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Edmond Rothé as an early figure of a committed intellectual at Strasbourg University, 1919–1942



(1) Introduction

Historians generally consider that, although the word existed before, the figure of the intellectual was born with the Dreyfus affair, at the end of the 19th century, when the novelist Zola wrote the famous “J’accuse” on the front page of the newspaper “L’Aurore”, on January 13th, 1898. His position was supported the next day by writers and university professors in a text later called Manifesto. By doing

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this, the intellectuals started being a collective power. French society was split in two parts: pro and anti Dreyfus. The trial revealed that forged documents had been used against Captain Dreyfus, who belonged to an old Alsatian family. The machination charged him of treason as a Jew. The army and the catholic hierarchy were involved in these anti-Semitic attitudes. Dreyfus was exonerated and rehabilitated in 1906. The strong movement among intellectuals won them a new status in society and contributed to shaping their identity as a new social group.

After such an upheaval within French society, intellectual commitment has generally resulted from membership of a political party. It appeared in France during WWI, became strong during WWII and the cold war. The commitment made important progress during the interwar period, when Langevin, Joliot, Rivet, Alain were the main figures of committed intellectuals. Sartre, Nizan, Aragon and Picasso came later. They are still famous because of their leadership of French intelligentsia. Centralised France has centralised heroes.

But what happened far from Paris, in the depth of provincial life? This escaped historians who always focused on the famous and powerful Parisian elite. However, without a wide echo and implementation in the province, the movement would never have grown strong enough to exert any influence. Edmond Rothé is a textbook typical case of the emergence of committed intellectuals at the basis of society. He was a geophysicist at Strasbourg University from 1919 to 1941. He was neither an emblematic hero, nor an iconoclast. He was at first an austere university professor, who became one of the leaders of the Popular Front in Strasbourg. His itinerary shows the particular obstacles a scientist had to face in his professional and citizen life in the second best university of France, located at the border with Germany. His case can be described in three tiers: the patriot, the scientist, the citizen, which enlighten the birth and the specificity of intellectual commitment, and its consequences on private and public life.

(2) The committed patriot

As a matter of fact, his birthplace can be considered as an evidence of the French patriotism of his family: he was born in Paris, in 1873, i.e two years after the Francfort Treaty and the loss of Alsace-Lorraine. His parents were Alsatians who had decided not to become German, and had “opted” for France. Rothé is the son of an “optant” republican career soldier.

His patriotism was at stake when the First World War broke out. At that time, most of the young and senior scientists were to direct or divert their former researches towards military concerns. Rothé, who had been involved in aerology studies at Nancy University since 1905, had no objection to meet the army’s needs. His field was the wireless transmissions with planes, therefore he was very soon called on to work at the “Bureau des inventions” at the War Ministry, in the aircraft sector. He participated in this scientific war as the head of the aeronautic service. He was awarded the War medal and the Légion d’honneur medal for his services to the homeland. After the end of the war, he took on delivering regular courses, every term, to artillery officers in many camps such as Vitry, Metz, Bitche, until the late twenties.

When he applied for a position at Strasbourg university, in December 1918, it was also on a patriotic basis: the reopening of the French university in the recovered Alsace-Lorraine was conceived as a revenge against Germany, and all the professors were selected according to their scientific capability and also to their desire to promote French science, French style, French culture. His father had been a French “optant”, Edmond came back, aged 46, to the “Little Homeland” as a French “revenant”.

His activities at the faculty also aimed at the preservation of the French Empire, by installing seismographs in the French colonies under threat of earthquakes, and by inviting students to seek jobs in France’s overseas departments and territories.

At international level, he campaigned for locating the International Geodesic and Geophysical Union in Strasbourg, and for his own appointment as its director, and later its general secretary, in order to ban the Germans from any position in the Union. Rothé shared this kind of patriotic commitment with the great majority of his colleagues in Strasbourg. They all did it in an explicit and public way.

(3) The committed scientist

Rothé had studied maths and physics at the Sorbonne at the end of the 19th century, and had met Pierre and Marie Curie, Jean Perrin and Paul Langevin in their laboratories.

When the French academic authorities appointed him in Strasbourg, Rothé was well known as a specialist of wireless telegraph transmissions between atmospheric balloons and the ground, in order to gather informations about the wind speed, storm clouds etc., which were very useful for the development of flying, aircraft forces and commercial aviation. He also improved the measurement of earth movements and implemented seismographs to forecast earthquakes, and proposed to map, for further prospections and exploitation, the geological densities at a world wide scale. Since his arrival in Strasbourg, he had planned to unite meteorology, seismology and geology and create a specific institute: the Institute of physics of the globe. He was supported by the university council to lead this institutional innovation. The new institute was launched in Strasbourg some months before the Paris Institute: that shows his dynamism. Rothé opened the field to young scholars, and it is noticeable that, under his supervision, many women found an opportunity to defend a PhD much more easily than in traditional disciplines, all in the hands of men. Rothé actually played a significant role in gender history by promoting a new scientific discipline widely open to women.

Applied science was not neglected. Outside the institution, closer relations with the local society were introduced by daily diffusion of weather forecast bulletins as public services towards airmen, farmers, mountain hikers, tourists and insurance companies. The linkage of pure and applied science was realised within the institution when he set up, following up on what he had implemented in Nancy, an Engineering School within the university, to train students to geological prospection, seismology and meteorology. The constant contacts between scientists and students were a guarantee of high level standards and of interrelations between science and industry. Therefore the societal demand was fulfilled on this educational side too. Furthermore, this was a very original curriculum compared to other French engineering schools and it corresponded to a global programme of modernisation of French universities launched in Strasbourg after WWI. The reports on his activities are laudatory:

- 1921: Although overburdened, stands his responsibilities of chief of service. Exceptional organiser, excellent professor (The dean and the rector);
- 1935/36: Scientist of repute, active professor, (...) plays a role of first rank at the faculty and the university. (Rector Dresch).

Rothé was rewarded by his election at the French Science Academy for this scientific work on December 5th in 1938. He had gained his peers recognition for his achievements as a scientist.

(4) The committed citizen

Since his childhood he had been educated according to the values of the Republic. His parents were “dreyfusards”. This was not an easy position when your were in the army! Edmond Rothé was a school fellow of Léon Blum (the future prime minister of the Popular Front in 1936) at the Lycée Henri IV. Although he was never interested in political membership and he never joined any party, he founded the local section of the League of Human Rights when he arrived in Strasbourg, in 1919, with the help of Leblois, one the major defenders in the Dreyfus affair, who lived in Strasbourg. The League, founded in 1899, just after the trial of Dreyfus, had socialist orientations but was widely open and recruited mainly intellectuals.

Some years later, in 1926, Rothé founded the Cercle Jean-Macé, (so called since the “Ligue de l’enseignement” could not exist under this name because of the special status of religion in Alsace-Lorraine). The aim of the association was to promote laicity and rationalism at school. It recruited several professors of the university (mainly of the science faculty) and also primary and secondary school masters. Although Rothé remained a lutherian protestant all his life, he did not consider it a matter of contradiction to support the laws of separation of State and Church, and of Church and School, which are the core concepts of French « laïcité ». It was not an easy task in Alsace to promote freedom of conscience. The Cercle had to fight against local religious fanaticism: the Alsatians did not want to be ruled under the French laws in religious affairs and had obtained, without discussion in Parliament, a situation which advantaged ministers of religion a privileged status as civil servants, made religious teaching compulsory at school, and did not make room for free thinking. Defending laicity was considered as declaring a religious war.

In 1934, at a time when fascism was felt as a threat in France, Rothé founded the local Committee of Vigilance of the Antifascist Intellectuals (CVIA), which was a vast pacifist movement, through which an alliance with the popular movement was made possible in France. To the committee belonged school teachers, lawyers and several colleagues from the Strasbourg university. The movement was wide open. The debates were contradictory. There were 40 members in 1934 and 60 in 1937. In June 1936 the Popular Front won the elections. Rothé was the President of the Comité départemental du rassemblement populaire. Although the reaction in Alsace was not as enthusiastic as in other regions, several huge demonstrations were organised in the streets. Rothé was on the front line of 30,000 people on July 16, next to Joseph Mohn, the leader of the CGT trade union. He headed the Alsatian delegation which met Léon Blum. His photo on the front line of the demonstration, recently published again for the Popular Front 60th anniversary, shows “the great professor” in the street with the workers. This had never been seen before.



*Demonstration, July 16th 1936
From left to right: Cerf, Rothé, Mohn*

(5) The retaliation

In the academic sphere, Rothé was never forgiven for his political commitment. In 1935, because of his public position against fascism, he was dismissed from the deanship. There was no plot: the campaign was done openly against him by his conservative colleagues. His assessor, the physiologist Emile Terroine, immediately resigned, as a sign of solidarity.

In 1941, at Clermont-Ferrand, where the whole university had fled, the Nazis could not stand that the university of Strasbourg still existed in France, and tried by all means to dismantle it. They decided to move all the instruments of Rothé's laboratory from Clermont-Ferrand to Strasbourg, and sent the Gestapo to do that. This was the first attack of the Nazis against Strasbourg University as such. Later, in 1942, they also arrested 300 students and professors and sent more than one hundred of them to concentration camps. Among them were the best scientists.

Prior to the German exactions, the French authorities of the Vichy government had decided to prosecute all the former supporters of the Popular Front. That is why Rothé was abruptly compelled to leave the faculty in June 1941, two weeks before the exam session. He was made to take compulsory retirement. He was neither allowed to supervise his own students nor to participate in a PhD defense to

substitute Hélène Joliot-Curie, who had been turned down as a jury member in Paris. The decision had been made by the French Minister of Justice, Barthelemy, who was in charge of the Alsatian affairs. The rector and the dean did not back Rothé. There was no precedent of such an attitude. It was against all traditions. The faculty council tried to save his honour by rewarding Rothé the title of honorary professor and dean, but even that was not tolerated by the Vichy authorities. The minister answered he could not follow the faculty council's proposal. The ruling power discarded him.

Rothé's health worsened and he died some months later, on August 28th 1942, at Lezoux, a small village in the neighbourhood of Clermont-Ferrand, friendly assisted by his colleague and friend Cerf, who had been destituted from his academic position by the racial laws against the Jews, in December 1941.

The decision of the Vichy officials was nullified in 1945 by De Gaulle's Minister of Public Instruction, René Capitant, Rothé's former colleague in Strasbourg and partner of the CVIA. He awarded him posthumously the title of emeritus professor and dean. But the page was turned.

(6) Conclusion

What happened to Rothé at the end of his life reveals that the Nazis had, since the *de facto* annexion of Alsace-Lorraine, the purpose of dismantling Strasbourg university by all means. They started with the transfer of the scientific instruments from Clermont-Ferrand to the Reichsuniversität in Strasbourg. The scientists were the first victims.

But Rothé's case tells us also about French collaboration within universities. The Vichy government officials did not oppose the Nazis' intentions and, what is worse, went a step further by compelling Rothé to retire. At that time, the Nazis did not request it. Silence has generally spread on this type of collaboration, but we can now gather here and there hints of Vichy's policy. The detailed history of this obliterated period of French history can now be expected.

At the present time, only the memory of the martyrdom has been transmitted. The repression at a less emblematic level has been neglected. Since Rothé was not a martyr, like Marc Bloch, Maurice Halbwachs or many of his colleagues, deported to Buchenwald after the "great rafle" of November 1943, his name is no longer related to the war. The patriot has been forgotten.

At a scientific level, Rothé is still well known within the academic community as a founder and pioneer of a new discipline at the faculty. His name has been given to a lecture hall on the new campus. The scientist is still honoured.

The citizen has been obliterated. Nothing is said in academic biographies about his political activities: Georges Dubois, his successor, has written a long and exhaustive scientific obituary, without mentioning his political choices. Cerf has added one page on the committed citizen, but the text was printed separately from the scientific review, and was available only for the closest friends. However, Rothé is now present in the Dictionary of the French Social Movement. The academic elite accepted the nationalist pressure on scientists after WWI, the collaboration with industrialists and the public, but not the alliance with the people. The academic elite was on the side of the Bourgeoisie and dropped all references to the left wing of society. The portrait of Rothé was split into different and separate facets.

This was a great error: Rothé is interesting because of this complexity. Rothé's positions show a new rationale in intellectual commitment: his research was in tune with the historical context; he clearly questioned, at his level, the use of science in society, and he did not escape the political choices that the long term policy programmes implied. As a matter of fact, the introduction of scientific research in the mission of the university, which had spread widely in Strasbourg since the German time, provoked the question of political commitment. The reason why political commitment arose first at the science faculty in Strasbourg is linked to scientific issues. Paying more attention to the public than his colleagues, because of his particular scientific preoccupations, Rothé kept closer contacts with the local society than some more famous intellectual colleagues, such as Lucien Febvre, Marc Bloch or Maurice Halbwachs. That is why one may say that his commitment was science based. Because of his itinerary, Rothé is remembered as a forerunner of those who today have launched the debates on the responsibilities of scientists about GMOs, environment preservation or more widely "citizen science". Bourdieu, in the last decades, urged intellectuals to commit themselves, arguing that it was necessary in contemporary democratic societies to participate in the fundamental choices technoscience makes possible. Science and society should by this way be reconciliated. Rothé partly shaped the new generation of committed intellectuals.

But when Rothé started, left wing political commitment was not easy when practised far from Paris and the umbrella of the national centre. Province life exposed much more to be pointed out. The protection of the center was weak and did not reach the margins. Rothé lacked the net of decision makers and the vicinity with medias and journalists. He participated in the large movement as a local actor, and contributed to the emergence of new forms of political activities without the benefiting from national reputation. He is a good example of how local history has to do with global history in France. Even if his image has faded, he must be considered as a precursor who has implemented new ethics in the academic sphere.

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