Pac-Man Nationalism:
Peasants into Frenchmen and Muslims into French Republicans?

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The 2004 French controversy over the banning of head scarves, which was included along with other “overtly religious garb” (crucifixes, skullcaps, turbans), is a vivid reflection of the convulsions that French national identity has been undergoing for the last two decades. The 2004 law was the culmination of the so-called “affaires du foulard” which began in 1989 with the determination of three Muslim girls to wear headscarves in state schools. These debates over the right to exercise one’s cultural and religious identities in the public space have only intensified in France with the presence of a growing population of immigrants and minorities who are becoming increasingly visible and vocal. While current circumstances help shape French immigrant and minority negotiations with an overtly assimilationist cultural policy, history can shed another light on these debates.

The roots of the zero-sum game the French government has proposed between a Republican national identity and a multicultural vision of French identity can be found within the aggressive nation-building efforts of the early Third Republic (1870-1905).\(^1\) The early Republican government actively and aggressively pursued a program to acculturate a majority population whose identities were shaped by distinct peasant, regional, and Catholic cultures. The principles of *liberté, fraternité, égalité*, and *laïcité* became the composite parts of an ideological machine whose primary function was to act as a creator and guarantor of loyalty to the state by converting the majority population to the Republican mentality. The current assimilationist discourse regarding immigrant and minority identity has been strongly influenced by this history of early Republican acculturation policies.

This connection is most discernible in four areas. The first area concerns the continued use of the principles of *liberté, fraternité, égalité, and laïcité* as the ideological guidelines for

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engaging minorities/immigrants and the machinery by which they would be absorbed. The second is the prevalent view in Republican discourse that cultural pluralism or multiculturalism is equivalent to or results in social fragmentation. The third examines the targeting of religion and non-French cultural identities as competition for the loyalties of the people. Fourth, it can be argued, similar to a century ago, the school is regarded as a particularly important site of indoctrination in which the sanctity of the Republican tradition is paramount.

When is a nation?²

The foundations of this dialogue between the past and the present lie in “a curious, but understandable, paradox: modern nations and all their impedimenta generally claim to be the opposite of novel, namely rooted in the remotest antiquity, and the opposite of constructed, namely human communities so ‘natural’ as to require no definition other than self-assertion.”³ It is imperative to recognize that the assertion of the French Republic as an eternal representational given in which the “sacred may be relocated, transformed, but not lost” is a nineteenth-century ideal projected backward onto centuries of historical disunity in France.⁴ What we now conceive of as the French Republican national identity firmly embedded in the cultural consciousness of all inhabitants of the Hexagon only experienced its final processes of consolidation a little over a century ago. These processes can be “understood as a specific mobilization toward a particular source of identification at the expense of other/Other(s).”⁵

If the nation, as defined by Marcel Mauss, is a society characterized by the “relative moral, mental, and cultural unity of its inhabitants, who consciously support the state and its laws,” then in 1870, when the Third Republic began, France was by no means a nation. The understanding of the lack of cohesiveness of 1870 France can be further supplemented by the definition of the nation as proposed by Benedict Anderson, that the nation is “an imagined political community- and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.” The last three decades of the nineteenth century was the formative period when French Republican culture and nation-state became national.

Anderson’s definition is particularly importantly to this paper for two reasons. First, his definition is largely based on the French experience, particularly the principles expressed by the French Revolution. Second, understanding that nation is an imagined community is essential to debunking the myth that the French nation has existed since time immemorial. Anderson considers the nation an imagined community because most members of even the smallest nation-states will not meet each other and yet consider themselves members of the same community. In other words, “all communities larger than the primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined” and so the nation must have been created through certain processes.

The nation is also imagined as limited because “no nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind.” Even the largest of nations have definite boundaries, however flexible they may be. In fact, the French Republican nation-state can be described as being created through the

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8 Connor, “When is a nation?” 159.
10 Ibid., 7.
imposition of certain cultural and political borders. The rise of this particular nation-state also involved efforts to end various local allegiances and cultures. If messianic and Universalist impulses exist within a nation as the French case also demonstrated, it is because the individual nation aspires to outstrip its competitor nations by encompassing more of humanity.

The nation is also imagined as sovereign because the concept “emerged” during the age of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. For the development of nations in the Western world, these events were watershed moments. It represented a marked departure from the ancien régime where a dynastical monarchy and the Catholic Church together imposed its authority on the rest of society. Therefore, the nation is a sovereign entity because it is an expression of self-emancipation from the monarchy and the Church.

Lastly, the imagining of the nation as a community is even more firmly rooted in French Republican ideology. Anderson writes, ultimately it is a fraternity because “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.”11 The nation is a community where individuals as equals (relatively speaking), freed from the hierarchal structures imposed by the monarchy and the Church, choose to come together.

**Gladiator Politics**

In order to understand their policies, it is imperative to take into account the immediate social and political circumstances that brought the Republicans to power as well as the process they used to form a new political community. In fact, the atmosphere of uncertainty during most of the 1870s greatly helps to explain the virulence and intensity with which the internal mission

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11 Ibid.
civilisatrice was implemented. To begin, the territorial consolidation of France was a project that had begun in the 13th century and had only recently been completed in 1860 with the annexations of Savoy and Nice. Despite the possibilities for instability offered by incorporating the new territories into the state, by 1870 these concerns would be overshadowed by a new series of destabilizing events. The outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War, in which France was defeated, led to end of the Second Empire and a brief civil war with the Commune, a socialist regime which briefly controlled Paris from March 26th- May 28th, 1871.

Though the Third Republic was officially proclaimed on September 4th, 1870, there was nothing inevitable about its survival. In February 1871, the composition of the National Assembly that was elected did not favor the one hundred- fifty Republicans who were outnumbered by about four hundred monarchists. During this period, the fear of a royalist restoration by the loose coalition of Legitimists, Bonapartists, and Orleanists supporting various dynasties, was very serious. On the ideological battleground, the odds were also not in favor of the Republicans. The ironic election of such an overwhelming number of royalists to the National Assembly demonstrated that the majority of the French population was still made up of rural peasants committed to a conservative agenda and unreceptive to social change or experimentation. This was heightened by the negative reaction of most of the French population towards the Paris Commune. The socialist nature of the Paris Commune and its reforms reflected negatively on the Republicans who, in the eyes of the public, were ideological cousins of the Communards (or at least, ideologically closer than the monarchists).

Furthermore, the earlier French historical attempts to experiment with a republican state cast a shadow over Republican efforts in the 1870s. Monarchial rule, however flawed, was backed by centuries of tradition, cultural familiarity, and relative longevity. The two previous republics in France were brief, unstable, and marred by intense violence and repression. Even the presence of similar contemporary states such as the United States and Switzerland, which were federations, had a de-legitimizing effect for the viability of the Republican model. The United States had recently undergone a civil war and Switzerland was a comparatively much smaller state.13 During the previous republics and empires, the Republicans were in a constant search for self-definition and a concretization of their political ideology and program. The circumstances of the early 1870s forced the Republicans to prove the theoretical and practical viability of the Third Republic and Republicanism. Being placed in such an extreme position along with the fear a monarchist restoration provoked an understandably strong reaction from the Republicans. Their desire to prove their program was coupled with the need to assure that the array of political and ideological forces that had placed them in this bind would never arise again to threaten them and the program they had so painstakingly created.

Until 1877, Republican victories tended to be slow and a product of very calculated politics. The Republicans supported the constitution adopted by the National Assembly in 1875 (a result of compromise which was hardly concurrent with Republican principles) in exchange for constitutional arrangements that would increase their governing powers.14 However, it was the gradual increase of Republicans in the National Assembly through elections that truly moved the odds in their favor. Their position was finally solidified in the May 16th Crisis of 1877.

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14 Ibid., 125.
previous annual elections of 1876 had resulted in the Chamber of Deputies being heavily dominated by Republicans. President Patrice MacMahon, a monarchist, had dismissed the moderate Jules Simon as head of the government and replaced him with the Orleanist, Albert, Duc de Broglie. The Chamber refused to recognize the new government, passing a vote of no confidence. In response, President MacMahon dissolved the Chamber on grounds that such domination by “radical parties” was unacceptable. However, the consequent elections resulted in even more Republicans being elected, a clear rejection of MacMahon’s move, which forced him to accept the results or resign. In the words of Leon Gambetta, a prominent statesman of this period, “quand la France aura fait entendre sa voix souveraine, il faudra se soumettre ou se démettre.”¹⁵ So, in January 1879 MacMahon resigned.

How to explain the rise of the Republicans from their precarious position in 1870-71 to their victory in 1877? In the words of Jules Barni, a leading Republican intellectual of the 1860s and 1870s, Republicanism was distinguished by its attachment to civil and political liberties and so “the real love of liberty repudiates fanaticism, no matter where it originates from.”¹⁶ According to this formulation, the Paris Commune and ultraconservative clergy were equally reprehensible.¹⁷ The Republicans rejected the extremism of the left just as they rejected the extremism of the right. By doing so, they established that they were distinct from the Paris Commune. Whereas the Paris Commune represented destabilizing political and social revolutionary change brought about through violent means, the Republicans presented

themselves as moderate reformers whose program offered stability and progress. During the 1870-71 to 1877 period, the Republican willingness to work with the Monarchists through compromise and gradual change helped to demonstrate the sincerity of their claims.

The Republicans also sought to further their case by defining themselves as conservatives. This conservatism was procedural rather than ideological; the Republicans depicted themselves as conserving the Republic, the Constitution, and its laws.\(^\text{18}\) This worked on the presupposition that the Republic was the status quo rather than a barely established entity with an uncertain future. Regardless, this rhetoric placed the Monarchists in the role of reactionaries who were trying to bring France backward to an impossible past, thus casting them as the source of disorder. As stated in an 1877 Republican manifesto, the “true conservatives are those who, to win over a regime brought about by the force of circumstances, want to strengthen it.”\(^\text{19}\)

The constant rhetorical references to the Republic as an established fact alluded to another aspect of what was a very effective public relations campaign, the appeal to tradition derived from the achievements of the Revolution.\(^\text{20}\) As Leon Gambetta argued, to “be a true conservative…it is necessary to be attached to everything which has been founded, created, by the French Revolution, to everything that has constituted the patrimony of French society for the last hundred years.”\(^\text{21}\) It is during this vital formative period that Gambetta set up the creation of Republican France as the “eternal representational given” through another successful method of positive campaigning. In an 1872 speech, Gambetta denied that he was attempting to belittle the

\(^{18}\) Hawkins, What’s in a name?” 130.

\(^{19}\) Cited in Maurice Reclus, Le Seize mai (Pairs, 1931), 100, quoted in Hawkins, What’s in a name?” 130.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 131.

achievements of the French monarchy but that it was a history which had run its course and "must disappear in order to make way for a new world that is commencing."\textsuperscript{22} In this line of argumentation, the era of the French monarchy was finished and so republican France (and its ideological origins) was posited as the only valid reference point that could shape debates from the 1870s onwards. Thus, even in rhetoric the Republicans offered an easy and smooth method of conceptualizing the transition from monarchy to Republicanism. It seemed to not denigrate the former and presented the shift to the latter as a natural step. This simultaneously painted the Monarchists not only as revolutionaries against the existing regime but marching against the forward flow of time and history itself.

Though not an absolute determinant, it is important to note the role that the failure of the Monarchist coalition to form a cohesive alternative played in the success of the Republicans. Initially, the Monarchists came out ahead after the end of the Second Empire with a numerical advantage in the National Assembly and a far more receptive audience amongst the populace. However, the Legitimists, Bonapartists, and Orleanists were unable to compromise on a mutually acceptable and politically appealing vision of the monarchy.\textsuperscript{23} The conflict was further punctuated by the intransigent personalities of various candidates who did not work with the factions in constructive ways, disrupting the already loosely bound coalition. The fates of the Monarchists were sealed when many of the candidates began to die of old age in the 1880s, leaving behind potential heirs who were too young or unimportant to pose a challenge to Republican power.

\textsuperscript{22} Ib\textsuperscript{id}.
\textsuperscript{23} Hazareesingh, "The Societe d’Instruction Republicaine and the Propagation of Civic Education in Provincial and Rural France," 272.
Les gaulois, nos ancêtres…

While the Republicans were expanding their political influence in the National Assembly, interesting developments were occurring outside the Hexagon as well. France was increasing its colonial power in Asia and Africa. Between 1863 and 1895, Cambodia, Laos, Annam, Tonkin, and Cochin China came under French control, forming French Indochina. The French also aspired to create a “vast African empire” linked by a Trans-Saharan Railway running from Algiers to Sudan with branches that connected to Dakar on the West African coast.\textsuperscript{24} During, the nineteenth century, France was only second to Britain as an imperial power.

Children who were educated in French colonies would have opened their history textbooks to these lines, “les gaulois, nos ancestrès.”\textsuperscript{25} It would have, no doubt, seemed bizarre to children being educated in Dakar or Algiers. Surely, the Gauls, ancient inhabitants of what would become France, could not be their ancestors? As preposterous as it may appear to the modern eye, this particular parcel of the French colonial education system reveals something rather important. The external \textit{mission civilisatrice} in the French colonies sought to impress a deep cultural homogeneity upon all the territories held by the Republican state. Apparently, this cultural homogeneity included a sense of common ancestry regardless of how unlikely it may be.

Numerous academics such as Tony S. Jugé and Michael P. Perez have emphasized the legacies of French external colonialism, in particular racism, as especially detrimental to the treatment of immigrants/minorities in France today. Jugé and Perez have argued that not enough attention has been paid to the definition of French citizenship as a construction of whiteness. To

\textsuperscript{24} The Trans-Saharan Railway was never built. The British ensured that the French colonial empire would never be consolidated but consigned to have a piece of it in West Africa and the other in North Africa.

be a French citizen means to be white and to subscribe to all things white including culture, language and etc...  

Of course, this mentality is founded in the belief that the white *colons* were considered racially superior to those they colonized and so the culture of the *colons* must have been superior as well. Thus, for an Algerian child to become a French citizen, he must adopt the civilization of his colonizer as his own civilization. This process of assimilation extends to even adopting the mythic ancestors of the colonizer’s civilization, such as the *gaULOIS*.

In the twenty-first century, the legacy of the colonial assimilation process is a unique form of exclusion for Third-World non-European populations. People of color who do not fulfill the stringent requirements necessary to become French citizens find themselves permanently in the foreigner category. It is without doubt that this legacy has a continued impact on the treatment of immigrant/minorities today.

However, I would suggest that we take into consideration several factors. First, I would ask, who is white? The indigenous peoples of the French colonies were obviously not considered white. The French Republicans obviously thought of themselves as white. But in the late nineteenth century, who were the French Republicans but a small population of urbanites that could not have encompassed more than a quarter of the total population. So, in the Republican view, was the majority of the population in Hexagon truly white?

What this demonstrates is that race and in particular, whiteness is a highly fluid and subjective concept. What characteristics constitute a race and defines an individual as a member of a racial community is always subject to change and the cultural idiosyncrasies of the specific time period. Take for example, the case of the Irish. An English traveler in Ireland writes in his

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27 Ibid., 191.
account “but to see white chimpanzees is dreadful; if they were black, one would not feel it so much, but their skins, except where tanned by exposure, are as white as ours.”28 Today, we may look at these descriptions with certain incredulity. The Irish are physically white, why would they not be considered white? For the English in the 1850s, the Irish may have looked white but culturally and socially, they were not members of the white race.

The point is not to downplay the importance of colonial racism. Nor to suggest that France’s history as a former colonial power has no impact on the treatment of immigrants who are primarily drawn from the former colonies. However, what the next section seeks to demonstrate is that the majority of the Hexagon, who, today, are considered white, experienced a similar process of colonization. This line of reasoning leads us to two conclusions. First, the French Republicans probably found the peoples of Brittany or Corsica equally as savage, foreign, and non-white as the indigenes of their colonies abroad. Second, perhaps there is a greater paradigm at work here than race. In order to understand the interactions between the French Republicans and the peoples they encountered, whether in the Hexagon or North Africa, a more useful paradigm is Republican and Non-Republican. Thus, racism as a legacy of external French colonialism is a crucial but not determinative element.

**An internal mission civilisatrice**

Even though by the end of the 1870s, the Republicans had won the immediate political battle, they understood that the permanent conquest of national power was linked with local politics.29 It was necessary to convert the diverse populations of territorial France who found the

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29 Ibid., 273.
Republicans alien and suspicious. In the words of Count Massimo d’Azeglio “We created France, now we must create the French.”

Throughout the nineteenth-century and the first decades of the twentieth-century, the majority of the population in France was rural. The urban population only became slightly larger in comparison in the 1920s. The physical infrastructure of territorial France, such as railways and roads, was limited and did not make a substantial impact until later in the 1880s. The peasantry remained in isolated and distinct communities where the maintenance of order and stability tended to be equated with the preservation of distinct traditions. “The least of our villages,” wrote a local historian of the Var, “considers itself a pays in its language, legends, customs, ways.”

The cultural distinctiveness of each peasant village was also supplemented by a strongly embedded sense of Catholicism and its associated political conservatism. Thus, the political inclination of the peasantry was closer to that of the monarchists than that of the Republicans. The peasants who, for the most part, were also dedicated Catholics considered the Republicans to be revolutionaries. They suspected the Republicans of trying to attack what they perceived as one of foundational pillars of their society as well as established community institutions run by the clergy (who often provided vital social services). In the accusation succinctly articulated by Comte Albert de Mun, the Republicans, especially in their anti-clericalism, sought “a war against God, then, without delay, the negation of simple morality itself and of those elementary

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31 Ibid., 115.
32 Ibid., 45.
principles which follow natural law and without which there is no longer society, state, and nation.”

Perhaps the most evident sign of the distance between the peoples of France and its government was language, or rather the diversity of languages spoken. Historically, linguistic unity was not a great concern to the French monarchs, since French was only important as the maternal language of the King, diplomacy, and administration. The Ordinance of Villers-Cotterets in 1539 established that all legal processes had to be conducted and recorded in French. However, as evidenced by subsequent contradictory policies, the severity of its enforcement strictly corresponded to its ability to affect the King’s power. Thus, the French language spread slowly, beginning with the regions closest to Paris. Even amongst the provincial elites, French remained a foreign language well into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By the time of the early Third Republic, the government realized that French was a foreign language for half its so-called citizens. In 1863, roughly more than half the communes of France were “patois-speaking,” ranging between communes that were completely non-French speaking to minimally patois-speaking. The non-French speaking and significantly non-French-speaking communes formed a half of the patois-speaking communes.

The peoples of the Hexagon saw the Republicans as a foreign people and Paris as an occupying colonial force. The Republicans found the peasantry to be equally problematic, if not more. In 1871, Leon Gambetta stated, very accurately, this sentiment: the peasants were “intellectually several centuries behind the enlightened part of the country…[there is] an enormous distance between them and us…between those who speak our language and those

33 Albert de Munm speech in the Chamber of Deputies, 4 May 1877, reproduced in Gambetta, *Discours* VI, p. 359, quoted in Hawkins, “What’s in a name?” 129.
many of our compatriots [who] , cruel as it is to say so can no more than stammer in it.”

Echoing the sentiments of the external *mission civilisatrice* in North and West Africa and Indochina, the peasants were considered subhuman savages who needed to be uplifted into civilization by the Republicans. This conflict-ridden negotiation of cultures became the practical premise of the internal *mission civilisatrice*. The Republicans felt that to remain in power, for the long term, it was necessary for Republicanism to replace the Catholic, provincial, and peasant cultures of the majority of the population. “The peasant had to be integrated into the national society, economy, and culture: the culture of the city and of the city par excellence, Paris.”

Cultural and political unification were viewed as mutually reinforcing goals in which the accomplishment of one could not be completed without the other. The efforts to transform Republican identity into something shared by all the inhabitants of the geographic space of France were considered vital to nation-building. French Republicans “pursued an assimilationist, civilizing, [and] nationalizing mission” with peasants, provincials, and Catholics as their potential converts. In terms of the Republican reasoning process itself, socio-political reform was necessary if the heritage of the Revolution was to be preserved. The intent was not only to transform these peoples self-defined by class, regional, and religion into Frenchmen but also Frenchmen into good Republicans. In ideological terms, the internal mission civilisatrice consisted of two interrelated and mutually reinforcing parts: the concept of the conscious forgetting and the adoption of French Republicanism.

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36 Ibid.
38 Hawkins, “What’s in a name?” 132.
“Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?”

In the Hexagon, “the state and nation [had] merged to unite the anthropological diversity of the French nation around the same political plan.”40 This idea was embodied in key concepts articulated in the 1882 lecture “Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?” by Ernest Renan. He begins his reply to the question posed by the title by stating:

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Only two things, actually, constitute this soul, this spiritual principle. One is in the past, the other is in the present. One is the possession in the common legacy of remembrances; the other is the actual consent, the desire to live together, the will to value the heritage which all hold in common…The nation, even as the individual, is the end product of a long period of work, sacrifice and devotion.41

Renan recognized that the nation is an entity that is constructed with great difficulty. Therefore, in the methodology he offered for the achievement of this goal, Renan realized the utility of history and the creation of a connection between the past and the present. It is necessary to have some kind of historical and cultural experience that all peoples in the nation can use as a point of reference for self-identity. Furthermore, people in the present need to value this history and its legacies not only as important but also as something held in common (regardless of whether it is or not).

The other key concept that comes out of this passage is consent. Rather than membership to a nation being a consequence of race, ethnicity, or even religion, it is something that people must choose and agree to become part of. The candidate that the nation recognizes for potential membership is not a community of any kind but the individual. As Renan states further along in his speech, “the existence of a nation is an everyday plebiscite.”42 Thus, perhaps even more important than valuing a common history is the consent of the individual to be an “active

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42 Ibid.
member in a self-defining community.” In the words of the Republican sociologist Dominique Schnapper, “National identity is not a biological but a political fact: one is French through the practice of a language, the learning of a culture, through the wish to participate in an economic and political life.” This principle prevents the exclusion based on ancestry, religion, or cultural heritage, but the individual must consent to consider him or herself first and foremost a citizen of the republic.

This emphasis on individualism had already been established in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen of 1789 which proclaimed individuals should be respected “sans distinction d’origine, de race ou de religion.” This assertion that the inherent worth of every human being is independent of the community to which s/he belongs was a convenient appeal to individualism meant to establish not only the worth of the individual as human but equally, if not more importantly, as citizens.

Underlying the appeal to individual citizenship is another aspect of French Republicanism: the universality of humankind and the ability of the French nation-state to give expression to this aspiration. As the French anthropologist Louis Dumont remarks the “destiny of France is be the teacher of mankind.” Thus, one of the fundamental beliefs of both the internal and external mission civilisatrice is that all human beings as individuals could be taught to be French Republicans and that it was the duty of French Republicans to teach others how to become like them.

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45 Laborde, “The Culture(s) of the Republic,” 719-720.
46 Louis Dumont, German Ideology: From France to Germany and Back (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994), 199.
47 Ibid., 200.
The more sinister implication in both principles, though more so in the latter than the former, is the deliberate act of forgetting. Whether it is asserting the primacy of the French Republican identity consensually or the teachability of individuals, it involves some process of letting go of other identities. As Renan also argues in his lecture,

[A] person who has these same defects in quality that nations have, who nourishes himself on vainglory, who is jealous, egotistic, and quarrelsome, who could support nothing without fighting; he would be the most intolerable of men. But all these unharmonious details disappear when we are united...when this moral conscience [the nation] proves its strength by sacrifices that demand abdication of the individual for the benefit of the community, it is legitimate and it has the right to exist.48

In other words, “forgetting those features of past history that did not facilitate creating a sense of national unity was an indispensible part of supporting it.”49 While the act of forgetting other identities or histories, primary or secondary, can be a benign, more often than not it is coercive in one way or another. A Breton or a child of a Jew is encouraged to ignore the fact that they have some other linguistic, cultural, or religious affiliation because it is perceived to be an obstacle to social or economic advancement. Though less benign, another example is the creation of a national history in which some ancestral groups or events are prized others while the less valued details are conveniently de-emphasized.

However, even more grave is Renan’s anthropomorphic comparison of the nation and subsequent suggestion that the positive affirmation of unification is executed through the negative rejection of qualities, presupposed to be inherently destructive. In application, it implies that the internal mission civilisatrice can and should be carried because the other identities, forgotten in the process, are defective. The devaluing of other identities becomes extremely central for the coercive implementation of the internal mission civilisatrice. After all, what does

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48 Renan, Qu’est-ce qu’une nation
49 Hayward, Fragmented France, 177.
it matter to actively contribute to the extinction of regional languages or peasant festivals if these things are inferior and without value? In the ending statements of Renan’s lecture, the use of coercion becomes legitimized because it is the right and duty of nations to demand these sacrifices for the purpose of maintaining cohesion. In fact, it is the ability of a nation to make these demands that legitimizes it as a nation.

**Liberté, Fraternité, Égalité, and Laïcité as Nation-maker?**

If Renan’s speech identifies the nation and the national community that the Republicans imagined, then the four commonly touted principles of *liberté, fraternité, égalité,* and *laïcité* provided the ideological framework that the Republicans used to transform the peoples of the Hexagon. Liberty for republicans implies rational self-determination through the exercise of individual autonomy.\(^{50}\) In other words, culture is not genetic or permanently defining in any way. Culture is not a constitutive attribute of the individual identity but a contingent one that is very easily subject to change.\(^{51}\) Humans are distinguished by their ability to rationally examine traditions and presumably reject or accept them based on their merits. This process of examination is viewed as something positive to be highly encouraged. After all, cultural attachments represent arbitrarily imposed conditions that are inherently limiting for two reasons. They have not been subjected to the process of rational examination and so to readily accept them as truth becomes equivalent to blind faith in superstitions. Furthermore, to engage in this process is to exercise one’s liberty or freedom to choose as an autonomous human being. It is an expression of independence.

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\(^{50}\) Laborde, “The Culture(s) of the Republic,” 718.

\(^{51}\) Ibid., 718.
As a result of its universalism, this model sees itself as the most humanitarian because it recognizes the common humanity, and therefore equality, of all humans. The French model is based on the undifferentiation of individuals. The state views and treats all individuals as citizens who have equal value regardless of their class, race, sex, religion, and so forth. After all, it is their ability to become French Republican citizens that is relevant and important. Taken together, the two aforementioned concepts result in a new formulation. All human beings have value as individuals who are capable of choosing through a process of rational examination. Of course, the implicit understanding in this process is that they come to recognize and inevitably choose the inherent “superiority” of Republicanism.

This system does not deny the individual the right to cultural attachments but these particularisms (implied as inferior) are to be relegated to the private sphere. And so the national community becomes a community composed of Republican “public similars” and “private others.” The concept of “public similars” leads to fraternity between all individuals who become part of the national community. Not only does it downplay their differences but seeks to put in its place a sense of civic duty and responsibility shared by all individuals. On a larger scale, it results in the formation of a cohesive nation by allowing (sometimes forcing) its citizens to leave behind their private interests for the common good.

In French society, the three previous principles would then be maintained by the fourth principle of laïcité. On the most basic level secularism refers to the separation of state and church. However, it also has a much more comprehensive meaning with deeper implications.

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52 Haut Conseil a l’Intégration, *Liens culturels et intégration* (Pairs: Documentation Française, 1995), 19
54 Laborde, “The Culture(s) of the Republic,” 719
55 Ibid.
The Republican community of “public similars” exists in the public sphere of French society. In this case, secularism also refers to public neutrality which is maintained for the sake of individual autonomy, equal respect, and civic solidarity.\(^5^6\) This neutrality applies to a number of things considered part of the private sphere, including religion, lifestyle, and cultural preferences. It is executed through a strict policy of separation between the public and the private. The state, as part of the public sphere, only recognizes and gives rights to the individual, not communities.\(^5^7\) This contract is partly maintained through the state, more or less, ignoring the private affiliations of its citizenry. At the same the state does not tolerate any intrusion of private particularities in the public sphere, material, symbolic, or perceived.

Through this neutrality, the state gives the individual the freedom of choice by neither privileging nor suppressing any kind of particularistic attachment (i.e. religious communities) outside of Republicanism. It guarantees equal access of all individuals to the public sphere by transforming it into a political space which is the “locus for the transcendence of particularisms of all kinds through citizenship.”\(^5^8\) This policy was intended to cement the bonds of Republican citizenship and brotherhood by de-emphasizing differences and avoiding perceived favoritism. Particularistic attachments become non-issues that are technically only subject to the personal preferences of individuals. By rejecting the recognition of communities based on class, race, or religion, it supposedly prevents the growth of fratricidal sentiments that can possibly tear apart French society.

\(^{5^6}\) Ibid., 720.  
Republican reform, regional identities, and the clergy

From 1879 onwards, the Republicans used their newfound political power and security to pass a series of laws that clearly demonstrated deliberate attempts to implement the aforementioned principles. Similar to their battles in the national political arena, the enactment of these policies became a battle that would span the next two decades. It would not be until well after the First World War that their goals were substantially realized. Depending on the region, the Republicans were met with resistant rural populations that were, at best, ignorant of the state, and at worst, hostile toward it. Republican efforts to homogenize the population took the form of legislation in the areas of church-state relations, education, transportation, and military conscription. Legislation in each of these areas played key roles in bringing the peripheral provinces within Paris’s reach. In discussing the efforts to bring about cultural transformations, changes in the areas of church-state relations and education are particularly relevant.

The Republicans prioritized reform in these two areas due to what they perceived as a set of related problems. According to the Republican perspective, there was a special relationship between the preservation of regional languages and the Church. The provinces where Flemish, Basque, Provencal, and Breton were spoken corresponded to regions with a high degree of religiosity. Regionalism, through linguistic distinctiveness, and religiosity were believed to have reinforced each other. If the Church used the local language in catechisms and sermons, it functioned as a method of keeping the language relevant and useful. At same time, it lessened the motivation for the peasants to learn to speak French. The symbolic value of catechisms and sermons in French, which in the Republican worldview belonged to the public sphere, would

59 Jacob, Hills of Conflict, 40.
have been a powerful sign of the new order. Similarly, the clergy also observed this relationship and well before the Third Republic, associated the destruction of local languages with the destruction of religion. The use of the local language provided the clergy with a unique avenue of access that integrated them into the community.

Furthermore, from the French Revolution onwards, the Church never quite escaped its association with monarchism. Even after 1877, clerico-monarchist conspiracies were an ever-present fear. Thus, even in the eyes of devout Republicans it was necessary to guard the fragile Republic from the clergy who could use local languages to cause an electoral backlash or military coup. Many times resistance to Republican reforms was blamed on clerically-inspired conservatism. In addition to the positions the clergy occupied as respectable figures, guides, or mentors in the community, the catechisms they delivered contained political instructions as well as basic theology.

The most outspoken proponents of retaining the local language in religious education were the archbishops and bishops. This argument did rest on a very real and practical claim. In some regions, their parishioners simply did not speak French at all or only had a minimal fluency. For example, Etienne Lamy, deputy from Brittany, declared that it was both insensitive and irrational to use French because speaking Breton was a necessity. After all, out of the roughly 2 million Breton-speaking French, only 743,000 were bilingual. Moreover, it was particularly difficult for young children who were accustomed to speaking their native language. As the archbishop of Cambrai pointed out, while classes were taught in French, the children

understood French as though it were a classical language. This archbishop compromised by stating it would be best to have children receive religious instruction in Flemish until they were old enough or their French was sophisticated enough to comprehend complex concepts.63

This issue is also complicated by the technical relationship between the Church and the state. The attempts to regulate and control the church began almost a century before the Republicans came to power. From 1801 to 1905, church-state relations in France were governed by the Concordat and its adjunct, the Organic Articles. The Concordat recognized that Catholicism was the religion of the majority of France’s citizenry and subsidized the church. The state paid a salary to about 42,000 secular clergy. While the Organic Articles were never approved by the Vatican, amongst other things they asked for was the right to approve clergy and a single catechism for all of France’s sixty seven dioceses. Ignoring this, each diocese continued to produce their own catechism with the language and the content determined by the bishop. Bishops often inserted political commentary in their diocesan catechism in opposition to the antireligious stance taken by the government and its apparatus.64

The fact that the secular clergy were government employees as well called into question their loyalty, not only as state employees but also as French citizens. Had the Catholic Church been an institution entirely located and bound to geographic borders of the Hexagon, it would have been a very different situation. The conflict between the state and the Church would have been an internal conflict. However, the clergy of the French dioceses were also representatives of the Holy See. Having this connection made their loyalties suspect because the clergy were not only perceived as disagreeing with Republican reforms but also having a direct extra-national

64 Ibid., 57.
loyalty. During periods of monarchial rule, particularly in the time of Ancien Régime, this extra-national loyalty was not seen as dangerous because the monarch himself held a similar loyalty and was in fact legitimized by the Church.

Therefore, the reasons for Gambetta’s exclamation *le cléricalisme, voila l’ennemi* can be firmly located in the fear of the clerical power in French education, particularly in primary schools. It is true that Republican fears of clerical-monarchist conspiracies were, ultimately, ill-founded. However, the problem in the Republican perspective, that there was a clear conflict of interest by the clergy, was understandable. The clergy, who were historical allies of the old regime and subjects of an extra-national authority, both resisted Republican legislation and had “secret” languages which they used with at least half the rural population.

Most troublingly, they held a considerable amount of control over the education system. Historically, the clergy played an important role in the education of young children. Until the Third Republic, primary school education was largely controlled by the Church. The Church’s position had been strengthened by the Falloux Law of 1850. The law had ended any chance of a government monopoly in primary education by allowing the formation of church schools subject only to minimal state control. It also ended the requirement that private school instructors have a certificate from the state in order to teach. Consequently, clerical education expanded so that by 1870 religious schools educated about 40% of the country’s youth and 1.5 out of 4 million children attending primary school attended those run by the Church.65

In light of these factors, the French Republican government responded by attempting to eradicate both local languages (implicitly connected to regional identity) and the power of the clergy. The Republicans saw advances in the achievement of one goal as aiding efforts in the

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other. In some regions, it was taken to such an extent that it was believed one could not be accomplished without the other. On the local level, the state efforts to control the clergy manifested in a variety of methods via civil authorities such as mayors, subprefects, and prefects. However, this also became problematic, as many local authorities did not want to implement government initiatives or compromised. The fear that taking action against resistant clergy would cost local officials elections or would elicit hostile reactions from the community was frequent. Other mayors realized the practical difficulties of the initiatives and sympathized with the clergy whom they believed were doing their best. So after January 1901, the national government put additional pressure on local authorities to use the time honored method of withholding salaries from noncompliant clergy. From time to time, mayors were expected to sign forms attesting that a particular clergyman conducted religious instructions in French. Then prefects informed the bishops which of their clergy did not follow directions. 66

On the national level, there were several policies that paralleled and underlined the development of these debates. On October 30, 1890, Minister of Cults Armand Fallieres issued a circulaire to the non-French-speaking departments that French had to be used in catechisms and sermons. Predictably, Provence, Brittany, Flanders, and the Basque Country were unhappy. Then, two additional initiatives were passed to reinforce the Fallieres circulaire. Prime Minister Rene Waldeck-Rousseau sent a circulaire January 26, 1901 and Emile Combes, as prime minister, in 1902 sent another. 67 Waldeck-Rousseau, in July 1901, also passed the Law on Association, which mandated that congregations had to be authorized by the parliament within three months or face dissolution. The bill also decreed that no member of an unauthorized

67 Ibid., 56.
religious congregation would be allowed to teach. 68 This was the culmination of many attempts in the previous decades to bring the Catholicism under state control as an administrative organ. His successor, Combes, used the bill to attack the Catholic Church and its apparatus without moderation. Only a few religious orders received authorization for their missionary work. By October 1903 more than 10,000 schools run by unauthorized religious orders were closed. A year later, the Parliament passed a law that prohibited any member of a religious order, authorized or not, to teach. 69

The realpolitik of these early years of the 20th century was further complicated by the Dreyfus Affair, which directly contributed to the success of the Law on Associations. 70 The Dreyfus Affair (1894-1906) concerned the trial, conviction, and punishment of Alfred Dreyfus, a French Jewish army officer, who was accused of selling military secrets to the German government. The Catholic Church had overwhelmingly supported the conviction of Dreyfus and so became subject to charges of anti-Semitism. As a result, the Church lost the support of moderate Republicans who then joined forces with the highly anti-clerical Radical Republicans, resulting in a radicalization of the republican government. 71 When the evidence ultimately vindicated Dreyfus, it further legitimized the position of the Radical Republicans and damaged the credibility of the Church. The affair provided more than enough evidence and ammunition for the Republicans to present a convincing argument that the Church had threatened the

69 Ibid., 7.
70 Ibid., 5.
71 Coffey, “Of Catechisms and Sermons,” 58.
existence of the Republic and needed to be subject to government authority and discipline.\footnote{Ford, “Religion and the Politics of Cultural Change in Provincial France,” 5.} This line of reasoning became one of the immediate bases for the Law on Associations.

These developments eventually led to the complete breakdown of ties with the formal separation of the church and state in 1905, the Separation Law was also carried to success partly by Emile Combes. As a result of Combes’ ardent anticlericalism and intransigency, tensions had already been mounting. In addition to his other actions, he suspended the salary of four times as many clergy as his predecessor. He was also unafraid to use the threat of a formal separation as a weapon. However, the actual event that precipitated the break was the visit of President Loubet to the King of Italy who was accused of usurping Rome, the Church’s capital. Combes responded to what he perceived as interference in France’s foreign policy by withdrawing the French ambassador to the Vatican and placing separation on the agenda. The tensions were also exacerbated by more also power politics between Combes and Pius X.\footnote{Pius X was pope when Emile Combes was prime minister.} Pius X refused the nomination of two bishops who sought Combes’ protection and tried to force their resignation.\footnote{Keylor, “Review: Anti-Clericalism and Education Reform in the Third Republic,” 100.}

In the realm of education reform, the public school system was the vehicle through which Republicans sought to implant their values into the younger generation. In legislation, this was reflected by the enactment of the Ferry Laws, which established free primary school education in 1881 and made it mandatory for those aged 6 to 13. The state sought to replace the clergy with Republican teachers who acted as \textit{missionnaires laïques} in the instruction of young children, especially in rural areas. Civic education was intended to replace the Catholic catechism as the basis of moral instruction in primary schools.\footnote{Hayward, \textit{Fragmented France}, 207.} This change became the practical realization of the principles of collective forgetting and achieving a common culture as proposed by Renan.
The official process of breaking the powers of regionalism and Catholicism was accomplished through the teaching of the new common values of liberty, equality, brotherhood, and secularism.

Once again, it is important to note that this experience was another affirmation of the Republican view that the propagation of certain political/cultural values was linked to political survival. After all, the failure of the Second Republic and the initial success of the Second Empire, in 1848, were partly blamed on the Church and the clergy, who were perceived as having contributed to the downfall of the democratic and social republic. Therefore, once having achieved power, the Republicans sought ensure the Church could not threaten them through the indoctrination of future generations.

Rather briefly, Republican reforms during this era were also supported by developments in transportation and military conscription. Paris’s cultural and political incursion into the countryside was supported by the expansion and the amelioration of roads. By the 1870s, there was a pre-existing road system but it was designed to serve the capital and urban areas. They were administrative highways for troops to travel and taxes to flow into the state treasury. There was little coordination between the main roads, local roads, and areas where people actually lived. The physical disconnection between the center and peripheral provinces contributed to the persistence of local cultures late into the nineteenth century. The difficulties involved in simply leaving the village effectively “imprisoned” rural communities in isolation and limited their ability to participate in the economy and politics of France. The Third Republic government responded by emphasizing the improvement of local roads described as vicinal. These roads

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were pertinent for giving the inhabitants of rural areas access to local markets or railway
stations.\textsuperscript{77}

Though systematic conscription existed in France since 1798, the Republic transformed
the military into a unifying agent of the French peoples. As a predominantly agrarian society,
there was traditionally a fair amount of resistance to mandatory military service. After all, the
loss of a son to the military meant the loss of a laborer that would have otherwise contributed to
the productivity of the farm. There was also a certain cultural aversion to soldiers as individuals
who returned changed by the world outside their closely knit and isolated rural community of
origin.

Nonetheless, from 1873 onwards, the state ended legislation that made it possible for
young men to avoid military service such as substitutions or class exemptions.\textsuperscript{78} The military
functioned as a kind of school where, in many cases, peasants had no choice but to abide by the
cultural policies of Paris. For example, provincial peoples were sometimes forced to speak
French as the only means of communication amongst soldiers themselves or between the soldiers
and the commanding officers. Military service became increasingly palatable as the term of
service was shortened. It also became viewed as a method of social, economic, and political
advancement. The general standards of diet, lodging, dress, and wellbeing for soldiers was above
that of the rural working class.\textsuperscript{79}

\textsuperscript{78} Young men or their families paid other individuals to fulfill their term of military service for them.
L’Intégration à la Française

The bi-centenary celebrations of 1989 may have emphasized the sentiment that “the Republic was no longer a regulative ideal of significance in French politics.” Nonetheless, there are many areas of French public life where republicanism is still alive and well. The 1993 report by the High Committee on Integration, titled “L’Intégration à la Française,” is both an explicit declaration of the continued relevance of the Republican doctrine and in particular, to the question of immigrant/minority assimilation. Questions over integration are not unique to France alone, as many of the Western states with substantial immigrant and/or minority populations are having similar debates. However, the report evoked the idea that uniqueness of French history and culture plays an important role in this debate. According to the authors, the French model of integration which is “based on a principle of equality, contrasts with the ‘logic of minorities’ that confers a special status on national or ethnic minorities.” It affirms the heritage of the Revolution by emphasizing that “the profound calling of our country, which, inspired, by the principles, of the Declaration of the Rights of Man, asserts the equality of men across the diversity of their cultures.”

Thus, if we look at the acculturation policies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as immigration policies, then the French model of integration (however coercive) has been a success. After World War One, immigration continued in the form of arrivals from Southern and Eastern Europe as well as a much smaller population from the colonies. However, in comparison to today, their numbers were small. Moreover, during an era when French status as a global colonial power was still relatively intact, the pressure to assimilate in the metropole

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82 “L’Intégration à la Française,” High Committee on Integration(1993), quoted in Kastoryano, Negotiating Identities, 40.
was greater. So, the French Republican model of integration was more easily executed and remained, more or less, unchallenged. In other words, until the 1980s, this system has worked, so why fix what is not broken?

This sentiment reflects some of the factors that have been exacerbating the tensions in the integration of France’s substantial Muslim population. The current population of immigrants composes close to ten percent of the total French population. Moreover, the Muslims also form distinct communities whose coherence is often based on socio-economic immobility. The post World War One and World War Two eras of relatively painless integration are long gone. Though it is proposed with caution, the treatment of Muslims today closely resembles the process of assimilation experienced by the regional peoples of the Hexagon a century ago.\(^{83}\) As was demonstrated, what happened in the late nineteenth century was a long and conflict-ridden process. Today, the assumption that immigrants would automatically abandon their cultural traditions for French civic culture is being challenged by an increasing number of immigrants and some members of the European Union who are more tolerant of cultural pluralism.\(^{84}\) So, once again Republican France and “cultural-religious communities are…engaged in intense competition for the loyalty and allegiance of those living within the same geographical space.”\(^{85}\)

Within recent years, this competition was reflected in the so-called veil affairs and social relevance of the \textit{banlieues}.

The numeric and demographic breakdown of Muslims in France along is crucial to understanding the events that have brought them to the attention of the public eye. First, of all

\(^{83}\) Despite the parallels that can be drawn, it is proposed with caution because no two historical situations are exactly the same and each must be understood, first, within its own context.


the Europeans states, France has the highest population of Muslims. Due to French law which forbids distinguishing citizens or residents by faith, there is no official data regarding the exact number of the Muslim population. However, studies from the mid to late 1990s estimated there were 3.5-5 million Muslims in France which would mean that Muslims composed about 5-10% of the total French population.\textsuperscript{86} While Muslims are scattered all over France, the largest communities are found in Ile-de-France (35 percent), Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur (20 percent), Rhône-Alpes (15 percent), and the Nord-Pas-de-Calais (10 percent).\textsuperscript{87} In the decade that has since passed, it is only reasonable to assume that the Muslim population has increased due.

Many of the Muslim immigrants and minorities are from the former French colonies in North and West Africa. This population is supplemented by the Muslim populations from the Balkans, Turkey, and the Indian subcontinent.\textsuperscript{88} Initially, large numbers of immigrants arrived in France as workers during the \textit{trente glorieuses}.\textsuperscript{89} Housing policies by the French government during this period resulted in the current concentration of Muslims in the \textit{banlieues} around major French cities. In the 1960s, families of all national backgrounds were given the opportunity to move from shantytowns into low-incoming housing projects called \textit{Habitation à Loyer Modéré} (HLM) in the suburbs. In the times the HLMs were built, they were modern and an undeniable improvement in quality of life for many working-class families who left their homes in the cities. The HLMs were intended to be government provided stepping stones towards a better quality of life and towards assimilation.

In the 1970s, two important developments resulted in profound changes in the labor market. Economic depression led to high unemployment rates and consequently presented a

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{89} The \textit{trente glorieuses} refer to the three decade-long period of prosperity and growth after World War Two.
situation in which immigrants and minorities were perceived as unwelcomed competition. The competition was exacerbated by the arrival to the labor market of the children born after World War Two who came of age during this period. By the end of the 1970s, the HLMs were still inhabited by immigrants along with \textit{les Francais de souche} (native-born French people). However, \textit{les Francais de souche} slowly began to abandon the housing projects. In part, the white flight was a product of the belief the HLMs were stepping stones on the road to upward social mobility. It was also due to the fact that whites did not wish to live alongside immigrant families. These factors contributed to the creation of the banlieues as a primarily immigrant and minority cultural space.

Thus, the immigrants who arrived in France at a time of economic depression began to live in the HLMs when they were no longer considered a sign of progress and upward mobility. Rather, the \textit{banlieues} became a trap for working-class immigrant families that did not have the financial means to leave.\footnote{Jocelyne Cesari, “Ethnicity, Islam, and les banlieues: Confusing the Issues,” \textit{Social Science Research Council}, http://riotsfrance.ssrc.org/Cesari/.} At the same time, the \textit{banlieues} began to develop an increasingly negative image as a culturally separate sphere marked by poor socio-economic conditions and high crime rates. The \textit{banlieues} came to be perceived as unreachable places or the so-called \textit{territoires perdus de la République}, with the implication that Republican doctrine and law had to be re-implemented.\footnote{Emmanuel Brenner, \textit{Les territoires perdus de la République} (Paris : Mille et une Une Nuits, 2002).}

Finally, any debate over immigrant/minority assimilation cannot be complete without explaining the significance of \textit{communautarisme} and \textit{laïcité}. While claims of its uniqueness as very specific features of French society may be exaggerated, this term is nonetheless difficult to translate into English. The term \textit{communautarisme} is translated by Joan Wallach Scott, a pioneer
of gender studies, as communalism. The term refers to an individual giving priority to a group or particularistic identity before the national identity.\(^92\) According to this theory, an individual either belongs to a group (i.e. religious, cultural, and/or ethnic) or to the nation. There is no space for the recognition of hyphenated or group identities in the public sphere. The United States and, to a lesser extent, the United Kingdom are seen as primes examples of communalism. The multiculturalism of the so-called Anglo-Saxon model is perceived as being unable to provide individuals with equality due to ethnic conflict and group identity politics.\(^93\) Individuals can only received equality in the public sphere by acting as an abstract individual and relegating other identities, assumed to be secondary, wholly to the private sphere (i.e. home, family, and/or friends).\(^94\)

As a brief definition of laïcité has already been provided, this section concerns the place of this concept in French society today. Benedict Anderson points out all nations are “inherently” laïque. Out of all the Western states, this particular understanding of the nation is the most evident in France. In the French Republican nationalist historical narrative, from the Revolution onwards, the Republicans battled the forces of Catholicism in order to create the French nation. So, it is especially important to understand that the French nation is perceived an expression of having emerged victorious from that battle and consequently having attained freedom from the Church. The French nation-state is laïque because it exists despite the Church. “French laïcité is inseparable from the construction of the republican state from the Revolution on.”\(^95\)

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\(^92\) According to this line of reasoning, it is assumed that the national identity is the most important and should take precedence.
\(^93\) For example, American affirmative action policies are seen as unfairly giving opportunity to individuals based on their race rather than merit.
commitment is written into the constitution of the Fifth Republic “France shall be an indivisible, secular, democratic, and social Republic.”

In the discussion regarding Muslim immigrant/minorities, the legacy of this struggle (real or imagined) is too often ignored. The Stasi Commission, which was assembled to study the question of the laïcité in the Republic in 2003, very clearly emphasized this sentiment.

“La laïcité est constitutive de notre histoire collective…Elle se réfère à la Grèce antique, la Renaissance et la Réforme, l’Edit de Nantes, les Lumières, chacune de ces étapes développant à sa manière l’autonomie de la personne et la liberté de la pensée… La Révolution marque l’acte de naissance de la laïcité dans son acception contemporaine. L’autonomie de la conscience, y compris sur le plan spirituel et religieux, est affirmée…[Au XIXème siècle] les Républicains entendent soustraire la société à la tutelle de l’Eglise catholique et à son emprise sur les consciences.”

The report clearly affirmed the role and the importance of laïcité in the Republic, past and present. Moreover, it also portrays French society as having been evolving, for centuries, toward laïcité. According to this perspective, for the French government to deny laïcité, in any form, is not only to deny this evolution but the forward flow of history itself.

To briefly address a point by Scott, that despite the image of a conflict between two indomitable and uncompromising forces, there was also a history of accommodation between the state and the Catholic Church. For example, even after the 1905 law, children were not expected to attend class on Sundays and given another day off so that they could receive religious instruction. So if the Republican state was able to achieve compromise with the

96 French Constitution of 4 October 1958, Preamble, art. 1.
98 Scott, Politics of the Veil, 98.
Catholics, why not the Muslims? The attempts to answer this question have, once again, paid too little attention to French history. The Republican compromise with the Catholics was not necessarily made by choice. Despite the best state efforts, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Catholics were still an overwhelming majority and organized Catholicism a powerful force. The political expediency demonstrated by the Republicans in the 1870s extended to other areas of their policies. Today, the Muslims are confronted with a state which subscribes to laïcité as one of its foundational ideologies and perceives religion to be inherently hostile to its existence. In terms of realpolitik, unlike the case of the Catholics, the state does not have to compromise with the Muslims.99

La laïcité face à l’islam100

The so-called veil affair was an ongoing debate throughout from the late 1980s onwards. However, there are three notable moments when the debate very visibly shifted into the national arena: 1989, 1994, and 2003. The first so-called veil affair began almost two decades ago in 1989 in the industrial town of Creil, north of Paris, when three girls of North African origin wore veils to the local state school. We should take note of the fact that this school was located in what the French government refers to as a “priority educational zone” (ZEP). A ZEP is usually an ethnically mixed poor neighborhood with a high turnover rate amongst the local teaching staff.101

The incident occurred very closely after the commission studying France’s citizenship codes published “Être Français aujourd’hui et demain” (Being French today and tomorrow). Whether the incidents were related or not, the timing of the events certainly exacerbated tensions by helping launch the actions of the girls into a national debate regarding citizenship and national

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99 For the most part, the Muslims are an economically disadvantaged minority group.
101 Scott, Politics of the Veil, 22.
identity. The negative public response generally fell into two categories; fears over the compatibility and assimilability of Muslims and/or fears over the weakening of Republican institutions and culture. This was also seen in the sudden increase of academic and popular literature on “the French model” of assimilation.¹⁰²

The Prime Minister chose to resolve the issue by handing the case over to the State Council, France’s highest administrative court. In 1989, the Council sought to “articulate the international and national rules protecting the freedom of conscience on the one hand, and the constitutional principle of laïcité of the state on the other.” At this point, the preservation and enforcement of laïcité had not taken precedence. The Council still expressed relatively equal interest in maintaining civil liberties. It was decided that religious symbols should not be prohibited unless they were “ostentatoires” (ostentatious) or “revendicatifs” (expressing a demand). In other words, religious symbols were legally permitted unless they were extremely flamboyant or were used as a form of proselytization. Furthermore, all future cases would be dealt with on a case-by-case basis by a judge.¹⁰³

Even though throughout the 1990s Muslims girls challenged the state over the wearing of the veil, public debate and interest faded. It was in 1994 when the debates surrounding the veil reentered the public arena after girls were expelled for wearing headscarves to a public state school. The Minister of Education in 1994, Francois Bayou, decreed on September 20, 1994 that all ostentatious signs of religious affiliation would be prohibited in schools without taking into the behavior of the students (for the purpose of ascertaining whether they were acts of

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¹⁰² Kastoryano, “France’s Veil Affair: National institutions and transnational identities,” 64.
¹⁰³ Ibid.
proselytizing). The State Council rejected Bayou’s decision and reinforced its 1989 decision that any veil affairs should be handled on a local basis with teachers having the power to decide.

During Jacques Chirac’s second term, he appointed a commission to study the issue. In the summer of 2003, this debate came into the spotlight again when two daughters of an atheist Jewish father came to school wearing scarves (presumably on their heads) and refused to take them off. In the same year, Nicolas Sarkozy, then minister of the interior, called attention to issue by insisting that Muslim women should take their official identification photos bare-headed. The commission, chaired by Christian-Democratic politician Bernard Stasi, suggested that wearing conspicuous religious symbols should be banned in schools. So in March 2004 (with enforcement beginning the following October), the suggestion became law.

To understand how deeply the so-called *affaires du foulard* is steeped in Republican historical experience and rhetoric, it is necessary to examine certain realities. First, we should take note of the progression in the terminology used in reference to the head-covering. The hijab, also referred to as foulard in French, is a headscarf that covers the hair, neck, and ears. Other forms of this covering worn by Muslim women include the “headscarf-lite,” which only covers the hair. However, the press, more often than not, referred to the hijab as the veil or *voile*.

Second, as Scott points out that the statistics do not correspond to the attention being paid to this debate. Just before the 2004 law was passed in France, even though 51 percent of the women polled declared they were practicing Muslims, only 14 percent wore the hijab. It is a sizeable minority but nonetheless, a clear minority.104

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Taking into account these two factors leads us to several questions. Why are the words *voile* and *foulard* used interchangeably? What the word *voile* describes is closer to the *niqab* which covers the woman’s entire face except her eyes. The *foulard* is much less conspicuous than the *niqab* and nowhere approaches the severity of a burqa, chador, or paranji (all are full body coverings). In the cases of problems with Muslim women wearing a heard-covering, only the foulard was worn. Why use a word that creates an image of something more severe than what really exist to refer to a small population of women who are clear minorities within their communities? After all, Scott rather sarcastically remarks it “is hard to imagine that a few schoolgirls wearing headscarves could bring down the nation or even produce fractures at its foundations…It was as if the headscarf were the flag of an alien nation whose forces were intent on compromising national integrity. These forces sought, it was imagined to corrupt the minds of the minds of the young and vulnerable (represented most poignantly by schoolgirls)…”

Scott may have written these words as a critique of the French government but they very precisely depict the current situation. Today, the fear of any threat Muslims might pose to France is much more ill-founded than concerns over clerical power or regionalism a century. However, similar to the fears of clerico-monarchist conspiracies or clerically-inspired peasant rebellions during the late nineteenth century, the image can be as important as the reality. Thus, whether or not, Muslims in France are a true threat to national integrity is irrelevant. The French state believes they are and so will act according. The interchangeability of *foulard* and *voile* helps to create the image of something much more menacing which in turn serves to justify certain attitudes and actions by the government.

105 Ibid., 116.
Why the headscarf? “What is it about the headscarf that makes it the focus of controversy, the sign of something intolerable?” First and foremost, it is a visual symbol. It can be seen and so it is innately conspicuous. Thus, the first problem concerns what the presence of this visual symbol means in the context of laïcité, which rests on the commitment to the separation between the public and private spheres. This leads to another question, what is the most important place in the Republican public sphere? Since the beginning of the Third Republic, it has been the school. After all, it is the place where Republicans are “born” through learning which awakens the individual to rational self-determination and imbues him/her with certain civic values. Therefore, what is relevant is not that a few schoolgirls wearing headscarves to school will bring down the whole system. Rather, the act of wearing of a headscarf is a physical trespass of the line between the public and the private. Moreover, by the committing this act in the school, the girls had trespassed in the most sacred space in the public sphere.

What symbolic meanings does the headscarf hold? Regardless of how true it actually is, the headscarf is primarily perceived to be a symbol of having allegiance to a force other than the Republic, most notably Islam. What is Islam? Islam, like Catholicism, is a religion. What meaning does religion have in the Republican historical experience? Religion is perceived to be an inherently oppositional entity. If all these factors are taken together, what conclusion can be reached? The act of wearing a headscarf to a public school represents of the violation of the most sacred space in the Republican state by a hostile entity.

The relationship between the foulard and Republican ideology is further complicated because this discussion is also gendered. The 1789 Declaration of Man and Citizen was primarily concerned with, quite literally, the rights of the male population. However, in the two centuries

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106 Ibid., 3.
that has passed Republican ideology has adapted to changes in French social mores regarding
gender relations. At least in theory and rhetoric, the principles of laïcité, fraternité, égalité, and
liberté and all the implied rights and responsibilities apply to women as well as men. Therefore,
one possible cause for the scandal over the so-called affaires du foulard was, simply, that as
citizens of the French Republic, the girls were expected to uphold certain values regardless of
their gender.

Sympathy and understanding for the inability of these girls to fulfill their responsibilities
came in the form of the anti-veil legislation. If the girls could not act as abstract individuals in
the public sphere, then it could not have been purely their fault? Surely, it is the workings of
some sinister force trying to prevent these girls from acting in accordance with Republican
values. It is at this point that it is essential to understand that French universalism has become
gendered. The anti-veil laws are perceived as “liberating” women from the patriarchal
oppression of Islam so that they could act as French citizens. “Women have lived too long with
the clothes and standards decided for them by men: [this removal of the veil] is a victory.”

According to this logic, French Republicanism is functioning as it should; it recognizes
the inherent equality of the girls as human beings. Therefore, the government creates the
conditions necessary for them to exercise their rational self-determination, in this case, regarding
the wearing the headscarf. If women who fear reprisals from particularistic elements (i.e. imams)
in their communities, then they can refer to the law and say “We wanted to wear the veil to
school but it is illegal.” Moreover, it really becomes a null point whether the headscarf was
forced on the girls or not if the government cannot see beyond the above scenario. After all, the

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universalizing and messianic impulses of Republicanism assume that all human beings wish subscribe to its tenets.

Rather briefly, a discussion of the *banlieues* is useful for further elucidating the debate in this subject. A frequent comparison is made between American ghettos and the French *banlieues*. While this comparison is very valid, an important difference should be noted. In the American or Anglo-Saxon multicultural tradition, the ghettos exist as a primarily socio-economically problematic space where poverty and high crime rates exist. However, in Republican France the *banlieues* represent a greater problem. In a country obsessed with cultural homogeneity, the failure of economic integration has contributed to a failure of cultural integration. A comparison can be made between the provinces in the nineteenth century and the *banlieues* today. Despite their vicinity to the cities, like the provinces, they are geographic spaces that are increasingly outside the political and cultural reach of Paris.

Riva Kastoryano uses the term “social void” to label the sentiments of the young people who live in the *banlieues* today. In communes such as Val-Fourré and Mantes-la-Jolie foreigners or children of foreign-born parents constitute roughly 50% of the population. Unemployment can reach as high as 20%-30% and mainly affects young people, in particular Maghrebian youth. Life in these zones is marked by unemployment, poverty, dependence on the state, and violence. Moreover, the destructive cycle continues and reinforces itself as the new generation is unable to move beyond the obstacles faced by their parents. The residents of these areas form a category known as the “excluded.” They are perceived as being equally excluded from social and economic upward mobility as well as mainstream French Republican culture. The seeming permanence of the *banlieues* and the situation of its residents are considered one of the primary
causes of non-integration. As Riva Kastoryano quite succinctly puts it their “spatial immobility reflects their social immobility.”

“Mon Pays”

Je n'connais pas ce soleil
Qui brule les dunes sans fin
Je n'connais pas d'autre terre
Quelle celle qui m'a tendu la main
Et si un jour, je pars d'ici
Que je traverse le désert
Pour aller voir d'où vient ma vie
Dans quelles rues jouait mon père
Moi qui suis né près de Paris
Sous tout ce vent, toute cette pluie
Je n'oublierai jamais mon pays

The song titled “Mon Pays” was a hit single from Mundial Corrida, the 2006 album by Faudel, a French artist of Algerian descent. “Mon Pays,” like most of his songs, reflect a variety of influences from French pop to flamenco, but what also becomes very clear is the undeniable evidence of Algerian rai. Faudel’s musical career had begun with Algerian rai which he learned from his grandmother, a traditional Oran musician. Today, Faudel follows in the footstep of famous rai musicians like Cheb Mami and is sometimes referred to as the “little Prince of Rai.”

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In this context, the opening lyrics of “Mon Pays” seem to reveal a terrible irony. For an artist whose career and fame is built on Algerian style of music, he seems overly eager to declare his allegiance to France. Faudel acknowledges that his father is of foreign origin and that he would visit the streets where his father had grown up. However, Faudel also states very strongly he was born in France and had grown up in France. Faudel, the little prince of Algerian rai, is unmistakably French and proud of it.

At the same time, this declaration is more than a desperate pledge of allegiance to a seemingly anti-immigrant French state. Faudel is also claiming the validity of his understanding and expression of what it means to be French. He was born in Mantes-la-Jolie, an ethnically mixed and poor suburb of Paris, one of the territoires perdus da la Republique. However, Faudel, by claiming France as his pays, declares these spaces are not lost or foreign but as French as the cinquième arrondissement in the center of Paris. By maintaining his status as a star artist in the worlds of Algerian rai and French pop, Faudel demonstrates that there is no inherent contradiction between the two identities. France is his home and Algerian rai can be French as well.

Of course, Faudel’s multiculturalism is nothing new in the Hexagon. Once upon a time, Breton, Occitan, Provencal, and Basque were commonly spoken alongside French. Or during the transitional years, the language policies of the Third Republic had created a generation of Republicans who were bilingual by necessity. As Michael Walzer writes, “far more than any country…France has been a society of immigrants. And yet it isn’t a pluralistic society- or at least it doesn’t think of itself, and it isn’t thought of, as a pluralistic society.” Whether through planning, politicking, manipulation, or coercion it is clear that the implementation of the

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Republican doctrine had caused the transformation into a relatively mono-cultural society. Like a Pac-man eating dots and ghosts, the Republicans had subsumed the plethora of local identities and cultures that existed in Hexagon before.

The current model of assimilation proposed for the immigrant and minority populations is outlined according to the Republican doctrine used a little over a century ago. The historical difficulties in the Republican rise to power left a legacy of cultural and political assimilation that is uniquely comprehensive and aggressive in comparison to other Western states. If the clerics and other representatives of organized Catholicism were the menacing ghosts a century ago, then surely all the emblems of Islam today must be as well. Consequently, if 19th century Republican Pac-man won by the eating the ghosts of the clerics and provincials, then why not do same thing to the Muslims today?

It is not a question of realpolitik but of ethics. Whether it is fair or not, Muslim immigrants and minorities have been cast into the role of the provincial Catholic peasantry of a century ago. However, times and circumstances have changed drastically along with the status of the Republicans. “It is one thing for the heirs of the Enlightenment to fight it out with the Catholics; it is quite another for a cultural majority to single out a minority, and what’s more, an economically disadvantaged one.”

A century ago, the Republicans were a cultural/political minority who fought an uphill battle against their own supposed citizenry. Today, Republicanism is the primary paradigm by which French society defines itself and derives its identity. The French are Republicans and the Republicans are the overwhelming majority.

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The incorporation of Muslim immigrants and minorities may be Republican France’s nation-building challenge of the twenty-first century. However, the Republican government is no longer Pac-man. Muslims immigrants and minorities are not menacing ghosts with the ability to threaten its continued survival. The Pac-man approach of eradicating all other entities besides itself is no longer viable or ethical. To prevent the ossification of the Republican doctrine as a relic of a by-gone age, it is time for a twentieth-first century reinterpretation.

If liberté, égalité, fraternité, and laïcité were intended to facilitate and preserve the equality of individuals, then it should do so for Muslims as well as the Français de souche. Even more so, if laïcité is truly a cornerstone of the Republic, then the French government must resolved the contradiction of denouncing so-called Muslim communautarisme in order to conceal its own communautarisme. Laïcité must also be observed for the Republican doctrine. Rather than using Republicanism to impose a mono-cultural vision of what it means to be French today, its potential to help create a society where all the peoples of France are represented should be recognized. As Faudel sums up quite clearly “Je n’oublierai jamais mon pays.” Because for the Muslim immigrants and minorities, France is their pays as well.

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