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At the Crossroads of Media, Media Critique, and the Critique of Media critics – An Interview with Serge Halimi, Editor-in-Chief of *Le Monde Diplomatique*

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Interview conducted in Paris, on July 25, 2012.

In “Media Studies: A French Blind Spot,”¹ François Cusset observed that, contrary to American tradition, no comprehensive interdisciplinary approach to media studies has so far penetrated French universities, thus leaving an ‘empty territory’ between the professional training of journalists and an activist critique arising from non-academic circles. Since the 1990s, French monthly *Le Monde Diplomatique* has thus consistently stood out for its “non-academic activism against media power and bias,” to quote an expression of François Cusset. Under the activism of its previous and present editors-in-chief, Ignacio Ramonet and Serge Halimi, the monthly continues to play a vital role in the French media environment.

Ignacio Ramonet, who was editor-in-chief of *Le Monde Diplomatique* from 1990 to 2008, published three books critically analyzing the content and evolution of the mass media: *La Tyrannie de la communication* (Galilée, 1999), *Propagandes silencieuses* (Galilée, 2000) and *L’Explosion du journalisme* (Galilée, 2011). A former student of Roland Barthes and Christian Metz at the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (EHESS), and with a Ph.D. in Semiology, Ramonet provided in these three books an analysis of the

media strongly influenced and inspired by the critical theory of the Frankfurt School but nonetheless directed at the general public. His successor at the helm of *Le Monde Diplomatique* shares a common desire to reach out to a readership beyond the realm of the academic and media environments. Serge Halimi, also a Ph.D., graduated in Political Science from the University of Berkeley and has regularly contributed critical articles to *Le Monde Diplomatique* since the beginning of the 1990s, on both the French and American media. Of all his published works, one critical essay on the media in particular has encountered considerable success with the public. *Les Nouveaux Chiens de garde* (*The New Watchdogs*, *Raisons d'Agir*) published first in 1997, and in a second revised edition in 2005, has sold up to 300,000 copies; in 2011, the book was adapted under the same title into a documentary, attracting some 250,000 viewers.² The two journalist-analysts have succeeded in fueling the critical field on the media and at the same time providing works of interest to the general public.

Halimi developed an interest in the media while studying in the United States at the time of the Gulf War – as he relates in the following interview – and since then he has relentlessly highlighted the strong convergence of media discourse with media interest or economic dependency, both in the United States and in France. In one of his very first papers published in *Le Monde Diplomatique* in March 1991, he pointed to NBC anchorman Tom Brokaw's nationalistic and pro-war coverage of the Gulf War, while remarking that, coincidentally, Brokaw's television network was owned by none other than General Electric, one of the Pentagon's arm suppliers. Startled by the failings of American media, Halimi then turned his media criticism to the French scene, where he found the same demise of the mission of journalists, summarized by the American formula: 'Afflict the comfortable, comfort the afflicted.' He considered that the French media had been undermined by the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideas and the collusion of a small group of 'professional elites,' with the leaders of this industrial sector sharing the same ideas and interests. In 1995, during the French presidential election, Halimi denounced the "occupation of the mainstream media by a small caste of journalists and intellectuals who share the same patterns of thinking and who live together bound by networks of complicity and a common submission to the major industrial and financial groups that have penetrated mass communication."³ In his book *Les Nouveaux Chiens de garde*, Serge Halimi provides compelling data supporting this hypothesis and reveals the identity of these journalists who form a caste that, owing to the confluence of their opinions and interests, turn supposedly free speech into parodies of debate that distort democracy.

The naming and unmasking of these elite journalists has sparked retaliation in the mainstream media; in response, Halimi has forcefully argued that, while it is common practice for economic critics or journalists to name the actors of their fields of analysis (such as Bill Gates or the Walton brothers, to name but a few examples), so should the radical critique of the media be able to name the people involved in the field.⁴ He has adopted this same straightforward position in his criticism of French researchers who, he argues, refrain from difficult analysis or in-depth radical critique in hope that they, too, benefit from media coverage.⁵ His uncompromising posture can be affiliated with Pierre Bourdieu, who founded the publishing house *Raisons d'Agir* (Reasons to Act) where *Les Nouveaux Chiens de garde* was published a few years after Bourdieu's book *Sur la télévision*. In this context, Halimi has been associated with 'Radical Academicism.'⁶ Radicalism has been the rallying cry systematically used by detractors to discredit his media critique. It is also a label that Halimi will willingly embrace to define his actions

and positions. In his latest book, *Le Grand Bond en arrière*, (published in a second edition in 2012), the journalist-analyst proceeds with his investigation of the forces contributing to the spread of the neo-liberal discourse and logic, with special emphasis on the fields of media and politics. With his unflinching position at the crossroads of media, media criticism, and the criticism of academics conducting a soft media critique, Halimi has emerged as a major player in the field of French media analysis. In the following interview, he looks back on his particular itinerary and justifies his ongoing action at *Le Monde Diplomatique*.

Christine Larrazet: Have English-American Media Studies influenced your critique of the media?

Serge Halimi: Actually, in the very beginning, I was not really interested in the media. My interest was aroused at the time of the Gulf War, triggered by the invasion of Kuwait, while I was a student at Berkeley. In January-March 1991, just before the American military intervention, there was a rich debate in the United States about the best way to react. A majority of the Democratic Party was hostile to an intervention in Kuwait, whereas the Republican Party was in favor of it. In the fall of 1990, I sent a paper to *Le Monde Diplomatique* covering the richness of the American debate compared to that in France.⁷ But in January 1991, the debate closed, especially in the media, that swung the other way when the first bombs were dropped on Baghdad. The media no longer covered the opposing opinions and protests. In March 1991, I published an article in *Le Monde Diplomatique* on this reversal in the media and on journalists in uniform.⁸ At that time I was reading *Extra*, which was at the Berkeley library. This journal conducts a really critical analysis of the media that is not based solely, as in France at that time, on the confrontation of critical texts.⁹ So my first contact with what you call Media Studies was the work done by *Extra*. At that same period, I read new books published by Noam Chomsky, an active scholar who unfortunately still remains the subject of a misperception in France where he is mainly considered as a media critic while the bulk of his work is rather a cutting analysis of American foreign policy.¹⁰ And, being at Berkeley, I also became acquainted with Todd Gitlin's work.¹¹

When I returned to France, there was an ongoing debate on the Treaty of Maastricht. I came again upon the same systematic media battering that I had observed during the Gulf War in the United States. As far as I was concerned, it was confirmation for me that the pluralism of newspapers did not result in a pluralism of comment, even during peacetime.¹² Afterwards, I published numerous articles on this subject in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, then the book *Les Nouveaux Chiens de garde (The New Watchdogs)*. Then, with a small group of people (Pierre Rimbert, Pierre Carles, Gilles Balbastre, Marc Pantanella, Thierry Discepolo), we launched the *PLPL* newspaper, and, a few years later, with new people who joined us, *Le Plan B*. Throughout this period, the association Acrimed played an important role in my continuing involvement in media criticism.¹³ This criticism is still necessary today because over time, newspapers have increasingly lost their autonomy. While Hersant sometimes had to put up with journalists' freedom of opinion in the 1970s, Dassault, for his part, does not even waste time consulting with editors he has hired when deciding to make changes – editors he can fire in an instant.¹⁴

C.L.: Is it different in the United States?

S.H.: There is not one United States. There *are* United States, from the *New York Times* to *Fox News*. Things are not done in the same way everywhere. Nor is it different in France, even though the professional community is more homogeneous.

C.L.: How do you see Media Studies in France?

S.H.: In France, we also have a Media Studies field. I read what is published but the studies seem to be conducted more to feed academic thinking within the university (and inspire Ph.D. dissertations...) than to transform the media. Or even to change the perception that millions of citizens have of the media. Media Studies get little outside coverage, and most people could not care less about that fact. Yet it seems to me that when someone conducts a study with money from the public coffers, one should take that fact into consideration and communicate the results of the study to the public. This is a feature of universities that can be found elsewhere. There is an 'entrance fee' in the university world, meant to filter out charlatans, but I think there is also what Bourdieu called an "exit duty" to be paid.

In a sense, I feel that this "exit duty" was paid by *Le Monde Diplomatique*. We seized on this issue, which was not covered by the other media, with the disputed exception of Daniel Schneidermann's program on the television channel Arte.¹⁵ We played an important role in bringing to public attention issues that the public was interested in. And we called on academics. Now the space is no longer empty.

The documentary "Les Nouveaux Chiens de garde" (The New Watchdogs) was viewed by 250,000 people without any media coverage. This just goes to show that the public is interested in media criticism. And we did it despite the ritual objections like: "It has always existed," "nobody cares," "we already know," "it's not useful."¹⁶ Yet, when we developed this line of criticism of the media, with all the people I referred to, and also Ignacio Ramonet who ran *Le Monde Diplomatique* and has written a lot on this topic, we discovered that many people were interested in this topic. In fact, the public was not aware of a few things and they wanted to learn what they did not know. Our initiative has opened up a niche that has now been taken up by others, but differently, by toning down what is said. Ok for a critique of the media but not like this, we are often told. Thanks for the advice...

C.L.: What kind of relationships do you have with the journalists of the dominant French media?

S.H.: I do not know them. And, generally, I refuse to know them. If I met them, talked to them, spent time with them, it would be much more difficult to maintain my critical freedom. Today, I'm meeting you, I'm talking with you. If I later see your name associated with an action that I deem objectionable or reprehensible, I might be tempted not to make your name public when I criticize this initiative. Having already identified three or four other people, "why should I name you?", I might think. I do not want to be in this situation.

C.L.: How did *Le Monde Diplomatique* come to adopt this very peculiar stance in the French media landscape?

S.H.: When *Le Monde Diplomatique* really took off with Claude Julien, it served as a kind of fortress. Claude Julien withdrew to *Le Monde Diplomatique*, and established a more leftist line than that followed by *Le Monde* which, in the early 1980s, switched towards liberal ideology and favored the more rigorous approach adopted by the socialists. In

contrast, *Le Monde Diplomatique* pursued a radical critique of the Reagan policy, which we feel to be a form of anti-model. As Julien developed the newspaper, the criticism of an imperialistic liberal policy took increasing place in it.

C.L.: In your opinion, what impact does *Le Monde Diplomatique* have on French research?

S.H.: I do not know. Even so, many students of journalism are interested in our critical work on the media. Young journalists ask to meet us and tell us that our work is important, wondering whether they can continue the work we have undertaken, and especially where it could be done. Renaud Lambert has just been awarded a prize by students of journalism for his article on the 'contract economists' and their support in the media.

C.L.: What relationships do you have with French academia?

S.H.: *Le Monde Diplomatique* maintains personal links with numerous academics. Many of them contribute to the paper and I use whatever seems useful: critical reading, doctoral theses, etc.

C.L.: Is your particular position in the media landscape tenable?

S.H.: When you undertake political work, when you want to change things, sometimes you feel a sense of weariness. And when you are a journalist, the temptation is to say new things, not writing an umpteenth article on the promotion of Bernard-Henri Lévy (BHL). However, at the same time, it is our duty to write the article as long as the BHL effect continues.¹⁷ My motto goes something like this: "he proceeds, so we also proceed." In addition, I also now learn a lot less in media criticism, although new things are still published, as I have been covering this area for nearly 20 years. However, the question is: what matters to you? To make an intellectual performance or to solve a problem that our society confronts us with? When you are a journalist, you are summoned by news as it breaks. If there is a conflict, you cannot release yourself, thinking you have struggled enough on this theme, on this front, and just leave and do something completely different, something 'newer.' Although, over time, by plowing the same furrow, the intellectual curiosity tends to drop away somewhat.

Today, I am comforted in the idea that what matters are the structures. The media criticism we have conducted has all in all changed little in the daily functioning of the media. You think that once you have brought a problem to the light of day, once people are informed, those responsible for it won't start their same old tricks while everyone knows what they are doing. But they do start again. Once you have described a phenomenon, you hope it will disappear. But it does not disappear. Why? Because man is also the product of a structure consisting of lasting social interests.

Regarding the connivance networks operating in the media, the fact that X or Y is unmasked will not change anything about their behavior. But it changes something about how X or Y is looked upon. Once people are informed about what is happening in the media, they might think: since I understand better how this all works, I become freer not to take into account what I see or what I read. I keep my free will. This very change, this lucidity, has weakened the media system. And I think that we have played our role in that change.

ENDNOTES

1. <http://inmedia.revues.org/135>
2. <http://www.lesnouveauxchiensdegarde.com/>
3. *Le Monde Diplomatique*, February 1995.
4. Serge Halimi, "L'art et la manière d'ignorer la question des médias," in *Pour une analyse critique des médias. Le débat public en danger*, edited by Evelyne Pinto, 195-210. Paris: Editions du Croquant, 2007. Available at <http://www.homme-moderne.org/societe/media/halimi/pouracrimed/extraits1.html>
5. Halimi, "L'art et la manière d'ignorer la question des médias."
6. On this 'radical academicism,' the French sociologist Didier Lapeyronnie writes: "The entire problem with such a position is that it is first and foremost a position: that of the radical academic or revolutionary bourgeois. How to explain the fact that these sociologists belong to the world of the university and yet claim that their rightful position is alongside the oppressed and dominated? All 'position-taking' is justified by referring to oneself as 'radical.' The debate never pertains to science, to the content of observation and how to interpret it. The only acceptable question and the only concern is to determine who is truly radical and to demonstrate one's own radicalness. Is there any more effective way of doing this than saying that the others are not radical, or not truly radical? The academic radical's own position, and therefore his self justification, requires practicing a kind of 'puritan' logic wherein one must continually accuse 'the others;' it requires kindling and fueling suspicion, denouncing 'false' radicals, false 'friends of the people,' anyone who, under cover of being 'on the left' or 'scientific researchers,' are 'really' the most effective agents of neo-liberalism, or even American imperialism." Didier Lapeyronnie, "Radical Academicism, or the Sociologist's Monologue: Who Are Radical Sociologists Talking with?", *Revue française de sociologie*, 47, Supplement: An Annual English Selection (2006): 3-33.
7. "L'opinion américaine, si loin du Proche Orient," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, November 1990.
8. "Des médias en tenue camouflée," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, March 1991. In the heading, Serge Halimi writes: "While open to courageous debate before the outbreak of the war in mid-January, the American media have since vied for 'patriotism,' reflecting without turning a hair the views of the White House and the Pentagon. The 'fourth power' surrendered unconditionally." (Translated by C. Larrazet and R. Cooke)
9. *Extra* is the monthly magazine of FAIR, an American media watch group that has been conducting in-depth media analysis since 1986. (<http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=4>)
10. *Le Monde Diplomatique* has played an important role in publicizing Noam Chomsky's research in France. In 1998, Chomsky redefined the nature of his research in the newspaper, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, August 1998. Recently, the newspaper published an interview with Noam Chomsky conducted by the French journalist Daniel Mermet, "Le lavage de cerveau en liberté," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, August 2007, and organized a conference in May 2010, in which Noam Chomsky, after 25 years of voluntary absence from France, came to present his thoughts on "Contours of global order. Continuities, Changes and Challenges."
11. Todd Gitlin had already published three books on the media: *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the Left* (University of California Press, 1980), *Inside Prime Time* (University of California Press, 1983), *Watching Television* (Pantheon, 1986).
12. The Treaty of the European Union, which was ratified in Maastricht in February 1992 by 12 heads of state and government, was subject to a referendum in France in September 1992. After the referendum, Serge Halimi published "Décideurs et délinquants" (Policymakers and Offenders) on "the Media and the War over the referendum" in which he denounced a

"deferential media" system serving as an "echo chamber" for a doctrinaire approach, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, October 1992.

13. Acrimed stands for "Action Critique Medias." It is a French association founded in 1995 that brings together journalists, academics and "users of media" with a view to conducting an "independent, radical and uncompromising" analysis of the media (<http://www.acrimed.org/>).

14. Robert Hersant is a press baron who owned several news media, including *Le Figaro*. The majority of the shares in his media group, Socpresse, were sold by his heirs to Serge Dassault in 2004.

15. "Arrêt sur Images" is a program analyzing television footage that was launched by the public television channel France5 in 1995. After its over-the-air interruption in 2007, a site "@rrêt sur images" was created to prolong the program online.

16. Halimi, "L'art et la manière d'ignorer la question des médias."

17. Bernard-Henri Lévy, a French author of philosophical works and surveys of past and present wars, receives extensive media coverage for each of his films or books. For nearly twenty years, Serge Halimi has denounced this treatment he receives. See for example one of the first articles published on this topic which is entitled "Tapis rouge" (Rolling out the red carpet), *Le Monde Diplomatique*, December 1997, or more recently "Tous nazis !" (All Nazis), *Le Monde Diplomatique*, November 2007, and the online file on the newspaper's website entitled "L'imposture Bernard-Henri Lévy" (The Imposture of Bernard-Henri Lévy). In 2011, Serge Halimi wrote on this subject: "Indeed, the French press has been governed by an irremovable rule for thirty-five years: any country in which Bernard-Henri Lévy has just travelled and on which he has written a book becomes ipso facto a giant news item", in "La singularité a un prix" (Singularity has a cost), *Le Monde Diplomatique*, December 2011.

AUTHORS

SERGE HALIMI

Serge Halimi, journalist, writer and activist, has been editor-in-chief of the monthly newspaper *Le Monde Diplomatique* since 2008. He was hired by the critical monthly in 1992 after having completed a Ph.D. in political sciences from Berkeley University. He is the author of *A l'américaine : faire un président* (Aubier, 1986), *Les Nouveaux chiens de garde* (Liber-Raisons d'Agir, 1997, 2005), *Quand la gauche essayait* (Arlea, 2000), *L'Opinion, ça se travaille* (with Dominique Vidal, Agone, 2002), and *Le Grand bond en arrière* (Fayard, 2004; Agone, 2012).

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Christine Larrazet is an associate professor at the University of Bordeaux Segalen and a researcher at the Emile Durkheim research center on comparative sociology and political sciences. She completed a Ph.D. in American studies investigating the evolution of black citizens' place and representation in the content of *Time Magazine* paralleled with the integration of black journalists in *Time's* newsrooms from 1965 to 1995. She is currently conducting a comparative research on the semantic and political shift of the term "Politically Correct" as used by the American and French media.