

## **Le Monde and Mitterrand: challenging the 'yellow line'**

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### **Introduction**

It is widely acknowledged that, in stark contrast to the UK and USA, where almost nothing is sacred in the journalist's quest to uncover and expose the realities of political life and of the private lives of politicians, the media in France have traditionally been far more docile and acquiescent towards their political masters. Indeed, despite proclaimed allegiance to the notion of the freedom of the press, French journalists have in fact found it hard to cast off the lingering shackles of the gaullist legacy of tight state control of 'information', particularly in the broadcasting media, where appointments to the top public posts, despite various reforms, have been subject to political intervention, direct or covert. But what is arguably most remarkable from the anglo-saxon perspective, is that on the one hand, journalism in France has remained staunchly faithful to the notion of the so-called 'yellow line' that delineates public life from private,<sup>i</sup> so that French politicians have not had to suffer the degree of scrutiny of their private affairs that has brought many a British and American politician's career to an ignominious end; yet on the other hand, French journalists regularly flout the legal principle of the *secret de l'instruction* together with judges and the police, in pursuit of their own particular or combined interests, in ways which would be unthinkable in Britain or America.<sup>ii</sup> Clearly there are strong cultural differences and traditions which inform these contrasting deontologies of journalism, and which engender a degree of mutual disrespect for the principles of the other: take for example the failure of French journalists to report the fact that Nicolas Sarkozy's wife Cécilia had not voted in the presidential election which brought her husband into office in May 2007, which gave rise to much negative comment in the British and American dailies at the time. Or, in the other direction, the traditional French disdain for 'Anglo-saxon'-style methods of 'investigation' and the tendency towards *peopolisation* of politics that made it almost inevitable that a nude photo of Sarkozy's latest wife Carla Bruni would be published in the British press at the time of the President's official visit to the UK in March 2008.

Yet in recent years, this 'peopolisation' of politics has started to encroach upon the French media landscape, partly encouraged by politicians such as Sarkozy himself who seemed happy to accept his love life being splashed over the pages of weekly news magazines, as long as it kept him in the limelight before the election. Whilst the quality daily press has so far refused to go down this road, the definition of the famous *ligne jaune* that separates private life from public, has recently been seriously challenged on a number of issues, such as whether or not to report the separation of Ségolène Royal from her partner François Hollande, leader of the Socialist Party, during the presidential election campaign in 2007. The boundaries between public and private were most seriously put to the

test for the first time during the final years of the presidency of François Mitterrand, because of the complicated nature of his private life, which was finally brought into the public domain on the grounds that it had impacted significantly on his actions as president. The existence of Mitterrand's illegitimate daughter Mazarine, which had in fact been a well kept *secret de polichinelle* in the world of Paris journalists for well over a decade, in keeping with the established deontology of respect for the president's private life was perhaps predictably first revealed by 'le choc des photos' of *Paris Match*, in November 1994, arguably with the president's tacit approval. Once this secret was out in the open, it brought into even closer focus the question of the uneasy boundary between private and public life, since it gave substance to a series of allegations concerning the misappropriation of public funds (to provide security and housing for his second family) as well as certain accusations relating to the phone tapping affair, which was finally brought to the courts many years after Mitterrand's death.<sup>iii</sup> So too did the revelation by the president's doctor that Mitterrand's cancer had been diagnosed not in 1992, as was claimed in public, but six months after his election in 1981, thus raising the question of the president's capacity to carry out his official duties.

The treatment by the press of François Mitterrand, not only in the final years of his presidency, but for a further decade following his death in 1996, represents a significant moment in the history of the French media, for two reasons: first, because it was the first time that a president's private life had been the object of such close, extensive and critical public scrutiny, and second, because the attacks against him were led not by the more sensationalist magazines such as *Paris Match* but in the daily press, by the so called 'journal de référence', *Le Monde*, which had not hitherto engaged in reporting of this nature. This article will examine how and why this very particular relationship developed between François Mitterrand and *Le Monde*, evolving from open support for his election in 1981, towards what has been described as a 'duel à mort' from 1994 onwards (Poulet, 2003: 70). It will show how Mitterrand's very secretive style of governing inspired the adoption of new investigative techniques of journalism that had previously been considered inappropriate for a quality newspaper, and how after 1994, under the influence of Edwy Plenel as Chief Editor, these methods were developed along with a reporting style hitherto associated with some of the most deprecated features of the anglo-saxon press. This new style was accompanied, under the directorship of Jean-Marie Colombani, by a more aggressive managerial approach, adopted in pursuit of a long-term ambition to build up a major 'groupe de presse' around *Le Monde*. But despite nearly a decade of generally successful results in terms of sales and circulation figures, their strategy was seriously called into question after the publication of a detailed and well sourced investigation into the methods used by Plenel and Colombani, carried out by journalists Pierre Péan and Philippe Cohen, who turned the investigative techniques back against them (Péan and Cohen, 2003). This publication immediately sparked a major crisis for *Le Monde*, which led in the end to the forced resignation first of Plenel in 2005, then of Colombani in 2007, thus bringing to a close this particular era of the paper's history, and a return to more conventional methods of

journalism and management. The article will conclude by briefly reviewing the significance of this episode in relation to recent developments in French journalism.

### **From collusion to confrontation**

*Le Monde's* position as a 'journal de référence' derived largely from its rather unique history (Jeanneney and Julliard, 1979; Legris, 1976; Thibau, 1978; Eveno, 2004). Established during the post-war era under its founder Beuve-Méry, it aimed to provide a sort of public service, fulfilling the needs of the French intelligentsia in navigating a supposedly neutral path between the Left and Right, even though Beuve-Méry adopted an increasingly critical position towards de Gaulle as the years went by. But in the late 1970s it modified its course significantly under the direction of Jacques Fauvet, taking up an explicitly political position against Valéry Giscard d'Estaing in the context of the diamonds affair, and openly supporting François Mitterrand in the 1981 election. Fauvet wrote of Mitterrand's electoral victory in *Le Monde* (and in hindsight, with a poignant irony): 'Cette victoire c'est enfin celle du respect sur le dédain, du réalisme sur l'illusion, de la franchise sur l'artifice, bref, celle d'une certaine morale' (*Le Monde*, 11/05/81). This political support for Mitterrand was all the more significant when set in the context of the generally critical stance towards him of the left-wing press during the opposition years of the 1970s, when *Le Monde* and *Le Nouvel Observateur* in particular showed a preference for the 'deuxième gauche',<sup>iv</sup> as acknowledged by Mitterrand in *Mémoires interrompues*: 'ils ne m'ont pas pardonné l'Union de la gauche' (Mitterrand, 1996: 244). Indeed, there had been no special relationship between Mitterrand and *Le Monde* in earlier years, but it was the perceived need for a change of government, or *alternance*, that convinced its editors to support him as the only candidate able to bring the Left into power (Laurens, 1996: 10).

But the 15% drop in sales over the years following 1981 showed that the loss of neutrality and new collusion with the party of government had not been appreciated by all its readers (Colombani 2000-2001: 728), and after the resignation of Fauvet in 1982, relations with the president became increasingly more distant, starting with *Le Monde's* contesting of the new legislation governing municipal elections, and continuing with the exposure (by Edwy Plenel, then still a relatively junior journalist) of the first 'affairs' of the presidency: the sinking of the Rainbow Warrior by the French secret service, the bungled arrest of the 'Irish of Vincennes', and the Farewell affair regarding the expulsion of Soviet spies. Nevertheless, when Mitterrand stood for re-election in 1988, director André Fontaine expressed lukewarm endorsement for his candidacy, on the grounds that he was a 'réconciliateur des Français' (Laurens, 1996: 12). André Laurens, former director and later mediator of *Le Monde*, has argued that throughout Mitterrand's two terms of office, *Le Monde's* comment on the president's policies, whether critical or supportive, always remained in line with its own editorial positions of seeking social justice, better integration of citizens, the reinforcement of peace, the development of freedom of individuals and peoples, and a better distribution of wealth. But he has

also pointed out that 'c'est le dévoilement progressif de la personnalité du premier personnage de l'Etat [...] qui semble avoir creusé le fossé entre lui et *Le Monde*' and he acknowledged that:

la curiosité suscitée par la personnalité de François Mitterrand a correspondu à une évolution de la pratique journalistique, qu'on ne saurait nier. [...] Auparavant, ce genre d'interrogation n'était pas totalement absent dans la presse, mais il n'avait pas la même place ni la même fonction. Les journalistes s'y prêtaient moins, peut-être pas assez, mais surtout, la nécessité ne s'en faisaient pas autant sentir. (Laurens, 1996: 12-13).

It was in the mid 1980s that the paper first crossed this new editorial boundary, when it decided to espouse the cause of 'investigative journalism' in response to the secretive ways of the Mitterrand presidency, under the influence of the then unknown young journalist Edwy Plenel, who was taken on by *Le Monde* in 1981 as the specialist in police affairs. He had been a member of the Trotskyist LCR movement, and had been trained by his militant experiences with the party publication *Rouge* to debunk the police machinations and bunglings that provided the 'daily bread' of 'opposition' journalists in the post-68 era (Huberson, 2008; Poulet, 2003: 80-104). During this period, he established connections with certain members of the police, especially through his close friendship with Bernard Deleplace, secretary general of the Fédération Autonome des Syndicats de Police (FASP), the most important police union, and with the judiciary: in particular, certain left-wing judges who belonged to the Syndicat de la Magistrature, a left-wing union created in 1968, committed to trying to assert the independence of the judiciary from political authority. These links were designed to facilitate the organised leaks of police and legal documents to the press in a way which was of benefit to both parties, described by Péan and Cohen as:

un tandem qui ne dit pas encore son nom, le couple juge/journaliste. Le premier s'autorise, au nom de la liberté de la presse et des « blocages » imputés au Ministère de la Justice, à bafouer le secret de l'instruction et la présomption de l'innocence; le second profite du scoop obtenu pour publier des enquêtes « à charge » sans consultation de la partie adverse. (Péan and Cohen, 2003 : 114).

The illegal practices (because they flouted the *secret de l'instruction*) that formed the basis of this French version of investigative journalism developed by Plenel and others such as George Marion for *Le Canard Enchaîné*, became increasingly commonplace as the media in general took on a more active role in politics. Plenel, along with others of his generation, was greatly influenced by the impact of the Watergate Affair in Washington, exposed by two young journalists, and which inspired a new sense of the potential power of the press to bring about political change. In his new post at *Le Monde*, he took advantage of the prestige of the paper to establish new relations with the police and Ministry of the Interior, enabling him to carry out his first big 'coup' with the affair of the

'Irish of Vincennes', a story of police bungling in relation to a terrorist operation in 1982. He then consolidated his reputation in 1985 as a result of his investigation into the Rainbow Warrior Affair, which led ultimately to the resignation of the Defence Minister Charles Hernu, one of Mitterrand's close allies and friends, who had clearly lied about French responsibility for the incident. This was the first time that a minister had been forced to resign as a result of a press campaign, and it was a significant moment for relations between politics and the written press, marking one of the moments of greatest tension between the president and *Le Monde*. According to Roland Dumas (Mitterrand's close friend and Minister for Foreign Affairs at that time):

Le quotidien se comportait en véritable « ennemi de l'intérieur » aux yeux du chef de l'Etat. Ces révélations ont eu pour effet de mettre hors de lui le Président de la République. Il y vit comme la confirmation de l'entreprise qu'il avait dénoncée quelques mois auparavant avec l'affaire Farewell. (Dumas, 2003, 110).<sup>v</sup>

It was therefore no coincidence that it was in this context that Plenel's phone was put on tap, for his investigation had entered the realm of state security, and the Elysée wanted to know what sources he was using (*Le Nouvel Observateur*, 24/06/1999; Huberson, 2008 :442).<sup>vi</sup>

Plenel, who said he had voted for Mitterrand in 1981, had become rapidly disillusioned with the exercise of power under the socialist president whom he accused of flouting the principles of 'la gauche sociale et morale'. He expressed indignation at how Mitterrand had created a special *cellule* in charge of his personal security, based at the Elysée, responsible to himself personally, thus breaking with all existing practice. He also resented Mitterrand's nomination of certain police chiefs suspected of having right-wing sympathies, on the recommendation of Gilles Ménage, Mitterrand's advisor on internal police and security matters, reputed to be a closet Giscardian.<sup>vii</sup> According to Ménage, Plenel's hostility to the president originated in his organisational shake up of the police in 1982-3, which disrupted his own networks:

En remettant de l'ordre, on cassait les filières d'information privilégiées qui s'étaient établies à la faveur du laxisme des premiers temps du septennat [1981-2]. En tendant à l'Etat l'usage de ses possibilités d'action les plus usuelles, (choix de fonctionnaires, ou faculté d'empêcher que le contenu de dossiers sensibles soit dispersé sur la place publique) [...] on dérangeait une coopérative autogérée qui avait commencé de prospérer avec, pour fonds de roulement, les dysfonctionnements les plus flagrants de notre administration, en particulier la police. (Ménage, 1999: 12-13).

Ménage was put in charge of what Péan and Cohen called 'la chasse aux fuites [...] qui forment la « pompe à scoops » de la presse' (2003 : 109) and it was therefore not surprising that Plenel and Ménage saw each other as enemies, especially after Plenel's position was strengthened after 1984 by his good relationship with the new Minister of the Interior Pierre Joxe,

who admired his style of journalism, much to Mitterrand's annoyance (Joxe, 2006 : 98).

The seeds of the battle waged personally by Plenel against Mitterrand were thus sown in these early years of the presidency, and had reached full maturity by the early 1990s, with the publication of two books: the first, *La Part d'ombre*, was a damning exposé of *mitterrandisme* and its secret methods, with particular reference to Plenel's suspicions regarding the phone-tapping affair (Plenel, 1992). It was followed two years later in 1994 by *Un temps de chien*, an equally virulent response to Mitterrand's attack against the journalists that he had called 'dogs', holding them responsible for the suicide of his former Prime Minister, Pierre Bérégovoy, because of their so-called 'investigative' methods into his private life (Plenel, 1994). But the impact of the campaign waged by *Le Monde* against Mitterrand was not felt with full force until after the appointment of Jean-Marie Colombani as Managing Director (*Directeur de Publication*) in March 1994. Colombani promoted Plenel to the post of Chief Editor (*Rédacteur en chef*) then *rédacteur en chef, adjoint au directeur de la rédaction* in September, and *directeur-adjoint de la rédaction* in April 1995. In September he was given responsibility for reorganising the three sections of the *rédaction: édition, éditorial and prévision..* These appointments were part of an organisational shake-up designed to save the paper from financial collapse, sales having dropped by 10% over the preceding four years. Colombani, whose politics were sympathetic towards the '*deuxième gauche*' represented by Rocard, had, as a political journalist, followed the affairs of the PS during the 1970s, during which time he had developed an antipathy towards Mitterrand which was clearly mutual. It was common knowledge amongst journalists that he was not well liked at the Elysée, where he was known as 'le petit Corse': 'son rocardisme supposé ne le fait guère apprécier dans la galaxie mitterrandienne triomphante. Il en conservera quelque amertume.' (Poulet, 2003: 74).<sup>viii</sup> When he took over the directorship of *Le Monde*, the practice of traditional monthly dinners *en tête à tête* with the President came to an end,<sup>ix</sup> and Mitterrand is even said to have tried to get Colombani 'removed' as Director (Poulet, 2003: 113). This combination of political and personal animosity, combined with Colombani's 'challenge' to redress the fortunes of the paper, in collaboration with his friend and colleague Plenel, made for a situation that would colour the political landscape for many years to come.

The general political climate in which Colombani took over was already highly charged against the President by the revelation in 1993 by *Libération* of what became the 'affaire des écoutes' that put Plenel personally at the heart of accusations against the Elysée's *cellule*, since his suspicions of his own phone having been tapped had now been publicly confirmed. These and subsequent revelations in November 1994 about the president's private life and Vichy past (Péan, 1994) then provided the new leadership with an ideal opportunity to consolidate its campaign against Mitterrand, as part of its wider 'programme de relance', in terms vividly described by journalist Bernard Poulet in his own attack in 2003 against *Le Monde*:

*Le Monde* fait feu de tout bois dans sa guerre ouverte contre François Mitterrand. [...] le journal se déchaîne, sans compassion, contre le vieux locataire de l'Elysée, comme pour une mise à mort après une trop longue corrida. [...] Et ce bombardement journalistique a un objectif politique: c'est par ce duel avec la plus haute autorité de l'Etat que *Le Monde* assure sa nouvelle place dans le jeu des institutions. Il n'est plus seulement un contre-pouvoir, il est le pouvoir face au pouvoir. Mieux, il donne l'impression d'être capable de faire plier le pouvoir de l'Etat. La recette dépasse largement le combat idéologique. (Poulet, 2003 : 78-79).

The objective of its new editorial direction, intent on putting *mitterrandisme* on trial, was explicitly acknowledged later by Colombani: 'Depuis que je dirige *Le Monde*, nous avons été implacables avec François Mitterrand, [...] dans un face-à-face toujours critique par rapport à la Présidence de la République' (Colombani, 2000-2001 : 734). For Colombani, as Director of Production, this stance of open confrontation, presented as being against the presidency rather than with Mitterrand personally, was considered as being good for business, as well as fulfilling the political ambitions of the new leadership team. It was also, according to the paper's 'official' historian, Patrick Eveno, a means of demonstrating the independence of *Le Monde* (Eveno, 2004: 512-3). For Plenel, it was more of a moral crusade against the president who, he claimed, had betrayed the principles of socialism, causing the 'demoralisation of the Left' (Plenel, 1994: 49). He argued that the many scandals of the presidency were 'par leur ampleur et leur diversité [...] au cœur du bilan de l'entreprise mitterrandienne,' in which morality and ethics gave way to self-interested wheeling and dealing, and in which 'sa remarquable maîtrise du pouvoir s'appuie sur une dissociation permanente de la politique et de la morale,' (Plenel, 1992: 426). This was why he defended the use of 'revelations':

nous sommes un journal d'information et [...] nous ne devons pas céder aux pratiques de la communication. Tous les lieux de pouvoir et d'influence ont mis au point des stratégies de communication. Il faut aller chercher ce qu'il y a derrière la communication et le révéler aux lecteurs. (Eveno, 2004 : 553)<sup>x</sup>

1994 was thus 'l'année de la cristallisation de l'hostilité de François Mitterrand à l'égard du *Monde*' (Eveno, 2004: 507). Laure Adler, Mitterrand's cultural advisor from 1994-5, in her account of life at the Elysée during these years, reported how 'Tous les collaborateurs de l'Elysée décrivent l'attitude de certains journaux, particulièrement celle du *Monde*, en termes de chasse, de guerre, de meurtre symbolique' (Adler, 1995: 233). For Mitterrand himself, according to one of his 'intimes':

C'était leur manière de raisonner et de fonctionner qu'il trouvait révoltant [sic]. Selon lui, Plenel, le trotskiste, partageait la même culture de la culpabilité et le même ressentiment que Colombani le démo-chrétien. Il disait que certains mouvements

d'extrême gauche fonctionnaient avec des schémas de pensée et de raisonnement liés à des doctrines du salut, au péché (Péan, 2002 : 274).<sup>xi</sup>

In September of that year, the Elysée announced that it was reducing the number of its subscriptions from 110 to 20, in protest against the paper's articles regarding his Vichy past and his state of health (and by extension, his ability to carry out his presidential duties),<sup>xii</sup> a gesture that was immediately ridiculed in the columns of *Le Monde* as an incoherent act of political reprisal (Georges (1994). This unprecedented open battle between *Le Monde* and the President, described by Bernard Poulet at a 'duel à mort' (Poulet, 2003: 70), was thus largely the result of the conjunction of the very particular circumstances of the final years of the Mitterrand presidency, together with the personal role played by Plenel, and the financial crisis of France's 'journal de référence', which was itself symptomatic of a wider crisis in the press at this time.

### **From a 'duel à mort' to the 'fight after death'**

But if Colombani's intention was for the paper to take a stand against political authority, and the presidency in particular (and the similar treatment of Jacques Chirac after 1995 bore witness to this policy), it does not fully explain why or how the campaign against Mitterrand was maintained long after his death. As journalists Péan and Cohen later commented in their attack against *Le Monde* in 2003: 'une fois Mitterrand enterré, on aurait pu penser que la haine des dirigeants du *Monde* s'essoufflerait. Vaine espérance. [...] le crachat sur la tombe de François Mitterrand devient un exercice prisé par les rédacteurs' (Péan and Cohen, 2003 : 271). Clearly, the question of how Mitterrand's immediate legacy was articulated in the press would have a significant impact on how he would be judged in time by historians, if only because they would have to take account of all the accusations, even if to then prove them to be unfounded. It was therefore important for *Le Monde*, and for Plenel more particularly, to maintain the negative image, in line with its editorial policy, which had also been good for sales figures. It did so partly through extensive coverage and reviews of all the numerous publications about Mitterrand that appeared in the years following his death, especially those which brought his reputation into question, such as Pierre Marion's *Mémoires de l'ombre* (1999), which claimed that the President's attachment to his daughter Mazarine had interfered with his actions and decisions as Head of State.

But the main source for its attacks came from what can be described as the 'fallout' from the numerous 'affaires' of the Mitterrand years, which resulted in various sets of legal proceedings that dragged on for most of the following decade, providing endless reporting opportunities for Plenel, who remained in charge of the editorial policy, to revisit the attacks on *mitterrandisme* as a political system. They included the prosecution of Mitterrand's doctor, Claude Gubler (for the publication of his 'revelation' of the truth behind the diagnosis of the President's cancer), the MNEF affair (a corruption scandal involving a student insurance company), the

Josephine affair (a financial scandal involving a 25 billion dollar loan from Saudi Arabia), the Papon trial (involving reminders of Mitterrand's Vichy past and his relationship with the Vichy collaborator René Bousquet), and the 'déboires' of his son Jean-Christophe relating to his activities in Africa when he was an advisor to his father, which ended in his prosecution for arms dealing, tax evasion and corruption. But the two most important legal battles were the phone-tapping affair already referred to, involving Mitterrand personally, and the Elf affair, implicating Roland Dumas, but also targeting Mitterrand by association, through headlines such as: 'Elf: l'ombre de Mitterrand' (*Le Monde*, 12/07/00). Both of these were extremely long and complex trials, the detail of which cannot be dealt with here, but in both cases, the technique of 'serialised' revelations was used in a way that became one of the hallmarks of its reporting during these years. In the case of the Elf affair, during the eighteen months between January 1998 – June 1999 alone, *Le Monde* published 138 articles about the affair, of which 119 were about Dumas's alleged role in it, and most of them with front page trails, even though his part in it was relatively minor in comparison to the accusations made against the two main defendants, Alfred Sirven and Louis Le Floch-Prigent. Péan and Cohen commented: 'Déchiqueter le cadavre du « Vieux » ne suffisait pas. Il fallait aussi donner la chasse à ceux qui l'avaient servi. Roland Dumas est sans conteste le mieux lûti.' (Péan and Cohen, 2003: 279). As President of the Institut François Mitterrand,<sup>xiii</sup> Dumas seems to have been an obvious target for *Le Monde*, and indeed, the accusations made against him had significant repercussions within the Institute's Conseil d'Administration, forcing his resignation not only from its presidency, but also from that of the Conseil Constitutionnel.

It was the 'affaire des écoutes', however, that was unquestionably the most significant reminder of all the unfinished business of the Mitterrand presidency. Plenel, by making a formal personal complaint as a *partie civile* against the state in relation to the illegal phone tapping, became the driving force of a campaign waged through the pages of *Le Monde* to ensure that the affair was pursued to a legal conclusion rather than being abandoned in the face of political pressure, as was not uncommon practice for affairs such as this one, with sensitive and far-reaching ramifications across the whole political system. Plenel saw this trial as being inextricably tied to his professional defence of investigative journalism, in its attempt to find and reveal the reality behind the façade of political power: 'la face cachée de la Raison d'Etat':<sup>xiv</sup> 'entre François Mitterrand et nous, il y a d'abord, il y aura toujours la raison d'Etat' (Plenel, 1994: postface). From the outset, Plenel was resentful of the way in which, in his view, the affair had been to some extent depoliticised by a deliberate change in the law made in 1994, reducing the accusation to 'atteinte à la vie privée' rather than the previous 'crime d'attentat aux libertés inscrites dans la Constitution' (Plenel, 2006a: 41), which would have put into greater focus the political questions that it raised for him about 'notre culture politique nationale, notre rapport au pouvoir, notre pratique des institutions, nos usages de la liberté et de la loi.' (Plenel, 2006: 37) He wrote:

En décidant d'emblée que ce procès n'avait pas de portée historique, la justice française restait prisonnière des hiérarchies dans lesquelles elle avait si longtemps pris l'habitude de se situer avant de s'essayer à l'indépendance: sinon soumise, du moins respectueuse du pouvoir exécutif, de son autorité et de ses privilèges. (Plenel, 2006a: 42-3).

Legal proceedings were initiated in December 1994 against those held responsible for the phone tapping (and most notably in relation to this article, against Gilles Ménage<sup>xv</sup>), and were drawn out endlessly, partly due to arguments as to whether or not the *secret défense* (state secrecy rule) should be lifted in order to allow the accused to present their defence more fully. Thus the case provided *Le Monde* with extensive opportunities to revisit the dark side of Mitterrand's presidency and its allegedly disastrous legacy for the Left, so that by the time the affair finally reached the courts in November 2004 (by which point Ménage had been appointed General Secretary of the Institut François Mitterrand), most of the detail was already public knowledge, thanks to the repeated abuses of the *secret de l'instruction*, using the methods outlined earlier.<sup>xvi</sup> The final judgement, made in November 2005 but modified on appeal in March 2007, represented a somewhat ambiguous outcome, and only a partial victory for Plenel: on the one hand, the president was held personally responsible for the creation of the *cellule* and for having ordered the phone tapping, and significantly, this was the first time in republican history (but possibly not the last if proceedings against Chirac are pursued) that an affair of state implicating the President of the Republic had been brought before a court. However, the sentences served on the accused were fairly restrained, and Plenel commented with bitterness that 'C'est d'ailleurs une leçon de modestie pour les journalistes découvreurs d'affaires et de scandales: en elles-mêmes, leurs trouvailles n'ébranleront jamais le système; il saura toujours s'en accommoder si aucune force, politique et / ou sociale, ne s'empare de ces révélations pour imposer des remises en cause' (Plenel, 2006b: 773). Plenel was also forced to recognise that there had been a change in the public mood, no longer intent on retribution against the former president: 'Ne sachant plus comment être une grande nation mais voulant croire encore qu'elle l'est restée, la France d'aujourd'hui ne supporte pas d'être rabaissée. Et notre histoire la rabaissait par la mise à nu d'une présidence' (Plenel, 2006a: 44).

This change in mood was in fact not just symptomatic of the evolution of public opinion since Mitterrand's death in 1996; it was also no doubt largely the result of the attack on *Le Monde* launched in 2003 with the publication of the book by Pierre Péan and Philippe Cohen, *La Face cachée du Monde*. This created a huge 'media event' as a result of its many serious accusations against the paper's management style, commercial practices and editorial policies. The book criticised its accusatory style of journalism, through which it was said to have set itself up as a superior moral authority above all other; it also scorned Plenel's pursuit of sensational scoops and the excessive theatricalisation of news as 'dumbing down', and deplored the way its use of investigation had degenerated into the obsessive pursuit of 'revelations', some of them

unverified speculation presented as fact, such as in the 'affaire de la chambre du président'<sup>xvii</sup> or the alleged politico-financial scandal of the Panama Affair.<sup>xviii</sup> The editorial policy was attacked for having transformed the paper from a *contre-pouvoir* into an 'anti-pouvoir', driven by the ideology of denunciation, francophobia and sectarianism, and whose objective was no longer to inform but to impose its own politics. Colombani's financial management was exposed as being unsound in all sorts of ways, and Plenel was accused of being driven by 'une haine obsessionnelle de François Mitterrand', and waging a personal vendetta against him through the pages of the paper: 'Et la une, sa une, a été transformée en place de Grève pour condamner, jour après jour, un homme mort' (Péan and Cohen, 2003: 324).

This attack on such a venerable and powerful institution as *Le Monde* was not entered into lightly, and is said to have come about as a result of a joint agreement between the two authors, who were originally working separately, and Claude Durand, PDG of Fayard publications (Huberson, 2008: 443-462). For Péan, the main reason for carrying out this investigation was to seek revenge for the way in which *Le Monde* had, in his view, distorted the main message of his book, *Une jeunesse française*, which had led to very negative media analysis of Mitterrand's Vichy past, giving the overall impression that he had been if not quite a collaborator, at least a Pétainiste. In 2002 Péan had published a second book about Mitterrand: *Dernières volontés, derniers combats, dernières souffrances*, in which he expressed his regret at the negative impact of *Une jeunesse française* on his reputation. This second book was written in order to 'rétablir certaines vérités' (Péan, 2002: backcover), but this message had not been given much echo in the columns of *Le Monde*. Although Péan was also an investigative journalist, his views differed from those of Plenel, with whom a rivalry had developed in 1983 in the context of the reporting of the affair of the 'Irish of Vincennes':

L'Etat pour moi, cela signifie quelque chose. Ce n'est pas le mal absolu que décrivent les trotskistes qui le qualifient d'appareil répressif. L'Etat a une légitimité. Le secret d'Etat aussi. Tout n'est pas publiable. Pour Plenel, il n'y a pas de secret. Tout doit pouvoir être révélé. Pour moi, non. Il y a des informations qu'il ne faut pas sortir car leurs conséquences négatives peuvent être plus grandes que la seule vertu de les porter à la connaissance du public. (Péan, cited in Huberson, 2008: 435).

Péan formed the view that Plenel's brand of investigative journalism was ideologically motivated by his trotskyist convictions, and aimed essentially to destabilise the state, and he concluded *Dernières volontés, derniers combats, dernières souffrances* with the sentence: 'Le personnage [de François Mitterrand] mérite mieux qu'une condamnation prononcée au nom de Léon Trotski.' (Péan, 2002 : 328).

According to Huberson, Péan would have liked to say more against Plenel and *Le Monde*, but the publishers, Plon, thought it imprudent: 'le grand quotidien du soir fait peur. Personne ne veut vraiment se le mettre à dos'

(Huberson, 2008: 452). Péan then decided he should conduct a major investigation into *Le Monde's* activities, but could not find a publisher willing to be party to such an attack, until he met up with Claude Durand of Fayard, whose close publishing collaboration with Plenel had recently become fraught with conflicts. In 1999 he had been challenged by Plenel over his decision to publish Gilles Ménage's account of the phone tapping affair, *L'Œil du pouvoir* (Huberson, 2008: 455-6), but Durand had defended this decision in the preface to the book:

Je pense qu'il est de bonne guerre qu'un homme d'Etat ou un grand serviteur de l'Etat puisse user des mêmes voies pour expliquer et pour défendre son action, critiquer à son tour ses critiques, voire s'atteler à démonter lui-même les mécanismes d'un contre-pouvoir dont il fustige les excès, les dérapages ou l'impartialité (Durand, in Ménage, 1999 : 4-5).

Then the following year they fell out over the publication by Fayard of Renaud Camus's book *La Campagne de France*, which created a controversy over the question of whether or not it was anti-semitic, bringing home to Durand just how powerful *Le Monde* had become, with its supplement *Le Monde des livres* playing an increasingly dominant role in the world of publishing. The prospect of Colombani's press conglomerate was seen as a further threat by Durand, and he therefore decided to support Péan's project: 'Il faut donner un coup d'arrêt au pouvoir que s'arrogent les journalistes et à la constitution d'un groupe de presse expansionniste' (Durand, cited by Huberson, 2008: 459-460). Péan had meanwhile been contacted by another young journalist, Philippe Cohen, who had been working on a similar project, and wanted to get Péan on board; the coming together of all these different threads convinced Péan that the project was justified: 'A 40 ans, je n'aurais jamais écrit ce livre. C'eût été suicidaire. J'en ai 65, je pars à la retraite, je peux donc me permettre de me fâcher avec *Le Monde*' (Péan, cited by Huberson, 2008 : 461). The project was conducted with the greatest secrecy, and Durand even got the manuscript printed in Spain by a small subsidiary, *Mille et une nuits*, thus bringing together all the conditions for what Huberson has described as conspiracy (2008: 461-2). Patrick Eveno in his 'official' history of the paper, could therefore justifiably claim that 'L'opération médiatique contre *Le Monde*' was inspired not only by a combination of 'côteries', intent on blocking the expansionist ambitions of the management team, but also by 'le désir de vengeance des amis du président défunt' (Eveno, 2004: 655).

As soon as *La Face cachée du Monde* was published, many others were quick to add to the accusations, as testified by a flurry of books and articles on the same themes (Carton, 2003; Comte, 2003; Naulleau, 2003; Poulet, 2003; Rollat, 2003; Schneidermann, 2003), and a groundswell of opinion seemed to confirm a widespread disapproval of the tactics and ambitions of the newspaper that had been radically transformed from its position as *journal de référence*. Whilst all these attacks on *Le Monde* were clearly in part a response from other journalists to what were seen as its hegemonic ambitions and intimidating tactics in establishing itself as a *Groupe de presse*, there was also a wider sense in

which its relentless and unforgiving critique of French politics and history (for example its treatment of the memory of the Algerian War), had become counter-productive, feeding a climate of 'déclinisme' and crisis which, it was argued, only served to swell the ranks of the Front National, as attested by the presidential election result of 2002 (Péan and Cohen, 2003: Chapter 19, 'Ils n'aiment pas la France' 439-463). Or, put differently, France's salvation was not necessarily best secured by being put permanently on trial.

The response by Colombani and Plénel to all these attacks has been described in some detail by journalist Laurent Huberson, based mainly on interviews with Plénel, whose first concern was to 'éteindre l'incendie qui couve en interne. [...] Le livre a fédéré les nombreux ennemis du *Monde* à l'extérieur du journal, mais aussi a catalysé les mécontents à l'intérieur.' (Huberson, 2008: 465). In public, they chose not even to begin to answer any of the allegations but maintained an uneasy silence, until they were persuaded to accept the invitation by Guillaume Durand on his TV talk show, along with Alain Minc, who had joined *Le Monde* in 1985 as president of the newly founded *Société des lecteurs*, since when he had become president of the *conseil de surveillance* in 1994. Minc had used his extensive network of links with the world of big business and industry to bring investment into the paper, and had masterminded the project to build a conglomerate based on a series of acquisitions (D'Evron, 2007). Their television performance did little to appease their critics; indeed the internal strife increased, and the crisis of confidence in Plénel was consolidated by an unfavourable vote in the powerful *Société des rédacteurs*. Colombani's reaction was to accelerate the constitution of the *Groupe de presse* by trying to buy a majority holding in the PVC group (Publications de la Vie Catholique) in which it already owned 30% of the shares. Plénel, who argued that the counter-attack should be legal and political as well as economic, was prepared to accept Colombani's strategy on the understanding that if he was to be occupied with the *Groupe de presse*, Plénel should be made Director of *Le Monde*, which was his long-standing ambition. But Colombani was against this idea, and a major rift then opened up between them. Having initially favoured a legal suit against Péan and Cohen, Plénel realised that his career would be held in suspense until the courts had pronounced judgement, and therefore settled for a mediation process between the parties concerned. The terms of the agreement reached in June 2004 were kept secret and the protagonists all agreed not to make any details public. Thus the 'crisis' ended less with a bang than a whimper: no specific allegations had been answered in public and the underlying internal problems had not been resolved. Plénel disagreed with the plan supported by Colombani and Minc to recapitalise *Le Monde*, on the grounds that it would open the way to what he called 'la presse d'industrie' where there would be no editorial independence, but the *Société des rédacteurs* voted in favour, and Plénel was discredited. His position had become untenable, and in 2005, after refusing Minc's offer of taking on the responsibility for a new 'Fondation *Le Monde*', he had no choice but to negotiate his resignation.<sup>xix</sup> Shortly afterwards, *L'Express* ran a headline: '*Le Monde* n'est plus une icône' (*L'Express*, 11/04/05). Editorial policy moved away from an emphasis on investigation to what Plénel condemned as 'journalisme de validation': 'un

journalisme qui attend, qui ne dérange rien, ni personne parce qu'il ne se bouscule pas lui-même' (Plenel, 2006a: 131). Colombani remained in post until 2007, when he too was ousted, following an unfavourable vote by the *Société des Rédacteurs du Monde* (D'Evron, 2007: 41).

## Epilogue and conclusion

The campaign against Mitterrand had been the centrepiece of *Le Monde's* re-launch of sales as well as its wider crusade to transform French politics. But by the time of the tenth anniversary of Mitterrand's death, in January 2006, with Plenel no longer in post, with all the affairs of the Mitterrand era having been dealt with by the courts, and *Le Monde* seriously shaken by the attacks against it in 2003, the campaign against the former President seemed in fact finally to have exhausted itself. The coverage of the 2006 commemoration by *Le Monde*, in contrast to that of the previous anniversaries, was solemn and respectful, and in his front page article, Gérard Courtois wrote, as if to signal a truce, that 'Au-delà de la mémoire [...] La place est maintenant aux historiens' (*Le Monde*, 3/1/2006). So, although the saga of *Le Monde's* battle with François Mitterrand had brought about what André Laurens had called 'une évolution de la pratique journalistique, qu'on ne saurait nier' (Laurens, 1996: 13-14), it had not survived the onslaught of the 2003 crisis. Plenel wrote with bitterness in 2006: 'Le jour où, fin 2004, peu après ma démission de la direction de la rédaction, j'ai entendu le directeur du *Monde* parler de « journalisme de validation », j'ai compris que ce défi qui avait été le nôtre n'était plus le sien' (Plenel, 2006a: 131). For Plenel, this was the beginning of the normalisation and banalisation of *Le Monde*, the return to conformist journalism. After an unsuccessful attempt in 2006 to take over from Serge July as editor of *Libération*, Plenel has now moved into the world of the electronic media by setting up his own news site where he continues to defend his own particular brand of journalism, albeit with a more limited readership (<http://www.mediapart.fr/club/blog/edwy-plenel>).

The venture into investigative journalism led by *Le Monde* under the combined agendas of Plenel and Colombani was a significant episode in the history of the French press, that came about as a result of the quite unique constellation of circumstances and personalities described above: Mitterrand's secretive brand of governing, Plenel's investigative style of journalism, and Colombani's ambitious model of financial management. This was the first time that investigative journalism had been adopted in the daily press, and it was this, according to Huberson, that made it all the more effective: 'Il a décuplé son efficacité en démontrant qu'elle n'était plus réservée aux hebdomadaires. Sa force repose sur son rythme journalier' (Huberson, 2008: 489). But events also demonstrated the limits of *Le Monde's* journalistic ambitions, and here again it was their treatment of Mitterrand, articulated through the attack by Péan, that precipitated their demise. There seems to have been a general groundswell of opinion in 2003 confirming that Plenel had overstepped the boundaries of what was broadly acceptable to French cultural tradition: although he always protested that he had never crossed the 'yellow line'

into Mitterrand's private life when it did not have repercussions on his public life, the complex intertwining of Mitterrand's parallel public and private lives meant that these boundaries could no longer be easily defined. It is surely ironical that the most private of all presidents should have been finally exposed to such intense scrutiny of his personal life. But perhaps even more ironical is how Plenel's aggressive style of politically justified investigation, and its subsequent demise, could be said to have indirectly paved the way to the more recent trend towards *peopolisation* in the French media that has become the hallmark of the 21st century (<http://politique-peopolisation.20minutes-blogs.fr/4-definition-politique-et-peopolisation/>). The images of Danielle Mitterrand, Mazarine, and her mother, Anne Pingeot, standing together at Mitterrand's funeral must surely have set an important precedent in this respect, and will no doubt remain in the memories of millions of people long after they have forgotten the details of the attacks against him as president. As in most other countries, professional quality journalism in France is in crisis: the printed word is giving way to the electronic media and the blogosphere, and the free papers, despite their dumbed down journalism, are increasingly replacing the quality daily press as main provider of news in major French cities. With the increase in presidential intervention in the media that has been in evidence under Nicolas Sarkozy, it is unlikely that we shall see any revival of investigative journalism in the mainstream daily press, for lessons have been learnt from the experience of Mitterrand and *Le Monde*.

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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> The law of July 17 1970 states that 'chacun a droit au respect de sa vie privée.'

<sup>ii</sup> In January 2009, Nicolas Sarkozy proposed the replacement of the *secret de l'instruction* by the *secret de l'enquête*; see <http://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/2009/01/07/01011-20090107FILWWW00501-suppression-du-secret-de-l-instruction-.php>

<sup>iii</sup> This affair related to the illegal phone tapping ordered personally by Mitterrand from 1983 – 1986, partly in order to ensure the security of Mazarine, whose existence he was determined to keep secret at that time. The writer Jean-Edern Hallier, who had fallen out with the president because he had not secured a post in his administration, was trying to publish a *roman à clef* revealing the truth, and his phone (and that of many of his friends and acquaintances) was put on tap in

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order to enable Mitterrand to prevent publication. The phone-tapping was also designed to provide information relating to various other affairs of state including the spate of terrorist attacks, Russian espionage and the Rainbow Warrior Affair.

<sup>iv</sup> This was the name given to the centrist elements in the Socialist Party, who saw Michel Rocard as their ideological leader and preferred presidential candidate.

<sup>v</sup> The Farewell operation concerned the expulsion of suspected Russian spies from France.

<sup>vi</sup> Confirmed in my interview with Gilles Ménage (10/07/2006).

<sup>vii</sup> Ménage became Mitterrand's *Directeur adjoint de cabinet* in 1982 then *Directeur de cabinet* in 1988-1992, and would later be put on trial for his central role in the phone tapping affair.

<sup>viii</sup> See also Benamou, 1996: 67-72.

<sup>ix</sup> Interview with Roland Dumas (11<sup>/06/2007</sup>).

<sup>x</sup> Plenel was speaking at the Assemblée générale de la Société des lecteurs du Monde, 20 May 1995.

<sup>xi</sup> Comment made by Mazarine's partner simply referred to as Ali, in Péan, 2002: 274.

<sup>xii</sup> In particular, this referred to two articles which went into intimate details about the President's illness: Jean-Yves Nau, 'L'évolution du cancer du chef de l'Etat est devenu imprévisible' 10/09/1994, and Bernard Debré, 'L'état de santé du chef de l'Etat' 11/09/1994. According to Benamou (1996: 67), it was the article published by *Le Monde* on 15 September by Claire Andrieu, 'François Mitterrand, questions d'une historienne', asserting that Mitterrand could be classified amongst the 'pétainistes durs', that finally triggered the Elysée announcement, reported in *Le Monde* on 30 September 1994.

<sup>xiii</sup> The Institut François Mitterrand is the foundation set up after Mitterrand's death to be the guardian of his 'mémoire'. It is located in the rue Charlot, close to the National Archives. [www.mitterrand.org](http://www.mitterrand.org).

<sup>xiv</sup> Explanation of his case in favour of investigative journalism made during an editorial meeting on 7 April 1989, quoted in Poulet, 2003: 95.

<sup>xv</sup> There were twelve defendants put on trial; for details see: [http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Affaire\\_des\\_%C3%A9coutes\\_de\\_l%27%C3%89lys%C3%A9](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Affaire_des_%C3%A9coutes_de_l%27%C3%89lys%C3%A9)

<sup>xvi</sup> Unusually, two journalists were condemned in court for 'recel de violation du secret de l'instruction' after they published a book about the phone tapping affair: Jérôme Dupuis and Jean-Marie Pontaut, *Les Oreilles du Président*, Fayard, 1996. The book contained the list of the '2000 personnes écoutées par François Mitterrand'.

<sup>xvii</sup> *La Lettre de l'Institut François Mitterrand* no. 3, 2003, pp.3-5 deals in detail with this particular case in which Mitterrand was falsely accused of having had a villa built for him in the South of France.

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<sup>xviii</sup> Plenel acknowledged his error in 'La plume et la plaie', an epilogue to *La part d'ombre*, Stock, 1992.

<sup>xix</sup> He discusses the circumstances of his resignation in *Procès*, Stock, 2005.