IDENTITY (MIS)PERCEPTIONS: FRANCE AND ITS IMMIGRANTS OF MUSLIM ORIGIN

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By
Christopher Harkness Hook

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Slogans of the National front

**LES IMMIGRÉS VONT VOTER...**

**ET VOUS VOUS ABSTENEZ ?!!**

**Stop ou encore ?**

**A vous de choisir VOTEZ ! Front National**
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² Ibid.
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“Once upon a time, there was an old country, encased in tradition and caution. We must transform our old country of France into a new country, and it must marry its epoch”

-Charles de Gaulle
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Rue Myrha, in the 18th arrondissement (neighborhood) of Paris, is a well-known immigrant enclave. Walking off the Chateau-Rouge metro (or Chateau-Noir, as one shopkeeper told me with disgust), a visitor might be forgiven for thinking that he or she was in Dakar or Nairobi. Turkish, Moroccan and Lebanese restaurants dominate your sightlines. Women in beautifully knit, colorful African robes tote their children on their backs, carrying sacks of rice and bags of fruit bought at the nearby market. Men in traditional beige religious wear stroll the streets in search of a cup of mint tea and talk among themselves in short, slangy French. The population here is majority black and North African, although France does not officially keep statistics on the ethnic composition of its citizens (for reasons which will be examined later). The predominance of immigrants in one particular area is not uncommon in a country where a policy of unofficial segregation is de facto built into the state zoning codes. When new waves of North African immigrants began pouring into the country after the Algerian War, the government, responding to the population augmentation, began to erect subsidized housing units in economically depleted city suburbs. It is in these neighborhoods, known in France as banlieues,3 that many immigrants and later their children ended up living.

3 The word “banlieue” is typically translated into English as “suburb”, but whereas in English this tends to have a positive connotation, and tends to signify a well-to-do neighborhood, in France, the banlieues are synonymous with social exclusion and poverty.
largely due to economic circumstances. These housing units, known as HLM (Habitation à loyer modéré), and the *banlieues* in which they are situated became infamous for squalid conditions, lawlessness, and extreme poverty. What is more, they began to acquire a reputation in France for producing hardened and delinquent Muslim youth, particularly from the 1980s onwards as the children of the original immigrants reached adolescence. These stereotypes have cast a pall on the lives of French Muslims, particularly in these decrepit areas.

*Laïcité*

What is notable about Rue Myrha is that each Friday at one in the afternoon, city police close the street to accommodate hundreds of Muslims from across the city who converge there to pray. Citing the lack of mosques in the city proper, Muslims have been praying openly on the cobblestones of Rue Myrha since the 1980s. Allowing Muslims to pray openly in the streets of Paris has produced an outcry among traditionalists in Paris and elsewhere that the government is ceding the streets to Muslims, and by doing so betraying what may be the most important French value, secularism, or “laïcité” as it is known in French discourse – a term used to denote the official separation of church and state. Though the official state motto of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* does not include any specific stipulations with regard to secularism, it has certainly taken firm shape in the minds of the French public. An Ipsos 2005 poll found that 85% of the French population was opposed to clerical lobbying of their leaders, a larger percentage by far than in Germany, Italy or the United States. Moreover, an astounding 82% of the French
population supported banning the wearing of the niqab/burqa in the public sphere,\(^4\) higher support than in any of the other Western European countries where similar proposals were being debated. This tradition can be traced back to a secularist post-Revolution reaction to the French monarchy's former close relationship with the Catholic Church, where state and religion were intermixed beyond distinction. The blurring of church and state would constitute one of many grievances which contributed to the French Revolution. The notable revision on traditional secularism is that the concept is now being defined by French leaders to include public displays of religiosity, e.g. women in niqab/burqas. Though the motives behind the ban of certain Muslim women’s clothing are complicated, they do have much to do with secularism and the protection of French values. Numerous *de souche*\(^5\) residents in the Rue Myrha area have sought to combat overt displays of Islamic religious affiliation. For example, a conservative French woman and several friends in the neighborhood scheduled a street party one Friday, to begin at 1:00 pm, inviting people to eat sausage, and drink booze (*saucisson and pinard*), both activities that are outlawed by classic Islamic texts. While the event organizer denied trying to create any public disorder, she did acknowledge that she no longer felt “at home” in her own neighborhood where if she did not wear a veil or dressed less-than-modestly, she received strange looks from the Muslim majority. She added: “Ethnic French people can no longer take a drink in peace round here. Her same activist group, it


\(^5\) *De souche* is a French term which in essence denotes the abstract idea of “Frenchness,” i.e. a French national identity with certain shared historical, cultural and ethnic traits (the most important being white and/or of European descent, and often of Catholic heritage). *De souche* residents are said to derive from the Gauls, a Celtic tribe who inhabited France between the 5th and 1st centuries BCE.
should be noted, also organized soup kitchens around the city, where sausage was served intentionally to target non-Muslim homeless people.

Misperceptions

By and large, the struggle of French Muslims, especially the third- and fourth-generation youth, is one of perception. When three unkempt *jeunes*, Vince, Hubert, and Said, the principal protagonists of Matthieu Kassowitz’ film *La Haine* (Hate) (1995) stroll into a Parisian art gallery one night, they, under-dressed, rough, and speaking in slang, appear awkward and receive scathing looks from the more *de souche* French in the gallery, who speak in “proper” French and are dressed in finer linens. In response, the three act out, hitting on women in lewd ways, stealing food and drink, and making a general ruckus, before being kicked out by the impertinent and uncomfortable gallery curator who, while ejecting the unruly visitors, shakes his head and mutters “la malaise de la banlieue.” Youth of mostly North African origin, and mostly poor in socioeconomic situation, are seen by many in the French establishment as agitators. In a society where public order is highly valued, the riots, crime, and violence seen as originating from youths of Muslim background are often presented as deriving from inherent shortcomings or a lack of willingness to conform on the part of the youths themselves – rarely are questions of the background factors which have contributed to youth exclusion (such as poverty, lack of education, unemployment and so forth) seriously taken into consideration.
Rue Myrha, in northern Paris, is twenty-or-so blocks from the city limits. Beyond these limits and the Périphérique roadway that loops the city, a visitor stumbles into some of the most infamous banlieues in France, like Seine-St. Denis or Aubervilliers. The difference is stark when one walks from one side of the Périphérique and into the banlieues. Beautiful Haussmannien architecture and clean, well-paved streets give way literally in a matter of feet to tin houses, cracked sidewalks, and a significantly more impoverished population. Paris becomes Paris autre. The physical disparity is representative of what is seen largely as a society divided.

Seine St. Denis, nicknamed neuf-trois (93) for the postal identification numbers of residents there, is a site of elevated rates of crime and widespread poverty (sometimes more than four times the rate of the rest of the country), so much so that police in the area have more or less stopped policing out of fear. Several sources note that often, gangs of youths will make a fake emergency call to police, and then ambush the police car rushing to the scene with heavy objects and in some instances, guns. The analysis which follows will argue that the truth behind Muslim youth delinquency is far more complicated and there has been an unwillingness both at a political and social level to fully acknowledge and address underlying structural factors contributing to these problems, most notably the role of social exclusion.

A Changing Society

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France is having to face a variety of social changes that are making lawmakers reconsider many of the underlying principles of the state. The consideration of what exactly is French identity in a globalized world is perhaps the question most on the lips of contemporary French politicians. Muslims, mostly of North African descent, now make up around 8% of the French population according to unofficial figures (INSEE, France’s leading data collection agency, does not compile statistics relating to ethnic or religious affiliation in its surveys), and according to some estimates, this number could be more than 10.3% by the year 2030.\(^8\) The state is facing the prospect of a dramatic demographic shift, and there is widespread fear that this will change France dramatically. The Gallup Co-exist Index of 2009 found that nearly three of five French believed Muslims in their country were not loyal to the French state, this despite the same poll indicating four of every five Muslims believed other Muslims were loyal to the French government.\(^9\) For a country valuing patriotic citizens and being proud of its legacy, this misconception about Muslims’ loyalty has cast a pall on the presence of Muslims in France. Furthermore, the War on Terror (and fears of militant Islam) has only augmented these perceptions. Notably, the economic crisis of late 2008 has added pressure to Muslims living in France. Poor and unemployed Muslims have been on the receiving end of criticism haranguing them for exploiting the welfare system and thus contributing to France’s economic problems. As will be outlined later, this trend is neatly captured when one examines the electoral successes of the far right and xenophobic political party, the National Front, who saw their first breakthroughs in the early 1980s in regions experiencing high levels


of unemployment combined with large populations of North African immigrants and their descendants.

Methodology and Thesis Statement

This undergraduate thesis will seek to lay out the struggles facing immigrants in France today, addressing specifically Muslims, a large portion of whom are of North African origin, and are poor. There is a considerable literature on the subject already. Riva Kastoryano of Sciences Po Paris has written extensively on the Republican model and specifically how the emphasis on equality in state doctrine has affected immigrant Muslim populations.\(^\text{10}\) Alec Hargreaves in his foundational *Immigration, “Race” and Ethnicity in Contemporary France* looks at the socioeconomic factors that have prevented immigrant youth from economically integrating fully into French culture, despite the success of cultural integration (through media and the school, primarily).\(^\text{11}\) Michel Wieviorka, in his 2002 work *Race, Culture, and Society: The French Experience with Muslims* has argued that Islam has been directly under attack by militant French universalism, which has sought to eliminate cultural differences in order to preserve French traditions and societal order.\(^\text{12}\) Azouz Begag in his 1986 autobiographically-inspired novel *Le Gone du Chaâba* (translated as *The Shantytown Kid*) provides a first-person perspective about living in a *bidonville* (shack city) as a child and encountering


racism and prejudice. There is also a wide-ranging and scholarly literature on the veil and what it symbolizes both in France and elsewhere. Marnia Lezreg has written about approaching the veil question from a Muslim woman's perspective, emphasizing female agency, the “politicization of the veil,” and the intrusion of the state in the woman's life.\textsuperscript{13} Joan Wallach Scott has written on the imposition of the French model on its Muslim immigrants and describes attacks on the veil and the niqab/burqa as the \textit{effect} of a particular discourse framed in cultural terms.\textsuperscript{14}

So when thinking of how my own work would contribute to the existing body of scholarship I asked myself how I could provide a more personal and in-depth look at the issue. It was important to me to read not only the dominant literature of the subject, but also to experience France through the eyes of Muslims living in these economically depressed areas in order to gain a sense of how they live. I chose to go to France during the summer of 2010 when the French Parliament would be debating the proposed niqab/burqa ban to gain a sense of how French and Muslims alike spoke about the burqa, how they felt about it, and what the general attitude was from the general population.

Thanks to a generous grant from the Kent State University Honors College, I was able to spend two weeks in Paris speaking with a myriad of people: shopkeepers in predominantly immigrant areas, Muslim and non-Muslim youth, and professors of culture and political science. Moreover, I attended the only session of Parliament where the niqab/burqa ban was debated, and visited important sites of French Muslim life: La Grande Mosquée, \textit{banlieues}, and the Institute of the Arab World. Numerous scholars

since the birth of the ethnographic research methodology in the early 1920s have testified to the importance of taking a ‘closer look’ at an issue beyond learning from afar.

“Ethnographic methods are a means of tapping local points of view, households and community ‘funds of knowledge.’”\textsuperscript{15} And: “ethnography literally means “a portrait of a people.” An ethnography is a written description of a particular culture - the customs, beliefs, and behavior based on information collected through fieldwork.\textsuperscript{16} This thesis then will agree with many scholars who have written on the subject, but will also provide new insights gleaned from an ethnographic approach. During my trip, I sought to meet the five criteria Richardson submits for determining a sound ethnographic study:

1. \textit{Substantive Contribution}: "Does the piece contribute to our understanding of social-life?"

2. \textit{Aesthetic Merit}: "Does this piece succeed aesthetically?"

3. \textit{Reflexivity}: "How did the author come to write this text…Is there adequate self-awareness and self-exposure for the reader to make judgments about the point of view?"

4. \textit{Impact}: "Does this affect me? Emotionally? Intellectually? Does it move me?"

5. \textit{Expresses a Reality}: "Does it seem 'true'—a credible account of a cultural, social, individual, or communal sense of the 'real'?"

This paper will argue that the French government's policy towards their immigrants of Muslim descent has been opportunistic and hardly egalitarian. France is a country with deep-seated traditions and values, and in an era where the forces of

\textsuperscript{15}Michael Genzuk, \textit{A Synthesis of Ethnographic Research}. Occasional Papers Series. Center for Multilingual, Multicultural Research (Eds.). Center for Multilingual, Multicultural Research, Rossier School of Education, University of Southern California. Los Angeles.

\textsuperscript{16}Marvin Harris and Orva Johnson, 2000, as quoted in Genzuk, 2003.
globalization and integration are blurring the lines that traditionally separated people -- ethnicity, nationality, and religious affiliation-- France is seeking to defend itself from their perceived onslaught. France is a country with a national conscience-- keeping with the reliance on national sovereignty, the government says nationality should supersede all other identifications, including religious and ethnic. While the French state does, in principle, expound tolerance and the inclusion of immigrant communities in the national body, it has simultaneously sought to minimize cultural practices, which it considers to run contrary to the 'French way of life.' As a consequence, and very much in line with the precepts of the Republican model to be outlined below, the French state places strong emphasis on 'assimilation' with regard to minority groups. Muslim immigrants, especially those with strong religious ties, are seen to be antagonistic to the French idealized notion of a coherent and uniform national culture. Related to the French government’s preoccupation with creating a sense of shared national culture is the concept of "communautarisme," which in political terms encompasses the idea that any separate forms of community adherence which place a separate and potentially competing identity reference above that of the state is strongly discouraged. This has important implications for Islam, as it is often argued that Islamic cultural practices do precisely this, and thus erode national cultural unity. The War on Terror and subsequent discourses on terrorism only worsen Western feelings that Muslim 'creep' will change the face of the country for the worse. France itself faces an identity crisis, as it confronts a variety of outside forces, only one of which is accelerated immigration. This paper will show that the immigrant question is largely mischaracterized as a “Muslim problem,” when in fact the question is
steeped in socioeconomic contingencies, and furthermore is hidden by a cultural political discourse. Simply put, my purpose is to better situate the contours of the contemporary debate. The socioeconomic difficulties facing many in the immigrant community should not be conflated with the religious battles being fought by those who wish to keep religion out of the public sphere. Too often are the poor and the unemployed said to be acting out because of fundamental religious or cultural differences, and are thus not assimilable to mainstream French society (indeed, this was the spirit of government discourses following the 2005 riots which involved, primarily, French youths of Arab descent).

It is not the cultural prejudice itself that is the problem, but that so many in government and otherwise put unfair barriers in the way so that those considered “outsiders” will never be able to gain a foothold. The paper will also show that individual identity is a patchwork of each individual's experiences, and as such, everyone has a right to form their identity, with all due deference to national law. In essence, France's defense of its national identity is to deny all outsiders their own. As explained in the next section, this question is typically framed in the spirit that if one does not fully embrace every aspect of France’s national culture (whatever this is), and if one does not therefore destroy his/her roots, then one cannot ever be fully ‘French.’ It will be argued through the discussion that follows that many of the problems with integration/assimilation come down to complex socio-economic questions and exclusionary policies on the part of the French state.
CHAPTER II
HISTORICAL CONTEXT

A Civilizing Mission

Before examining contemporary questions of Muslim identity in France today, it is worth providing a brief examination of France’s complicated and long-standing relationship with Algeria; notably the initial colonization of 1830, the so-called “civilizing mission” which provided the ideological basis for France’s colonial presence in North Africa, the Algerian War of Independence of 1954-1962, and finally the major waves of immigration from North Africa to France following World War II. This will help to orient the discussion which follows, as numerous themes which have shaped mutual perceptions between “de souche” French and Muslim immigrants can be traced back to the colonial period.

While France’s colonial mission in Algeria was defended on economic, political and even ethical grounds (political leaders at the time invoked the concept of a “mission civilisatrice” or “civilizing mission” to argue that their intention was to bring cultural, political and economic progress to the backwards indigenous people), it was inherently violent and ultimately denied the Arab population the same rights and privileges as the European settlers (which came to number around a million people out of a total population of around ten million). The two populations lived almost entirely apart, and Islam was seen as incompatible with French traditions.
The contradictions and tensions inherent in France’s colonial system came to a head after World War II when the indigenous population began to demand equal political and social rights along with a concerted attempt on the part of the French colonial administration to improve economic conditions for the Arab population. In 1954, when France refused to grant these requests, open rebellion broke out under the leadership of the Front de Libération nationale (FLN). Frantz Fanon’s *Les Damnés de la terre* (The Wretched of the Earth”) argued that France's inhumane treatment of Algerians justified the use of violence against French occupiers, and Fanon interpreted this violence as part and parcel of the creation of an Algerian national identity.\(^{17}\) One of the main areas of tension concerned the fact that despite the claim that France was pursuing a civilizing mission, it denied equal status to the Arab population (notably through the 1881 Code d’indigénat or “Indigenous Code”) except in rare case where the individual concerned was willing to fully assimilate to French cultural and religious norms (thus destroying any Arab and Muslim identity-references). What emerges is that during the colonial period, French policy-makers considered Islam to be undesirable and fundamentally incompatible with French culture and identity.

*The Immigrant Question*

The first waves of Algerian immigrants arrived in France prior to the outbreak of World War I. Needing blue-collar workers to help run the wartime industries (as well as fight in the war itself) while hundreds of thousands of young French served on the

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\(^{17}\) Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York : Grove Press, 1968).
battlefield, the French Parliament voted for the first time to open up France's borders to its Algerian colonies. By and large, they settled outside of major cities, most notably Marseilles and Paris. Lucassen tells us that during the war, very little integration took place between the new Algerians immigrants and the native population. For the most part, these new entrants were single males, working seasonally with plans to return to their families. They often held the most dangerous undesirable jobs, with a disproportionately low salary. However, the threat of deportation for many of the undocumented workers (who worked for less than a normal worker) kept Algerian immigrants from speaking out about below-standard working conditions. By the end of the war, over 170,000 Algerians had seen battle (25,000 dead), and over 130,000 had worked in the mines, factories and docks to help the war effort. The interwar period brought an influx of workers not only externally from the Maghreb, but also internally from Europe. By the onset of WW2, France had more foreigners as a percent of the population than did the United States. However, French attitudes towards Maghrebi immigrants remained negative, due in part to efforts by politicians and specialists to convince the public that the Algerians represented a natural threat to law and order. The rise of a quasi-fascist movement in the interwar period, and the indomitable influence of French intellectuals like Charles Maurras and Georges Sorel whose ideas became the ideological underpinnings to German and Italian fascisms, did not help the immigrants' case.

20 Hargreaves, 10.
Ironically, it was the influence of fascism, a nativist statist movement, that helped bring about the first nationalist movements in Algeria and whose remnants remained after WW2, arguably leading to the Algerian revolution in the postwar period.

The Rise of Algeria Indépendante

Algeria and most other French colonies became part of Vichy France with the signing of the peace agreement between France and Nazi Germany. By 1942, however, De Gaulle's non-collaborationist Free French forces, with help from British and American troops, had turned the tide against Vichy troops in Algeria. From 1942 to 1945, thousands of pro-De Gaulle Maghrebis fought on behalf of France on the North African front, eventually leading to the Allied victory in 1945. The end of World War II brought with it a new international order that explicitly valued, among other things, the right to self-determination for all nations: this would have important repercussions for those nations who still kept colonies. France seeking to stem the nationalist tide in Algeria, included Algeria and its other colonies in the French Parliament in 1947. It also for the first time allowed Algerians to be fully-fledged French citizens with free movement between the two nations. However, this did little to assuage the growing tide of pro-independence feelings in Algeria, and by 1954, France found itself embroiled in a violent guerrilla conflict with revolutionaries, fighting under the banner of the Front de Libération nationale (FLN) in Algiers. The Algerian War, which lasted from 1954-62, was an unusual conflict of extreme brutality and cruelty. Both sides-- the French and their loyal Algerian allies (called harkis), and the street soldiers of the FLN-- engaged in torture,
terrorism, and extra-judicial killings that caused an enormous and long-lasting rift between Algerians and the French after the war ended in 1962 with the signing of the Evian Accords by General de Gaulle. In accordance with the stipulations of the Evian Accords, France agreed in 1962 to accept “an unlimited number” of Algerians. France became flooded with over two million Algerians fleeing post-revolution unrest in Algeria and *pieds-noir*, the French colonists who had been living in Algeria prior to the war. By 1973, as a result of this circumstance and the OPEC oil crisis, which affected France particularly hard, the economy, now in recession, was growing at less than 1% by 1975.  

For French nationalists, the end of the Algerian War represented the ultimate humiliation, and signaled an erosion of France’s national grandeur. The military defeat at the hands of Algerian FLN militants and the subsequent territorial losses were humiliating recapitulations of the infamous defeats in the Franco-Prussian War and in World War II and Indochina. The defeat brought a wave of anger against President De Gaulle who in many people's minds had betrayed the nation by abandoning Algeria. More anger was directed at North African immigrants coming to France, who were largely seen as the principal cause for the economic downturn beginning in 1973.

*The Front national*

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It was out of these circumstances that France's first serious fascistic party in the postwar period grew. The Front national (FN), a conglomerate party formed in 1972 from many right-wing and extremist groups in France, sought to unify the interests of ultra-conservative parties in order to win elections. The party, led by Algerian War veteran Jean-Marie Le Pen, sought to pacify the more militant neofascists of the period, and appeal to a wide audience of electors.\textsuperscript{25} The FN dropped any notion of biological racial superiority, citing its propensity to scare off voters (who feared a Nazi revival). In its place, they substituted a doctrine of social Darwinism, that is, the idea that the long-standing and superior Christian Western cultural heritage, of which the FN and the “true” French were a part, was to be defended against foreigners, in a similar manner to how the “living world [struggles] against what is foreign to it: cancerous cells, viruses, [and] parasites.”\textsuperscript{26} Not by accident, the Front national constructed a racial program that publicly rejected Hitlerian notions of biological inequality (which made electors more comfortable) while at the same time appealing to and benefiting from growing nativism and xenophobia in the population through an “us vs. them” political discourse. Le Pen, popular, charismatic and polarizing, became the face of the party (so much so that a new term was coined out of his name, lepénisme, which expressed his eagerness “to become accepted as a main-line political figure.”\textsuperscript{27} One of the major successes of the party was being able to capitalize on the failures of moderate conservatives in Parliament, and recruiting young and well-educated formerly moderate conservatives-turned-disaffected

\textsuperscript{25} Veugelers et al, 13
\textsuperscript{26} Fysh and Wolfeys, The Politics of Racism in France. (New York : MacMillan), 12.
radicals. Now armed with many more mobilized supporters, the FN capitalized on existing anti-immigrant feelings in the French population at large by focusing nearly all their efforts there. In the midst of an economic downturn, immigrants were being targeted as responsible for high rates of unemployment, for sucking the welfare state dry, and for increasing rates of delinquency, especially juvenile.

The presence and influence of the FN made all parties shift their stances to the right and address growing anti-immigrant feelings. In order to meet the political and economic demand for immigration reform, the French government instituted several policies to limit or halt immigration. In 1974, following six years of an immigration quota, the French government halted immigration from North Africa completely. In 1977 as France's economy slowed further, a right-wing government led by President Valéry Giscard-d'Estaing offered 10,000 francs to immigrants to leave France and repatriate. The policy largely failed, as many North Africans by that point were “rooted” in France permanently.

In the local elections of 1983, the “coming-out party” for the FN, the immigration question formed the basis of their political platform. FN General Secretary Jean-Pierre Stirbois ran for mayoral election with the slogan “two million unemployed are two million immigrants too many.” The FN made significant electoral gains in contests across the country. In utilizing slogans such as: “Produisons français avec des Français”

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30 Hargreaves, 16.

31 Fysh and Wolfreys 65.
(Produce French with the French)\textsuperscript{32}, the FN forced conservative parties at the time, such as the Gaullists and the \textit{Union pour la Démocratie française}, to accommodate the FN in ruling coalitions. Thanks in part to the resurgence of these parties, violence against immigrants augmented considerably.\textsuperscript{33} As it has gained electoral support through the years, the FN has been able to radicalize. Le Pen has admitted his belief in biological superiority (where “some races are more equal than others”\textsuperscript{34}); furthermore, he has come out as a committed Holocaust revisionist, famously relegating the Holocaust to simply a “detail”\textsuperscript{35} in the history of the Second World War. Le Pen, who no longer operates as the FN’s leader (his daughter has taken the party’s reins, and is the leading candidate for President in the next election) has run in every presidential election since 1988, earning his most notable success in 2002. Invoking nationalist, anti-immigrant, and populist themes, Le Pen won 17% of the vote and reached the second round of the 2002 French presidential elections.\textsuperscript{36} The FN has made a devastating mark not only on French politics, but also on European politics. Not only was it the first successful party in the fascist tradition of the postwar period to be a major factor on its country's political scene,\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Lepénisme} has become a model for how fascistic parties and their leaders can appeal to voters already frustrated by broad political, economic and demographic upheaval.

Furthermore, The FN’s, and now many 'copycat' parties’ hard anti-immigration stances have pushed all other parties to the right as well in a political effort to siphon voters.

\textsuperscript{32} Illustration i-iv
\textsuperscript{33} Lucassen, 30.
\textsuperscript{34} Fysh and Wolfreys, \textit{140}.
\textsuperscript{36} Fysh and Wolfreys, 45.
\textsuperscript{37} Davies and Jackson, 32.
Because of this remarkable fact, Western Europe writ large has seen a dramatic shift to the right, especially during times of economic instability and the prevalence of so-called Islamist terrorism in Western European countries.

The emergence of a national discourse against immigrants brought about the *beurs* (slang French for Arab) movement. Led by youth of immigrant descent and joined by other left-wing supporters, the movement sought to counter the influence of the FN through public marches and concerts, the most notable coming in the summer of 1983, when over 100,000 protestors took to the streets. This was also the time when a number of pro-human rights and pro-justice groups formed to defend the rights of immigrants. SOS Racisme is the most notable of these. Founded in 1984, the organization led a public information campaign with the slogan « Touche pas à mon pote » (Do not touch my friend). It is at this time, and in this environment, that the first question was raised about the wearing of the Muslim veil, or *hijab*, in public schools, and where contemporary debates over secularism and Republicanism begins.
CHAPTER III
THE REPUBLICAN MODEL OF ASSIMILATION

In order to make sense of the debates outlined above regarding the immigrant question in France, and particularly those of Muslim origin, it is important to understand the underlying French Republican model of assimilation. The French government, in contrast with her other liberal democracy friends across the globe, both holds and enforces a very strict idea about what they would like their citizens to be. Unlike the United States or the UK, where one can identify both with one’s nation of citizenship and one’s cultural or ethnic tradition (“African-American” or “Anglo-Indian”), one should not hyphenate one’s name in France (which represents a normative, almost moral stipulation). It should be enough to be French. Access to citizenship in France is based on the judicial concept of “jus de sol” (the same model used in the United States). According to this concept, “race” or biological background is no obstacle to gaining citizenship, which is relatively easy to obtain once inside the border – there are no restrictions on access to citizenship based on blood, ethnic background or religion – but the process essentially requires the abandonment of one's past identity in favor of the French identity. The term Franco-Algerian, or even Franco-Muslim, is a misnomer, inasmuch as these terms denote a dual identity. The French government does not recognize social or ethnic cleavages and for this reason, it does not ask for religious, ethnic or race data on census sheets. Individuals are defined by their citizenship to the French state only. While notions
of equality in democracies like the United States allow for social cleavages, whereby one can have multiple allegiances, France flatly denies individuals the right to be communitarian, that is, to possess cultural affiliations seen to be in opposition to those of the French republican model. In the French mindset, the civil right movement in America in the 1950s and 60s vastly destabilized American society, precisely because the United States allowed separate identifies to form outside of that of the state. This led to social crises, all of which could have been avoided by enforcing a national identity that superseded all others. The French government since the days of the Revolution has preferred to see its citizens as abstract individuals, blank slates, colorless. This reflects a universalist approach to citizenship -- all individuals are to be judged on their merits, and their citizenship is seen to be intimately connected with their voluntary adherence to the assimilationist expectations of the French state. This, in essence, amounts to an encouragement of sameness. Universalism is thus in direct disagreement with communautarisme, which allows for multiculturalism and espouses tolerance of difference. The French state is not historically anti-religion nor racist but rather, motivated by the idealistic notion that a nation devoid of social conflicts is conceivable if its people (irrespective of their ethnic or religious backgrounds) are united around the republican values espoused by the state. What France is finding out, however, is that this system is incredibly difficult to create and to maintain. From an American perspective, the idea of democracy, which allows for freedom of expression and the “rights of man” (les droits de l’homme) seems to run counter to their quest for sameness and universalism.
However, the French idea of democracy has less to do with individualism, and much more to do with equality.

Riva Kastoryano and Tariq Modood present two possible interpretations of equality, the former stemming from the 1960s, and the latter from the 1990s:

1. The right to assimilate to the majority/dominant culture in the public sphere; and toleration of 'difference' in the private sphere.
2. The right to have one's 'difference' (minority, ethnicity, etc.) recognized and supported in the public and private sphere.\textsuperscript{38}

Both conceptions involve the incorporation of new entrants into a dominant society. However, in the French case, the first of these is not presented as a “right”, but more as an “obligation” (while maintaining the notion of tolerance of difference in private), whereas the second (espousing the recognition of the right to difference), only applies to the private sphere, and rarely receives political support in the public sphere.

We have already noted the French rejection of the so-called hyphenated identity, and based on that, it easy to see where the French model falls in line: much more inclined towards definition one. This raises the question of assimilation. Assimilation is simply the process by and the degree to which new entrants into a society conform to that society's existing modes of behavior. France, which has been a haven for immigrants for more than a century, holds the view that immigrants are welcome as long as they conform acutely to the norms and values of the French state. According to the French model of assimilation, this in effect demands declaring an allegiance to \textit{la patrie} and to the maintenance of its

grandeur and status and by extension renouncing any identification that would supersede it. You come here, you live by our rules, it is in essence the French notion of assimilation.

The question, according to sociologist Charles Taylor, comes down to a politics of recognition: to what degree do you recognize/deny the native (predominant) identities of those foreigners seeking access to your state? Taylor disagrees with the French approach. He agrees that immigrants should conform themselves to their country of migration, but in order to create a fluid integration and a more peaceful society, it is important to recognize people's existing identities as well.39 Kastoryano and Modood agree and state that:

The approach that is being argued here, then, consists of... a reconceptualization of equality from sameness to an incorporation of a respect for difference,” and a “pragmatic, case-by-case, negotiated approach to dealing with controversy and conflict, not an ideological, drawing a 'line-in-the-sand' mentality.”40

Both Taylor, Kastoryano et al, and the position presented in this thesis question, ask simply, what is the right of an individual is to make his or her identity, and then be recognized as such. Better political, social, and cultural recognition of France's immigrants to construct their identities, while remaining in line with French norms of conduct, would perhaps better pacify the division between Muslims and non-Muslims over the long term.

40 Kastoryano and Modood, 215.
CHAPTER IV
AN EGALITARIAN SOCIETY?

The official state motto of 'Liberty, Equality, Brotherhood' seems to place an equal emphasis on each aspect. It is important to note that this motto was first coined during the French Revolution, and is enshrined in the first written constitution that came out of that event. However, the application of these three principles has not been equally applied. The second ideal, equality, is from most perspectives predominant. Equality from a French legal perspective constitutes equality of access, of education (see discussion below), and of opportunity, irrespective of one's background. People succeed and fail on their merits - education level being one of the most critical. But as we will see, the French school system is far from egalitarian.

*Education*

The first condition of all instruction is to teach only truths, institutions established by the state must be as independent as possible of all political authority... instruction should be universal... No public institution should have the authority or even the possibility of preventing the development of new truths, the teaching of theories, which contradict its particular policies or its short-term interests.41

41 Report on the General Organization of Public Instruction presented by the Concordet, Deputy from the Department of Paris, 20 and 21, April 1792.
Education for France has always been of utmost importance in order to ‘Frenchify’ their children and turn them into productive citizens. ‘Productive’ in the French sense does not only signify achieving a high salaried position or earning the best grades, but also signifies learning how to be French, that is, learning how to think in a rational and above all ‘French’ way. There is no person behind the construction of this system more important than Jules Ferry, education minister from November 1881 to February 1882, the ‘father’ of the French Republican public education system. While Napoleon I created the scholarly institutions (that still exist today), Ferry is widely seen to be behind the French educational philosophy that is still dominant today, which emphasizes the classroom as a ‘sacred educational space’ for molding every student into a French citizen. The word sacred is misleading here: it is not meant in a religious context, but rather a fundamentally secular one. Ferry and others in the government during the 1880s saw religious intrusion in the classroom, at that time by the Catholic establishment, as anathema to the development of French students as rational and emancipated thinkers. Ferry stated in his Letter to the Primary Teachers of France (November 17, 1883), “religious instruction is the province of the family; moral instruction… [‘being not less universally accepted than the rules of language or arithmetic’] belongs to the school.”43 The state, then, fills the role formerly filled by these institutions (like the Catholic Church in premodern France) by providing moral education, that is, the provision of a purely secular and intellectual education. Furthermore, for Ferry (a fervent

supporter of French colonization in North Africa and other parts of the world) education was a means to equalize all children living in France. The process was indeed framed as an “internal civilizing mission.” At the time, France was decentralized, divided *de facto* into different regions each with their own identities: Bretagne, Corsica, Provence, and so forth. These regions all had significant ethnic enclaves within France, and largely kept to themselves retaining their own languages and culture. The fragmentation of the French cultural landscape posed a threat to its survival, believed Ferry and others. Ferry wished to ‘melt’ these heritages into one ‘pot,’ that of France, *la mère patrie*. Education, believed Ferry, could be the great uniter: “The school of the Third Republic had its responsibility and goal as that of transforming [these various ethnic groups] into citizens of the Republic, speaking the same language and sharing the same cultural and patriotic values.”

Education then became extraordinarily important as the vehicle by which the nation-state remained strong and vitalic. We should also frame this within the context of the geopolitical situation in which France found itself in 1882. Less than ten years earlier, France had fought and had lost a military conflict with its neighbor to the east, Prussia. As a result of the embarrassing military defeat, France was forced to annex a key part of its territory, Alsace-Lorraine. As Prussia pushed closer to unification in the early 1880s (to become Germany), it was clear that more battles were to be fought. The strength of the nation-state, obviously, would be tested in the coming century, so for Ferry, it was paramount that the citizens unite around the nation for its very survival. Education, then, can be seen as a survival mechanism for the French nation.

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Since the introduction in 1905 of the laws on laïcité, the French government, like most liberal democracies, draws a very strict line between religion and the state. According to the laïcité laws, religion must not intervene or put pressure on the workings of the state (defined broadly), and the state will allow libertarian religious practices with a key caveat, as long as the practice does not disrupt the public order. It is this exception that the French government has invoked in recent years in order to justify banning overt religious symbols in public schools in 2004. The argument is that students wearing Muslim veils or Jewish skullcaps are putting religious pressure on other students. We will revisit the controversial headscarves affair later in this paper.

Indeed, Ferry’s ideological influence lives on. This, from the Introduction to the Circular of December 1989, signed by Education Minister Lionel Jospin:

At school like elsewhere, religious beliefs are a matter of individual conscience and freedom. But since all children come together in school without any form of discrimination, the exercise of freedom of belief with the public service’s responsibility for respect for pluralism and neutrality, means that the entire educational community should be protected from any form of ideological or religious pressure.45

Though students are free to practice religion how they will outside its walls, the public school is framed as a secular space primarily for socialization and for the acquisition of knowledge: any outside pressure disrupts the atmosphere and prevents these processes from taking place. Despite the insistence on equality of access and

opportunity, French schools are, by and large segregated (although I do not mean to suggest that this is as a result of an official policy) by ethnic origin. Felouzis (2005) has done the most influential work on this subject. Felouzis chose to focus on segregation in the middle schools in the Aquitaine region of France (the Bordeaux educational area). It is important to acknowledge that the author was forced to reckon with the fact that France does not keep official statistics on ethnic or religious background (as explained earlier). These statistics are thus based on the evaluation of pupil names and the origins they suggested. The author compiled lists of common North African, Black African and Turkish first names and then counted the numbers of pupils in each school with these names. Felouzis demonstrates quantitatively that 40% of children of North African, Black African, and Turkish origin are concentrated in 10% of all middle schools; however, in all eighty-one middle schools of the Aquitaine region children of these origins account for less than one percent of all pupils. These statistics suggest a high concentration of immigrants and immigrant families in certain zones of the Aquitaine region. This presents a potential problem for a country seeking to equalize education and keep outside influences from disrupting the school environment. Many of the schools with high populations of pupils of Muslim origin are in what are called ZEPs, or zones d’éducation prioritaires (priority educational zones). These are the schools with the most students of Muslim origin, and at the same time, with the most students classified as “disadvantaged.” The author contends that this system “is characterized by combined, compounded inequalities, showing that these pupils have been de facto concentrated or

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set apart in a highly unfavorable social and scholastic context.” Moreover, “the most segregated schools constitute an educational context much more sharply marked by social and scholastic problems.”\textsuperscript{47} The ZEPs being a modern phenomenon, many, including Eurydice, see them as significant departures from the classic Republican model of French education (addressed previously). As Eurydice puts it, ZEPs were, in fact, created to “obtain significant improvement of pupils' school results, particularly of the most unfortunate.”\textsuperscript{48} In other words, ZEPs are examples of affirmative action-like programs that positively discriminate towards that population coming from disadvantaged situations, i.e. those of Muslim origin. While the spirit of these political measures is to provide a better quality of education for disadvantaged pupils, the question still remains: has this differentiated treatment had a positive effect? Does the designation of a school as a ZEP actually improve the school? Raynal says no:

The main criticism of ZEPs is their tendency to develop a ghetto effect. In a way, the school transfers a geographical and social reality that subsequently gives rise to segregation. No one wants to live in a trouble spot and no one voluntarily chooses to go to school in a priority education area.\textsuperscript{49}

ZEPs are infamous across France for uncontrollable pupils, high truancy, and low admission rates into above-average high schools and post-graduate programs. “The Class,” a French film that won the Cannes Film Festival Palme D’Or award and received the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 2008, sums up as only art can

\textsuperscript{47} Felouzis, “Ethnic Segregation,” 14.
much of what has been discussed in this chapter. “The Class” is about one of these ZEPs, just outside Paris. In the school, instructor François Bégaudeau heads up a classroom of twenty or so adolescents, around fourteen or fifteen years in age. The movie shows the difficulty Bégaudeau has in controlling his mostly North African and Black African students’ behaviors enough to teach them. At one point he remarks (translation): “The Enlightenment will be tough for them. Voltaire… Not in their year.” What emerges from this quote is that the students have not been taught the patience, nor do they have the self-control perhaps taught to students with better home lives, to properly digest the history or literature that other students learn at this age. In another scene, Bégaudeau is trying to teach his students grammar, and he writes on the chalkboard “Bill déguste…” [Bill tastes…]. Before he can complete the sentence, one of his female students cries out, “What’s with this Bill? What Bill?” The professor explains that Bill is his name. The female student continues “What about Aïssata or Fatou?” The fact that a French name strikes this student as out of place or inappropriate given the virtually mono-ethnic composition of the class underlines the social reality in which these students live and the paradox of living in segregated communities and going to segregated schools in a universalist nation (where individuals rather than groups are recognized). As Felouzis says:

What we have in France is a paradoxical situation where the ethnic variable is a category in its own right in people’s perceptions of schools and schooling but goes unrecognized in sociological analysis because there is no official “ethnicity”

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statistic category, this in turn due to the French conception of the citizen and citizenship, which does not recognize ethnicity. Hence an important dimension of the experience of school actors is denied on the grounds that it does not figure in official, abstract conceptions of the institution. This in turn amounts to denying the existence of segregation and discrimination phenomena and sidestepping the work of determining the breadth of those phenomena and their effects on pupils’ scholastic careers. Lastly, the hole left by the absence of official statistics is filled with rumors and stereotypes, whereas, for instance, one of the rare studies of scholastic careers of children from immigrant background finds that they learn more and are more academically successful in middle school than expected.  

As Musken and Peters query further, this means that the “good” students, i.e. those from good situations and without difficult circumstances at home, can and do leave for better schools. Their findings “showed that even liberal parents committed to diversity worried about too much contact with disadvantaged children and adopted strategies to avoid it or ameliorate its impacts.”

*Employment*

Even when immigrants of Muslim descent emerge out of the school system, they encounter unofficial racism in the workplace. David D. Laitin, professor of political

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51 Felouzis, p. 5.
science at Stanford University, conducted a study in conjunction with two other professors, one from the Sorbonne, and another from the University of California-San Diego, where two identical CVs were made, one for “Aurélie Ménard” (a clearly-identifiable 'French' name), and the other for “Khadija Diouf” (a clearly-identifiable Muslim/North African name). Identical CVs were sent to multiple employers seeking to fill advertising positions. The results were clear: “Aurélie” received three times as many calls back as did “Khadija.”

Dr. Laitin, in a New York Times editorial concluded: “There is no doubt: Anti-Muslim discrimination in at least one sector of the white-collar French labor market is surely holding back Muslim economic success in France.” In a similar study conducted by the same researchers, 500 Senegalese Muslims on the one hand and a representative group of Christians on the other in France were polled for their socioeconomic data. Even after controlling for other factors like education, the survey showed that the Senegalese Muslims were at a severe economic disadvantage when compared to their Christian counterparts. What is important to note is that this study was the first to isolate “religious heritage” as an important source of anti-Muslim discrimination.

While institutional racism may exist in this one sector, there have been other unofficial reports of labor discrimination. An LA Times article published in July 2010 interviewed Abdel Basset Zitouni, leader of the non-profit National Association for Young Entrepreneurs. Zitouni said that unofficial discrimination is pervasive in the hiring

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55 New study points to religion as discrimination against Muslims in France.” French- American Foundation. 2010.
process: “It is common to hear of employers asking new hires to change their names to something more 'French-sounding' and less Muslim, apparently to appease touchy customers.”  

Both the Laitin study and Zitouni’s remarks come as no surprise to many who have studied the issue. Dr. Terence Murphy, professor of European History at the Foundation of the United States, Cité-Universitaire, Paris, spoke to me in his office about the unequal barriers to success that Muslims face through childhood and into their professional lives:

Schools are a tough environment for many Muslim immigrants, whose home lives are incredibly difficult. Their families, living in the banlieues and struggling with poverty, may not imbue in their children the respect and commitment needed to succeed in the classroom. And the way the Napoleonic school system works, if you do not succeed from an early age, you won't matriculate to the best universities, and you won't be placed in those powerful positions after you graduate from college.

A Monolithic Community?

One solution to the discriminatory issues facing France’s Muslim population, say commentators, is to increase the amount of political representation for French Muslims. The democratic system says that those with interests can act on those interests through institutions- local, regional, and national government, for example. But so far, French Muslims have remained disengaged from the political process. A 2001 survey showed

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that only 2.4% of all local elected officials in France were of North African origin. Moreover, 24% of French Muslims remain unregistered to vote, while the national average hovers around only 7%.\textsuperscript{57} Nicholas Sarkozy helped found the Conseil Français du Culte Musulman (CFCM) in 2003, an organization meant to be the interlocutor between the French Muslim community and the national government. However, this group is seen as having too cozy a relationship with authorities. Strikingly, there is no such thing as a “Muslim vote” in France. Though they certainly vote more to the left (and are almost unanimously against the extreme right), there is no monolithic Muslim community to speak of. Algerians, Turks, Moroccans, Saudis—though they may share a common religion, the practice of this religion is sometimes very different across boundaries. While conducting my fieldwork in France, spoke to a Turkish gentleman serving kabobs in a Parisian storefront. I asked him about the burqa, and he told me he didn't care one bit. His wife, his daughter, his friends, and his culture do not wear the burqa. Why should he care?, he asked me.

In fact, the lack of a visible monolithic community of French Muslims makes even research on the question difficult. One professor, Dr. Navarro at the American University in Paris, presented it this way:

> When doing work on immigrants in France, it is very important to nail down the target of your research. Not every Muslim is an immigrant, not every immigrant is from North Africa, and not every North African is a Muslim. There

\textsuperscript{57} Giry, “France and its Muslims,” 200.
is no community of Muslims. Researchers have enormous difficulty with this question: who exactly are we talking about here?

However, as much as my kebab vendor, Dr. Navarro, and the majority of the five million Muslims in France do not necessarily see themselves in communion with other French Muslims, the government has at times acted as if they were this monolithic community. This has created incoherent policies that have done little to diffuse the tensions, which have often marked relations between the French “de souche” and Muslim communities. There is no example more apt to provide evidence for this as the 2005 banlieue riots.

In late October 2005, in Clichy-Sous-Bois (a Paris banlieue), two teenagers of Arab descent were electrocuted to death in a French electric plant as they hid from policeman. Believing the youths to have been shepherded there by local police, and therefore responsible for their deaths, banlieues across the country exploded in rage. Nine days of unrest followed-- cars were burned, policemen were attacked, and storefront windows were cracked and looted— acts committed by and large by youths of Muslim heritage in those areas. The French government’s response was led by then-Minister of the Interior Nicholas Sarkozy, who had gained a reputation for the enforcement of law and order. His comments did nothing to quell the situation- Sarkozy famously declared a “war without mercy” on the rioters, calling on policemen to “wash the scum off the streets.”\(^{58}\) Infamously, Sarkozy deployed Muslim leaders in Paris to try and calm the youth. The leaders were met with rocks and violence themselves. The most important fact

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that emerged from the riots themselves was that the violence and unrest were not motivated by religion; moreover, these youth were not even very religious themselves. The deaths of the two teens in the power plant, and the subsequent riots were an opportunity for impoverished, unemployed, uneducated youths to act out their frustrations over their socioeconomic situations. Notably, these youths did not attack randomly— they targeted those objects that represented the state and public life: town halls, police cars, government buildings, as well as objects such as cars to which they had no economic access. The government’s response to these events reveals a mistaken perception that religion, rather than socioeconomic condition, is the dominant factor in les banlieues. Manuel Valls, mayor of one these banlieues, spoke out about the government response, and argued that deeper symptoms of the neighborhood unrest must be addressed. "Each crisis is bigger, harsher and deeper, more revealing of the failure of our integration model," he said.59

59 Smith, “Immigrant rioting flares”
CHAPTER V

CLOTHING CONTROVERSIES

Before examining contemporary discussions on the *hijab* and the *niqab/burqa*, it is important to clarify what, exactly, are the clothing items in question. The *hijab*, known in France as *la voile* or *le foulard* (the veil, the headscarf) is the single scarf Muslim women wrap around the head, to cover the hair and the neck. The *niqab* and *burqa* are very similar, the only difference being that the *niqab* does not cover one's eyes. The wearing of the veil, and of the *niqab/burqa* by French female Muslims has been under attack as a violation of the French secular tradition, which outlaws religious intrusion in public spaces. The ban of the veil in public schools in 2004, and the ban of the *niqab/burqa* in 2011 have both been justified a number of ways. The defenses of these policies really bring to light issues of contemporary France and specifically the state's role in regard to its people. The particulars of these questions, and of others relating to demographic, social and economic reforms, have factored heavily in the on-going construction of what it means to be French today.

*The Hijab*

The veil issue was first raised when, in 1989, a principal of a small *collège* (middle school) thirty miles outside of Paris expelled three Muslim students who refused to take off their veils before entering the school. The principal in question, Ernest
Chenière justified the girls' expulsions by arguing that the school is where French values and traditions are taught and inculcated- the intrusion of any religious influence had no place there. The event would probably not have generated so much publicity had it not come at a time when international attention was tuned to issues of Islamist militancy, such as the first Palestinian intifada against Israel and Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa against British author Salman Rushdie whose novel The Satanic Verses was deemed by Islamic leaders to be insulting to Islam. Moreover, the celebration of the French Bicentennial throughout 1989 provided the moment for a nationwide conversation on national identity, which had very much to do with the consideration of 'French' values and traditions. As Joan Wallach Scott puts it, the veil question “exposed the crisis the nation was confronting: how to reconcile an increasingly multicultural population with a universalism that precluded the recognition of cultural and social differences.”60 The matter was settled when the State Council (the top judicial body of the French government) decided that the government had no right to ban students wearing headscarves admission into schools as long as these did not disrupt the public order, and were not ostentatious; however, it was up to school officials to settle this on their own.61

The issue was raised once again in 1994- this time, Education Minister François Bayrou prohibited the wearing of “ostentatious signs” of religious affiliation in the public space. Once again, we cannot separate the emergence of the issue from the events of the day: a violent civil war raged in Algeria, and Islamist terrorism was becoming more prevalent.

60 Scott, 22.
(like the World Trade Center bombings in the United States in 1993). In a poll commissioned in 1992 two out of three French interviewees expressed their anxiety about the development of Islam in France. Moreover, several anti-immigration pieces of legislation had been introduced in the early 1990s seeking to deny children born in France of immigrant descent access to citizenship. The veil question was inextricably linked to the Islam question: for Bayrou and his supporters, Islam was inherently oppressive and anti-republican. At this point, the defense of the veil transitioned from a defense of the state, to a defense of the Muslim female who, according to veil ban proponents, lived under rules of a naturally intolerant religion that coerced them to wear the headscarf. Once again, school officials were given the power as arbiter as to what was “ostentatious” or “disruptive”; however, social stigmas began to grow about the headscarf: as a result, it was reported that more Muslim girls began to remove their headscarves before entering school gates, classrooms, and other educational spaces. In 2003, the issue was brought to light for a third time (due in part to international attention on 9/11 and its aftermath). President Jacques Chirac appointed Bernard Stasi and a commission of experts to study the issue and present their findings to him. In December 2003, the Stasi Commission returned to Chirac with their suggestions, the most notable of which was the recommendation to ban the wearing of ostentatious religious symbols in public schools. Chirac largely ignored all other proposals of the Stasi Commission, which included policies recognizing the importance of Islam across the world and educating students further on different religious practices), which were included to make French

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62 Hargreaves, 119.
63 Scott, 23.
Muslims feel more welcome and accepted. Finally a in 2005, a ban on all ostentatious religious symbols in public schools became state law. While the Stasi Commission and the subsequent Chirac policy recommendation to Parliament was careful not to single out the Muslim foulard (rather, the “ostentatious display of religious symbols” including the Jewish yarmulke, Christian crosses, and the Muslim veil) the law was obviously targeted at Muslims. This is obvious when one examines the presence and practice of the two other principal faiths in France. The Jewish population in 2004 numbered less than 500,000, while Muslims in 2005 were estimated at over five million (around 8% of the country). Moreover, while Christians do wear symbols of their faith, these can be made discreet and are certainly not mandated by the Bible. Muslim women, on the other hand, could find no substitute for the veil (even hair coverings like bandannas are banned under the 2010 law) and many Muslim women are required according to their understandings of the Koran to wear the veil in order to remain modest. The 2005 law reveals a notable contradiction within French policy. While contemporary French leaders forcibly seek to keep religion out of the public realm, it also seeks to be the father of human rights and civil liberties, as Chirac said in his 2005 veil policy defense. Despite the constitutional promise for the preservation of religious freedom in France, the state of

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65 Institut de Planification d'une Politique pour le Peuple Juif, 2004.

66 Once again, official state statistics have not been kept out of respect to the French Republican tradition, so these numbers are rough estimates based upon private sector polling and immigration analysis


68 Lazreg “Questioning the Veil,” 2009.

religious freedom is at a low point. France's almost militant emphasis on secularism and equality has brought them to develop a form of religious freedom that actively keeps religious influence from the public, and moreover, prevents individuals from reasonably practicing their faith according to their personal beliefs.

*The Niqab/Burqa*

The ban of the niqab/burqa proposed in 2010 and set to be enforced in 2011 was similarly couched in neutral language. Officially, the proposal called for the prohibition of the dissimulation of the face (*interdiction de la dissimulation du visage*). Similar proposals have been submitted in nearly every other Western European country. While in France during the summer of 2010, I attended Parliamentary debates on the law. While observation is not the most quantifiable method of analysis, there is an important value to being “there,” to “feeling” the city out and investigating what is hidden beneath the discourse. July 6, 2010, the Assemblée nationale convened a special session where the main topic of the day was the dissimulation of the face in any and all public spaces. I wrote this immediately after observing the Parliamentary proceedings:

I could have gotten the National Assembly transcripts, but actually going there, seeing the atmosphere, was really valuable. This debate isn't about the veil itself: there is a vital subtext here. This is about the preservation of society, of arguing the status quo, preserving the "Frenchness" of France. Several times during the debate I thought: are we really arguing about a small piece of fabric across the face? But it does seem throughout the speeches and discourses of the politicians,
that the entire country is at stake. They feel bombarded by new developments: the EU, the rise of Germany as an economic powerhouse, new population dynamics, the declining economy, loss of public confidence... they are turning to the basics, the fundamentals of society. This is what the French call a "remaniement," or revision/evaluation, of the country's very core.

These politicians have invoked "liberty, equality, fraternity" and "secularism" a lot- this isn't a discussion of the practicalities of a particular law banning the dissimulation of the face, this is a national conversation on what France should stand for in the 21st century. What is interesting is the usage of these terms, and how it differs from the US which holds these values just as close to its heart. In the US, politicians would never go out of their way to state that we are a secular nation, and they certainly wouldn't use it as a platform, ideologically-speaking, to pass one law or another. The French Right, however, are proponents of secularism, an ideal which is entrenched in the French tradition. Conservatives in France are falling back on law, on established tradition, on not upsetting the "natural order of things." Interesting approach for a country that was founded on just that principle.

Conservatives defended the ban this way: the niqab/burqa represents fundamentalist Islam, oppresses women (goes against the Rights of Man, a foundational document similar to Bill of Rights written immediately after the French Revolution), is contrary to secularism, and other republican values of the state. Moreover, the presence of the burqa (and the anonymous person
underneath) creates a less secure atmosphere. Liberals attacked the proposal this way. For one, the proposed ban takes away a woman’s right to make her own choices on dress, and is actually an assault on women. For another, this will create more instability in society (protests, etc.). A prevalent argument was that the ban was just not necessary. At maximum, it is estimated that only 2000 women in France wear niqab/burqas. Another criticism was that the law attacks Islam, and that state should do more to recognize the second-largest religion in the country.

I do not get it. Maybe I am missing something. If anything, a law making such a judgment on the very character and tradition of one religion is violating its own code of secularism. It's less of a stretch to make this last argument than to say that 2000 women walking around France in large cloaks and masks somehow erodes the fabric of society. I agree that a state should preserve the right to help form religion to its laws, but how does the wearing of the niqab/burqa erode at all the nature of the state-society relationship?

On another train of thought, although the left are in general agreement on the principles that compose their opposition to the niqab/burqa ban, there is no agreement from them on how to confront the passage of the bill. Some in the Chamber argued in favor of killing the bill, calling it "not necessary" or "anti-republican." Others believe that the law needs amending to possibly incorporate some aspects that were not included or lacking. Another mentioned the need to emphasize respect for the Islamic community. The left is not organized against the proposal at all, and in fact, many times ideologically aligned with the UMP (ruling
party). Even the Socialist Party is touched by conservatism; you get the feeling they understand and really take in how much popular opinion drifts right in times of economic crisis.

Thus ends my first reactions to the Parliamentary session. I have had nearly a year to refine my thoughts on this, so I want to proceed now to clarify some of what I wrote. First, it is of utmost importance to remember that nothing happens in a vacuum— that is, the debate on the dissimulation of the face is connected at least in some degree to the events of the day. I would like to connect the aforementioned debate and subsequent passage of the law to a defense of France. As I heard one French député, M. Jean-Claude Guibel say in the National Assembly, “la société française... est en train de se fragmenter sous l’action de mouvements prêchant une société qui n’est pas la nôtre. Ils menacent notre modèle républicain, ses valeurs, ses pratiques, notre capacité à vivre ensemble.”

This was my experience when I spoke with Azita, a woman of Persian heritage studying at the American University in Paris. She told me that as a Muslim woman (though she does not wear any clothing demonstrating her faith), she understands how the older French population could feel threatened by changes reshaping the French landscape. As contemporary philosopher Slavoj Zizek says:

Problems, however, begin with Sarkozy's statement that veils are "not welcome" because, in a secular country like France, they intimidate and alienate non-

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71 My own translation: “French society is fragmenting under the action of a social movement preaching a society that is not ours. They threaten our Republican model, its values, its practices, and our capacity to live together.”
Muslims... one cannot but note how the allegedly universalist attack on the burqa on behalf of human rights and women's dignity ends up as a defense of the particular French way of life.\(^{72}\)

French policy towards first-, second-, and third-generation immigrants, especially those who differ by appearance and thought, cast Muslims as a homogenous group (even though the distinctions between Kabylian (Berber) and Arab Algerians, for example, are large). Moreover, many North Africans are not even Muslim - as has been noted earlier in another context, there are up to 500,000 Jews in France, many of North African heritage.\(^{73}\) However, these distinctions are often overlooked.

\textit{Public Opinion and French Muslims}

French public opinion suggests that the public also senses a feeling of national decline. A succession of European Commission polls from 2002-3, 2004-5, and 2006-7 indicate a steady loss of personal trust in politicians.\(^{74}\) In a 2010 BVA poll, 76% of French responded that they were less hopeful than before of France's future economic situation.\(^{75}\) Even in 2004, before the economic crisis, 78% of French respondents believed the world was “headed in the wrong direction.”\(^{76}\)

\[^{72}\text{Slavoj Zizek, “The Neighbor in Burqa,” June 2010.}\]
These numbers indicate a generalized feeling among the French public of a downward slide. Thus, the government in full-on defense mode has sought to curry political points by talking about an “immigration problem.” Islam is targeted for being an inherently violent religion, and women clothed in niqab/burqas are assumed to be doing so under threat from their spouses. A succession of French governments, instead of talking about the cycle of poverty, access to equal education and job opportunities, and housing standards, have couched their attacks against resident Muslims in cultural terms rather than socioeconomic ones in order to get the public talking about identity, about what it means to 'be French.' As one women put it to me, “Why are they talking about burqas? It's incomprehensible. The only ones who wear those are rich Saudi Arabians shopping on Rue de Rivoli [the fashion district of Paris].” Sarkozy and his government have actively framed the debate their way and under their direction in order to appear as the defenders of those French traditions “under attack.” “Scary” words like "immigrant," "terrorism," "oppression," "end of our way of life," "threat to France," etc. have a tendency to get people talking and get people behind the party defending the French state.

We have already seen that the women wearing niqabs/burqas before the 2010 law was passed numbered less than 2,000 (by most estimates). The effect of the bill was to deny these women the right to wear the niqab/burqa in public (with the threat of a fine if caught). Moreover, the bill mandates a heavy fine and jail time for any spouse who was forcibly making his wife wear the niqab/burqa. These two provisions of the bill indicate that the motives behind it were not simply the defense of the woman, but something different too. If Sarkozy et al were concerned primarily with the specific patriarchal and
oppressive Islamic regimen that requires women to cover themselves, they could have proposed a law cracking down on domestic violence. This would have freed women, to a greater degree, to wear what they wished. The effect may not have been immediate, but there are a multitude of examples in liberal democracies where the state has cracked down on a specific and unreasonable religious practice, such as human sacrifice. While laws against murder are not comparable to laws against dress, the point is that states regularly impose constraints on specific religious practices in order to uphold democratic law and order. However, the bill also imposes a fine, about 755 euro for the first offense, on the woman caught wearing the niqab/burqa. What are we to make of this? If Muslim women have no agency but to put on the clothes requested of them by the conservative males in their lives, and furthermore the only way to “escape” is through law, why punish them? The answer is that the state wished to take away all right to wear the niqab/burqa, regardless of motive. Although assuming women wore the niqab/burqa due to male spousal/familial influence, the state also wishes to take away all rights for independent women (without this male influence) to wear the burqa. Seen this way, the law is not empowering (as it was ostensibly intended to be), but rather limits the woman's ability to make her own decisions about dress and religion. By curbing the woman's ability to dress as she wants and reasonably profess her faith as she wants, the state is making a statement about the fundamentals of this particular religion: that even if a woman arrives at the decision alone to wear her burqa, she cannot do so, because the state has decided she does not have the ability to make any such decision. It is this perspective, a correct one I believe, that reveals these individuals in the French government to be not only
secularists, but radical, quasi-dictatorial secularists. The French government speaks about the oppressive regimes that force women into a burqa, but is it not equally oppressive to make her remove it?

Despite the perception that immigrants of Muslim origin have difficulties integrating into the predominant French way of life, all evidence points to the contrary. Individuals of Muslim origin have integrated very well into the dominant traditions and values of the French state. They believe in laïcité at about the same rate of support as do individuals of non-immigrant background. Though 45% identify with Islam before France, French Muslims overwhelmingly want to adopt French customs rather than remain in distinct communities. However, as the poll shows, 53% of non-Muslim French believe Muslims want to remain apart—this may indicate a misperception on the part of the non-Muslim population. Contrary to what many fearing the Islamization of France believe, the major concerns of French Muslims are not cultural, but socioeconomic: unemployment, social inequality, education, and the cost of living. An overwhelming majority of French Muslims consider unemployment, which in some places is three or four times the national average, their number one concern going ahead.

The most noticeable statistic is about national identity. According to Gallup, Muslims in Paris (making up 68% of the Parisian population) are just as likely as the national population to say they identify “strongly” or “extremely strongly” with the

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77 Figure 1
78 Giry, 194.
79 Giry, 194.
80 Figure 2
nation. 46% of Muslims in Paris, and 46% of people nationally fit into this category. This is striking given the common fear that the Muslim identity will trump that of the state and lead to the construction of a *communautariste*, fragmented society. Moreover, I spoke with a number of Muslims in Paris who said this is not the case. One woman, an employee at La Grande Mosquée (the largest mosque in Paris) and a *française issue d'immigration* (person of immigrant background) spoke to me over mint tea about her past, and how she identifies herself. She said Muslims in France have adapted well to the culture- it's important to remember, she said, that Algeria as a colony was an integral part of France for almost two centuries. Algerian children went to French schools, learned French history, and learned the French language. She said Muslims have no trouble integrating into French traditions. I asked her if she had any friends who wear the burqa, and she said she knew no one.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

A major preoccupation of French leaders throughout the nation’s history has been to create a sense of unity among what has always been, in truth, a highly diverse people with different ethnic, regional, linguistic backgrounds. In many ways, the Muslim question in France is just the most recent manifestation of a centuries-old debate. The republican model of assimilation, with its emphasis on one national identity, is the political reflection of this preoccupation – while egalitarian in principle, the effect has in fact been exclusionary particularly with regard to Muslim immigrants and their descendants. As I have sought to elucidate throughout the preceding examples and analysis, there are those in French government who worry that the weakness of the nation-state will in turn induce people to create other identities in absentia (this is encapsulated by the French government’s fear of communautarisme). Samuel Huntington in his oft-quoted work “The Clash of Civilizations” (1993) predicted this exact sort of situation emerging in the “post-history” 21st century world, where conflicts would arise between identities and civilizations, and not necessarily nation-states. The French governmental position in many respects can be said to be Huntingtonian: that is, it sees the mixing of what are perceived to be competing identities as a potential clashing point, and detrimental to national cohesion. This difference in perspective from say, the United States or the British multicultural models, defines many of the contemporary debates.
going on in France today. In fact, the word “multiculturalism” does not even exist in French discourse.

So, should we accept Huntington’s thesis and say that the situation in France today is a clashing of civilizations? Or is the situation more nuanced? In order to explore this, we need to turn to the fundamentals of identity, how people define themselves, and what factors in turn help us to shape ourselves and the world around us. Jenkins tells us that identity is not an inflexible ‘thing,’ but rather an on-going, lifelong process that helps us to make sense of our world. The process of identification lets us know “who’s who, and what’s what.”81 We organize ourselves around this basic determination (however changing), and our identity is the lens through which we judge our world. In other words, the process of identification is a survival mechanism in order to face challenges, whether these are existential or otherwise. This does not mean, however, that identity has any biological reality. For example, the original inhabitants who settled on what became French land are called the Gauls. Politicians from both sides of the aisle often present the Gauls as the original French civilization, the people who first encapsulated true ‘French’ ideals. They are immortalized in soaring patriotic rhetoric, even though we are now two thousand years removed from the original Gaulish settlement. What this reveals is the power of the “imagined community,”82 Benedict Anderson’s concept that identities, whether ‘real’ or not, remain vital to our existences. Nobody who enjoys French citizenship today is 100% Gaul, but that fact is meaningless: “Frenchness” remains a

powerful identification across France, helping French people to see “who’s who, and what’s what.”

This, ironically, is the crux of French policy towards its citizens of Muslim origin. France so deeply values the core ‘French’ identity that it actively rejects all others. Indeed, policies towards the practice of Islam reveal that the only ‘good’ Islam appropriate to practice in France is the ‘French’ form of Islam, which stays out of public life, which does not reveal itself on people’s bodies, and embraces secularism and gender equality. We have already seen that Muslims in France overwhelmingly want to be French (although the public perception is the opposite), and that Muslims in France are not, for the most part, opposed to laïcité. However, despite this, French Muslims find their ways of life infringed upon further. Recently, an elementary school principal in Seine-Saint-Denis refused entrance to a mother picking up her child from school because she was wearing a hijab, on the grounds that the ban on wearing religious symbols in schools does not only extend to the child, but also to his or her mother.83 This indicates the further incursion of secularism upon the lives of Muslim women, but represents something deeper-- that a specific French identity is the only acceptable identity. Muslims indicating their religion through their clothing are violating what it means to be ‘truly’ French. Muslim women, as Joan Wallach Scott and others have said, are an easy target for policymakers to begin to enforce secularism further and shape the nation of France.

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itself into one monolithic community. Indeed, the question emerges, is Islam even welcome in France? As one student, Caroline, put it to me as we sat and talked along the Left Bank, “What does a Muslim have to do? Eat croissants and listen to Edith Piaf?” When we consider the French incursion into the cultural and social lives of its citizens (and its ignoring of underlying socioeconomic issues), it is clear that the dominant perspective French leaders take on these issues is that France needs to be defended. Not from military invasions, but from changes that threaten to diminish the French identity (imagined as it is) in favor of another. These leaders see Islam as one of these great existential threats. And they wish to confront this, rather than to confront the deep socioeconomic issues afflicting many in the French Muslim community. However, the point remains that if France wishes to properly integrate its entire citizenry, it needs to make more of an effort on a socioeconomic level rather than a cultural one that only excludes and marginalizes a large portion of its citizens. General De Gaulle’s call for France to “marry its epoch” (cited in the beginning of this thesis) continues to go unanswered, and the transformation of an “old country into a new country” has also not yet been realized. Contemporary French leaders would do well to heed the General’s advice.


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