975 study. However, the new consensus view constructed in the 1980s by Berstein and others on the foundations laid by Rémond was, on the contrary, extraordinarily dismissive of the lived experience of participants and contemporary observers,

instead claiming to find a new meaning behind the surface reality of the events. To understand the intellectual rationale of this operation, we must first take some back bearings and outline the Rémondian approach.

The Rémondian perspective

In my thesis conclusion, I argued that the riots were an important stage in the radicalisation of the French Right, as later confirmed by the massive growth of Colonel François de La Rocque's authoritarian nationalist movement the Croix de Feu, which would, in 1936, become the Parti Social Français (PSF).[22] In retrospect this seems a rather limited and tentative formulation, and it is easy to regret now that I did not challenge the standard interpretation more systematically and with greater determination. However, that would be to underestimate just how pervasive was the influence in the 1970s of Rémond and the whole tradition of French historiography he represented.[23] His study of *La droite en France* and the conceptual framework it adopted had already become the unavoidable reference point for scholars in this field, not least for those working on the interwar period. Building on the notion of entrenched political temperaments in French history, already developed by André Siegfried and François Goguel, Rémond advanced the thesis of *les trois droites* (Legitimism, Orleanism, Bonapartism), which supposedly provided a framework for understanding the French Right from 1815 to the present day. Although I took issue with some aspects of Rémond's model – for example, his anachronistic use of the category 'Bonapartism' in the context of the 1930s – I failed to confront the underlying cultural and psychological determinism of his whole approach.[24]

In the specific context of the *six février*, Rémond's analysis presents two sets of problems. The first derives from the inherent determinism referred to above. The alleged *permanence* of the three right-wing traditions tends to promote an ahistorical perspective in which the importance of historical context and political conjuncture is neglected in favour of these supposed continuities of attitude and temperament. Similarly, the *trois droites* are often presented as *bounded* identities, whereas in real historical situations such boundaries between political traditions are not only permeable but also of *variable consistency*.[25] In times of acute political crisis, partisan affiliations may weaken and the nuances of ideological differentiation may blur into insignificance. For example, once we recognise that in such crisis situations more moderate elements may become 'radicalised', then the rigid analytical separation of Orleanists from Bonapartists is no longer helpful.

The second set of problems relates specifically to the issue of 'Fascism'. A significant sub-section of the chapter on the interwar period in *La droite en France* was given over to arguing that for the most part the French right-wing leagues did not resemble foreign fascist formations, that the *six février* did not resemble a fascist *putsch*, that Fascism was essentially an alien import, and that France was distinctly unpropitious territory for the development of Fascism for a variety of reasons, not least because the political space on the Right was already

occupied by indigenous traditions.[26] With the benefit of hindsight, the flaws in this argument are all too evident, and so indeed is the political agenda that drove Rémond and his successors to insist with such determination that France was 'allergic' to Fascism. But the historiographical climate at the time I was preparing my thesis was very different, and for a variety of reasons I was not yet equipped to recognise the methodological deficiencies of Rémond's approach.

The 'immunity thesis'

The issue of French 'Fascism' was soon to become the focus of furious debate. In 1978, Zeev Sternhell published *La droite révolutionnaire*[27] which claimed that France had been the main laboratory for the development of fascist ideas in the years between Boulangism and the Great War. Even more contentious was his *Ni droite ni gauche* (1983)[28] which argued that French society had by the 1930s become deeply impregnated with fascist attitudes. This provoked an indignant response from a range of prominent French scholars, who rallied to the defence of the Rémond position[29], subsequently refining and systematising it into what Michel Dobry has dubbed 'the immunity thesis'.[30] Over the years, this consensus historiography has been challenged by a growing number of (predominantly non-French) specialists, notably Robert Soucy and Kevin Passmore, though their lines of attack are as different from each other as they are from Sternhell's.[31] Indeed, the whole debate hinges as much on differing definitions of 'Fascism' as on details of empirical observation, and it is not surprising that a third perspective has recently been gaining ground under the aegis of Dobry which, while deeply critical of the immunity thesis, also takes issue with its opponents, and argues that measuring political movements against essentialist definitions of generic Fascism is an unproductive exercise.[32]

In this entire long-running dispute, the *six février* has received rather short shrift. The focus has been on political movements and ideologies, and the events often receive little more than passing reference. Berstein touched on the subject in two articles in the 1980s, and Michel Winock devoted a chapter to the *six février* in his book on French political crises, but these were largely restatements of the orthodox position.[33] Even Soucy's *French Fascism: The Second Wave* (1995) which concentrates on the 1933–39 period, deals with the riots in less than four pages[34], and his narrative contains little to which Rémond and Berstein could object. Dobry's landmark article (1989) was the major exception, of course, but despite its title this was not so much an examination of 'February 1934' as a devastating methodological critique of the 'immunity thesis' as a whole. It was, anyway, and predictably enough, studiously ignored by what William Irvine calls 'the consensus school of French historiography',[35] and thus remained a lonely beacon for a further decade.[36] Indeed, the present collection of essays seeks to develop empirically many of the lines of investigation indicated by Dobry in that essay. Until now the subject has never been addressed at any length from this alternative perspective. Although a new generation of scholars has emerged in the last ten years who are critical of the 'immunity thesis', the

six février has not for the most part attracted their interest, with the notable exception of my co-author Chris Millington, whose work on the war veterans' movement and on political violence between the wars, adds a vital new dimension to this study of the February 1934 events.

Of course, in many respects the 'immunity thesis' *requires* that the events of 6 February be not taken too seriously. The easiest way to refute the analogies drawn at the time between the events of February 1934 and the processes that brought Mussolini and Hitler to power was to downplay any suggestion that the regime had been in any kind of danger, to dismiss the more radical statements of participants as mere posturing, to point to the (moderate) 'outcome' as proof of what the demonstrators *really* wanted, to separate the *six février* riots from the month-long climate of political emergency, and furthermore to thoroughly *mis*-represent how Mussolini and Hitler *actually* got into office. And underpinning all this was the notion of France's deep-rooted 'democratic political culture' and the Rémondian model of *les trois droites*, which made France impervious to Fascism. Rémond had warned us against being deceived by surface similarities ('despite appearances, public opinion in this country is peculiarly resistant to the appeal of Fascism'[37]) and was dismissive about the *six février* ('not a *putsch*, barely a riot'[38]). His successors took up the same theme: for Winock, the *six février* produced an unwelcome and unnecessary 'dramatisation of the political scene',[39] while for Berstein it was symptomatic of 'the simulated confrontation of the 1930s',[40] phrases loaded with the implication that political strife in this period was somehow artificial, lacking in seriousness, mere posturing or shadow-boxing.

Towards a new perspective

For much of the period when this debate on French Fascism was raging, my own research was in different fields, notably the theory and history of Nationalism, first in relation to France and later in a wider European context.[41] While I knew Sternhell's work and was aware of the *furore* it had provoked in France, I had not read the wave of retaliatory articles that appeared in the wake of *Ni droite ni gauche*, and did not realise the extent to which French scholars had converged in defence of the Rémondian tradition. So when I returned tentatively to the subject in 1996 – an historiographical article on Soucy's *French Fascism: The Second Wave* – I had a lot of ground to make up.[42] In one respect, however, my long absence from the field had served me well. My study of Nationalism had revealed the dangers of generic categories, and of the obsession with classification. Nationalism is not only diverse (it assumes a variety of different political and ideological forms), but also deeply ambiguous (different variants coexist within every nationalist movement or ideology). These inherent tensions and contradictions make Nationalism politically malleable, dependent on the specificity of each historical situation, and indeed on the structure of political competition obtaining at the time. Political movements and ideologies are not hermetically sealed traditions shaped only by the past; they are engaged in a set

of reciprocal relationships with other movements and ideologies.[43] This *reciprocity*, along with the fluidity of ideological boundaries, is the key to understanding how Nationalism has oscillated in post-revolutionary French history between radically different political projects.[44]

This perspective would eventually prove compatible with the (methodologically much more rigorous) approach being developed by Dobry in relation to the interwar French authoritarian Right, and this convergence subsequently facilitated our collaboration on a number of projects.[45] Dobry, a political sociologist based at Nanterre and later the Sorbonne, was above all interested in the analysis of political crisis and the methodological deficiencies of many conventional approaches.[46] This provided the theoretical foundations for his critique of the 'immunity thesis', developed in a series of essays over the last twenty years. Dobry's methodological insights gave shape and structure to my own thinking on the subject of France in the era of Fascism, and more specifically provided a framework for the analysis of the *six février* which allowed my own research findings and tentative conclusions of 35 years ago finally to fall into place.

Dobry's critique of the 'immunity thesis' is multi-faceted, and given its importance for the approach adopted in this collection, its salient features are worth noting. One of his main targets is what he calls 'the logic of classification' (*la logique classificatoire*),[47] the compulsion to classify and to construct abstract typologies, and we have already noted some of the inherent dangers of this practice in relation to Rémond's *trois droites*. More specifically, however, Dobry takes issue with the formulation of essentialist definitions of Fascism against which to measure political movements. Fascism is, he points out, an 'indigenous category': namely, it is 'the product of the actions, the struggles, the self-identification of the political actors themselves'. And, as he goes on to say, the priorities of these actors 'certainly did not include developing the term into an academic tool.'[48]

An equally significant criticism is that immunity thesis historians have the habit of writing history backwards on the basis of 'outcomes' – i.e. Fascism did not come to power in France, so it was never a serious possibility, it was never intended, it was destined not to be. This is based on what Dobry calls elsewhere the 'illusion of natural history' (*l'illusion de l'histoire naturelle)*, the notion of regularities and sequential patterns in the march of history, which typically uses the 'regressive method' (starting from the outcome and working back to the initial causes).[49] This involves identifying only those historical facts which contribute to the outcome, and this teleological approach is, of course, inherently deterministic. If Fascism did not come to power in France, then (it is argued) the reasons must be located deep in the historical process, hence the recourse to highly dubious concepts like 'political culture'. Furthermore, this method has little value as a comparative tool, because the only cases deemed 'comparable' are those that have led to the same 'outcome'. The method thus *excludes* from the comparison other historical sequences which may indeed be comparable, but which produced a different outcome from that on which the definition of the phenomenon is based.[50] It also excludes the possibility that outcomes may

depend on small events, on details of conjuncture and context, rather than on deep historical processes.

The sociology of crisis

Clearly these strictures equally apply in the specific context of the *six février* 1934. The conventional interpretation, as exemplified in the writings of both Rémond and Berstein, depends heavily on the 'outcome' (i.e. the appointment of the Doumergue government), deemed somehow to *prove* that the bulk of demonstrators were inherently moderate and intended no more than they achieved. Of course, this eludes the point that the outcome was actually not as 'moderate' as all that – the violent overthrow of a legally-constituted government, a change of parliamentary majority, and the reversal of the 1932 election results. But more significantly, the regressive selection of facts to fit the outcome leads these scholars simply to ignore a large and compelling body of evidence suggesting that many of the leaders of the demonstration saw the removal of the Daladier government as a necessary first stage, a minimum requirement, after which there was much still left to play for.

In his *Sociologie des crises politiques*, Dobry makes a number of other methodological points which are of equal interest, both at the general level and in relation to the specific political crisis of February 1934. He draws attention, for example, to the twin dangers of 'objectivisme'[51] (where mobilisations are seen as the product of processes like 'modernisation'), and of what he calls 'a manipulative or instrumental vision'[52] (where leaders are perceived as controlling or guiding mobilisations). Even more provocative, however, is his critique of what he calls 'the etiological illusion',[53] which in some ways may be seen as a counterpoint to the 'regressive method'. While the latter reads history backwards from the outcome, the 'etiological illusion' involves the search for origins and causes upstream (*en amont*) from the crisis itself.

The danger lies not so much in the search itself, as in the use of these origins and causes as *explanations* of the crisis. To paraphrase Dobry, this perspective directs attention away from the events themselves to 'factors', 'variables' 'phenomena' located *upstream*. These become the 'object of study', 'the puzzle to be solved', and in the process the actual events and other related phenomena are deemed to be transparent, devoid of mystery, of no particular interest to the researcher, because attention should be focused on the 'causes'. The thing to be discovered is not 'what happened' in the events; it is on the contrary something that is both *external* and *anterior* to those events. There is therefore a refusal to recognise that the crisis may develop a dynamic of its own, that it may become 'autonomous' in relation to the 'causes' that may have played a role before the crisis. There is also a total lack of theoretical curiosity about the internal causal mechanisms of the particular crisis process under investigation.

It seems to me that these observations, though not specifically directed at the immunity-thesis interpretation of the February 1934 crisis, are entirely applicable in that context. In the course of the month-long right-wing mobilisation

preceding the *six février* riots, involving an unrelenting press campaign and near-daily street demonstrations, eventually producing an 'insurrectionary' atmosphere in the capital, there is no doubt that the crisis process developed a dynamic of its own. Rival conspiracy theories of Left and Right were widely believed, fuelled each other, and contributed to the creation of a climate of political emergency. Rivalry between the right-wing leagues led to a competitive one-upmanship (*surenchère*) which added momentum to the mobilisation. Radicalisation led to partisan dealignment and the blurring of political and ideological boundaries. In such situations, it is dangerous to ascribe 'intentions' to actors because (to quote Dobry again):

> the motives, interests, aims, calculations, objectives of the actors are more often than not brushed aside, deflected, transformed, exposed or forgotten in (and by) the skirmishes of the battle itself, that is to say, in the conflict's own 'autonomous' dynamics.[54]

In short, such crises are 'fluid political situations', difficult to manipulate or control, and which open up a variety of possible outcomes.

To sum up, the orthodox historiography on the crisis of February 1934 seems remarkably indifferent to what actually happened.[55] The 'meaning' of the events is produced first of all *teleologically* – the Doumergue 'outcome' becomes the defining characteristic of the events, and the regressive method highlights only those historical facts that are consistent with that outcome. Second, the meaning is produced *etiologically* – the events are seen in terms of origins and causes, often vague and heterogeneous, and difficult to link directly to the events being 'explained'.[56] All of this is then framed within an exceptionalist narrative emphasising the continuities of a distinctly French political culture, and the specificity of France's experience of world events like the Great War, the Russian Revolution and the Depression of the 1930s. The combined effect is to ensure that the *six février* is firmly insulated against unwelcome comparison with what might otherwise appear to be similar phenomena elsewhere.

As for the events themselves, writes Dobry, mainstream historians simply assume that we already 'know' the essentials of what took place. That sort of work can safely be left to 'chroniclers and eye witnesses', while the task of the real scholar is to look beneath the 'surface', to find meaning not in the events themselves but in their 'causes' (and 'results').[57] Another example of this is the practice (adopted by both Rémond and Berstein) of explaining the motives and intentions of the *six février* demonstrators through the official ideologies and programmes of the various participating organisations. The dangers of such an approach have been eloquently expressed by Kristin Ross, who was writing about the events of May 1968, but whose words are equally applicable in the context of February 1934:

> I find it impossible to evaluate the role played by radical ideas or revolutionary theories transmitted from the exterior on the eruption and evolution