



OXFORD JOURNALS
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Source: *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 68, No. 3, Muslim Integration in the United States and France (Fall, 2007), pp. 289-304

Published by: [Oxford University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20453165>

Accessed: 04/11/2013 10:15

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France Upside Down over a Headscarf?*

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This article addresses the controversial banning of the headscarf (hijab) worn by Muslim girls in French schools. Before looking at the controversy itself, this study tackles theoretical questions regarding the assertion and recognition of specific identities in the public space, the neutral role that schools are supposed to assume, and the perceptions of Muslim women by themselves and by others. These issues are then situated within the specific socio-historical context of France to underscore the unique circumstances surrounding the banning of the headscarf. The article concludes by suggesting that, although the law banning the headscarf was passed for petty political reasons, an unintended benefit may result: French Muslims who do not want to impose the headscarf on their daughters may now be able to refer to the law to deflect criticisms of those in their communities and neighbourhoods who feel they are being unfaithful to religious practices.

There is no doubt that for an outsider, particularly a Muslim outsider, the recent law banning the headscarves (*hijab*) worn by Muslim girls in public schools in France is stunning. Who would have thought a piece of cloth could threaten the stability of the French state? How can the land of Human Rights be so intolerant? Why did it act so hastily? Currently, to find a spot in the marketplace of ideas, it pays to develop binary visions rather than to aim at complexity; and yet, offering a complex view of the situation is what this article intends to do.

Before looking specifically at the controversy surrounding the headscarf, this article will address three theoretical issues. The first relates to the declaration and recognition of specific identities in the public space, the second to the neutral role that schools are supposed to assume, and the third to the perceptions of Muslim women by themselves and by others (part 1). The second part of the article clarifies the specific context of France, specifically its sacralization of secularization; the difficult recognition of ethnic and religious differences; and the failures of the Republican model of social integration, all of which shed light on the acute tensions between Islamic demands for recognition and the Republic's emphasis on French nationalism (part 2). The final section of the article details

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the circumstances and reasons for the law banning the headscarf and concludes that although the law banning the headscarf was passed for petty political reasons, some French Muslims may benefit because they will be able to refer to the law to deflect criticisms from the community regarding their daughters' decisions not to wear the headscarf (part 3).

PART I: THEORETICAL ISSUES

Problematizing the Differentialist Approach to Identity

Cultures can be defined as systems of meanings and customs that are blurred at the edges (Nanton 1989:557). Banton (1970:66) suggests that "as individuals come to terms with changing circumstances, so they change their ways and shared meanings change with them." This perception could apply to Muslim girls born and socialized in France and opting to mark their religious identity conspicuously. The more immigrants and their children become legally part of a nation, the more some of them may be tempted to establish a distance with accepted conventions and norms. In Canada, Australia, and the United States, the ethnicization of minorities and claims for the recognition of differences have been interpreted by some as a legitimate reaction to the ethnicization of majorities, which prevailed for such a long time, and to the democratic corrosion of long-term commitments (Balibar and Wallerstein 1988; Sennett 1998). These countries have taken political and judicial measures to redress harms suffered by minorities. Recognition granted to differences of race, ethnicity, gender, and age has been founded on "a presumption of equal respect for cultural diversity," according to Charles Taylor's formulation (1994:39). In the U.S., for instance, ethno-racial lobbies since the 1950s have become tools for activist minorities willing to exert pressures on a system receptive to these types of demands.

This is not the case in France where the political system ignores ethnic and racial demands—for example, in rejecting the notion of a "Corsican people." In the U.S., the presence of minority middle classes fostered more tolerance for differences in the mainstream culture. Again, this is not the case in France where, for instance, there are few Members of Parliament of post-colonial origin and where the political representation of women in Parliament remains weak due to the unwillingness of political parties to open their ranks, despite the requirements of the law. However, the "differentialist" approach has its own problems which relate to the issue under discussion here, the ban on Muslim girls wearing *hijabs* in the public schools in France.

The major problem with the differentialist approach concerns the reification and essentialization of identities. According to the French saying, "Roses are not peonies but each rose is unique." Muslim girls with headscarves have more identities than this single, visible characterization. They have different motivations for their choice of visible difference. In a survey of one hundred girls wearing

hijabs, Gaspard and Khosrokhavar (1995) distinguished those who wear one because it is traditional (viz., their mother, grand-mother always did); those who want to avoid a conflict with their families who expect daughters to defend their honor and their virginity; those who use it not to be bothered by males in their neighborhood; and those who are more militant and use the *hijab* like a flag of revolt. Although this typology may be useful, it is not entirely convincing because it does not take time and place into account. Some girls may wear a *hijab* for a while and take it off, or the reverse. Some wear it when they leave their neighborhood, then put it in their bag.

Thus, as Anthony Appiah and Amy Gutmann observe, individuals cannot be categorized by one single reference. "Those who see a space of conflicts between the freedom of individuals and identity politics are right and what goes for one should not go for the other" (Appiah and Gutmann 1996:96). Thus the category "Muslim girls" needs to be deconstructed, something the political class, committed intellectuals, and the media did not do. "Why is there so much contemporary talk of identity, of large categories—race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality—that seem so far from the individual?" (Appiah and Gutmann 1996:93). The concept of authenticity is central here and the multiple belongings of each individual and of each community are not explored enough in the debates. It is more tempting to essentialize these girls than to examine their cases one by one.

Suart Hall rightly advocates fluid identity politics, recognizing the "fact that we are all made of multiple social identities and not of a single one. We are formed out of diverse categories and diverse conflicts the goal of which is to locate us socially according to multiple positions of exclusion and subordination which do not operate in us in the same manner" (Hall 1991:48). But such virtue cannot be expected from politicians. I would add that the differentialist approach too frequently ignores that individuals' identities are constructed out of a distance from, or even an opposition to, the community of belonging. Moreover, no identity, whether individual or collective, coincides with itself. We are always alien to ourselves and to others, as Julia Kristeva (1988) has argued. Complexity is required here.

Schools Helping to Construct Neutrality

The second theoretical point relates to the role of public schools in terms of national identity construction or, to put it in Balibar's words (2004:21-22), "to the relationship of neutrality emanating from the state and from the school." Some people argue that secularization means that public schools are neutral towards various expressions of religious beliefs and others that religious beliefs should not be tolerated inside school institutions. According to Balibar, they are both right. School is a space of transition between the public and the private spheres, but it is located in the public sphere. It thus needs to negotiate this contradiction.

On the one hand, schools have to facilitate individuals' identification with the universalistic values of the "political sphere" and social citizenship. To do so they have to detach individuals from their primary identities, which is a violent process. Only then will individuals be able to reclaim their former identities, Balibar says, but with the "distance" brought by the "political" identity they have acquired with education. On the other hand, the schools' mission is also to help individuals find the means to express their own ideologies politically. These two goals are clearly in conflict. "The public schools are not required to be as neutral as the state is supposed to be but to *operate a neutralization* or to bring a *surplus of neutrality* between two *non neutral* spaces, the public and the private ones, in order to establish a boundary between the two" (Balibar 2004:20). Ideally, the schools of the *République* should transmit knowledge, enabling students to become future autonomous citizens (in their minds and their bodies) with the capacity to live together and share common principles within a larger political body.¹

This is why neutrality is so important. However, compromises did occur. For instance, the French public schools have had to compromise this neutrality with the Roman Catholic Church as the dominant religion in France, not only in accepting religious holidays but in suspending school on Sundays and on Wednesdays to allow religious classes to take place. In Alsace and Moselle, a special regime has been authorized and religious teaching takes place in public schools, delivered by clergy members paid by the state (Beaubert 1990). Another compromise relates to bilateral conventions with countries of origin so that teachers sent by these countries would teach language classes in case the parents return to their home countries with their children. But in practice, as many Turkish and Moroccan parents discovered, many such teachers were inclined towards proselytism and praising radical Islamism, directly opposing principles of secularization.

Yet, if one hundred years ago French public schools managed to take crosses off classroom walls, it is another challenge currently to dissolve the gender boundary separating bodies and male and female imaginations as early as childhood (Guénif-Souilamas 2004:88). This is why the ban of the headscarf related to a claim of gender identity loaded with sexual desire that the educational institution feels it difficult to control. "The lack of interest of imams for sex is no more credible than that of priests of any religion and their emphasis on modesty and decency (*pudeur*) translates into an obsession more than a protection" (Balibar 2004:22).

¹I refer here to the concept of social citizenship associated with T.H. Marshall. For him, social citizenship refers to "a bond of a different kind, a direct sense of community membership based upon loyalty to a civilization which is in common possession. It is the loyalty of free men endowed with rights and protected by a common law" (Marshall 1950:40-41). It is only when this stage is reached, it seems to me, that other claims can be formulated.

The controversy over secularization in schools was not a goal but a means. According to Balibar (2004:27), "This is why it is so tragic that, confronted to a political conflict in its own sphere, both bounded and one step after another questioning most of its functions and practices, the educational institution lost so much confidence in its own capacities and in its future that it hurried and reduced the conflict to its most restrictive and least intellectual dimension, implicitly trusting its theorization to dogmatic ideologues and requiring a fictitious 'solution' from a political power which draws its sense of the state's missions no further than in the reading of opinion polls." The demand for a clear national law supporting secularization was a means for principals and teachers to protect themselves from controversies over their local regulation and a way to avoid an in-depth debate about gender boundary.

Who Should Define Women's Ability to Assert their Rights?

Who is going to define the extent to which Muslim women have autonomy and the ability to choose to wear or not wear the *hijab*? The state? Inside or outside mediators? Public opinion? School authorities? Individual conscience? To answer this question, we must consider the on-the-ground experiences of Muslim girls, including the difficult relationship of majorities and minorities within the same community and the perceptions of Muslim women by themselves and by others.

Muslim girls with headscarves are a minority among Muslims in France. The turmoil arose over three girls who were expelled from their public school. Data from *Renseignements généraux* (the French intelligence service) identified about twelve hundred Muslim girls wearing headscarves in 2003 (Terray 2004:108). Most took them off to avoid expulsions from schools. The population of Muslims in France is estimated to be between three and six million, with only twelve percent of them saying that they go to the mosque every Friday (a percentage about equal to that of other religious practitioners in France). Which choice—that of 200,000 Muslim females or that of 1,200—should be protected in the public schools? Will Kymlicka (1995), an Anglophone Canadian social scientist, asserts that all cultural groups' demands should be recognized, but he concedes that an identity group may exert its oppression on some of its members and that letting communities organize as they wish is problematic in a democracy ruled by common laws. For Charles Taylor (1994), numbers are important. If a difference makes sense for a large number of individuals over a long period, it is to be respected. Does that mean that consensus and length of time are essential dimensions? To what extent do "partial cultures" have as much legitimacy as those of majorities within the same cultural group?

The Muslim girls who were audited by the French presidential commission appointed to make recommendations on this complex issue (the Stasi Commission) claim that in the neighborhoods where they live, they are forced to cover up and lower their eyes. Otherwise, they are stigmatized as "whores" and

“bad Muslims” by the community. The 77-page Stasi report mentioned that violence is sometimes used to force preteen girls to wear headscarves. Some fathers or husbands have been reported to refuse to let male doctors treat their wives or daughters in hospitals, sometimes forcing women to give birth in dangerous conditions. Women, in particular refugees from Iran who settled in France, denounce this domination over women’s bodies by men and chant, as American feminists did decades ago, “Our bodies, ourselves.” They are the ones to decide (Amara 2003). The march launched by eight young women of Muslim origin around France calling themselves “neither whores nor submissive” represents a form of identity politics asserting other rights than those of Muslim girls with headscarves.

The Muslim girls I meet in my classes express forms of emancipation in subtle ways and find opportunities to melt into the mainstream. They claim that the control exerted by their brothers and their friends on their behavior and on the way they dress, for instance, has become suffocating. Some of them admit that they wear a headscarf when they leave their neighborhood, so as not to be bothered, but a larger group resents the domination exerted upon them, domination that they claim has intensified in the last ten years.

PART II: THE CONSTRUCTION OF OTHERNESS IN THE FRENCH CONTEXT

The three issues outlined above did not emerge in a vacuum, but rather exist within a unique socio-historical period in French society. In this section, I discuss how this specific context has developed and why it is important for understanding the current banning of the headscarf. For the past three decades or so, the traditional tools of socio-economic integration of European welfare states have eroded or collapsed. The rise of citizen-subjects claiming specific, multiple, and hybrid identities has left national elites confused as to what they should do to bring back some sense of cohesion to the populations they govern via state bureaucracies.

The Sacralization of Secularization in France

In France, the political principle of secularization (*laïcité*)—according to which everyone is part of a one and indivisible nation and equal before the law, whatever their origins, race, or class—has been losing ground since the 1970s. It is being replaced by a more individual model of membership, anchored in de-territorialized notions of personhood’s rights and entitlements (Soysal 1994:3). The bond between nationality and citizenship in France is unique. To become a citizen is to be part of a universalist group, a group that symbolizes public interest and whose recruiting is not based on the membership in a group with a prescribed status. This conception, opposed to the American one, explains why attempts by

immigrants, then by ethnic groups, to take advantage of their cultural markers as a resource to exert pressures on the system of redistribution have been discouraged and the futility of such efforts internalized. A survey among first and second generation immigrant organizations in the 1990s revealed that, for community leaders, social stakes were far more important than identity ones: "Citizenship and communitarianism were hardly quoted, not even the issues of the 'scarf' or multiculturalism" (Wihtold de Wenden 1992:39).

As shown by a major and unique study undertaken by demographers in 1993-1994, the lack of emphasis on cultural and racial differences in schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods yields a commonality of views and goals among those who participate in these institutions. The function of myths and the impact of an ideology emphasizing freedom, equality, and human rights cannot be underestimated in the elements contributing to a nationalized French identity. On many dimensions, the trajectories of second or third generations do not seem to be significantly different from that of others, provided comparisons focus on identical social statuses (Tribalat 1995).

In this model of citizenship, secularization keeps religion at a distance. Since the French Revolution, the state has sought to protect individuals against pressures from intermediary and community bodies, particularly religious bodies. The 1905 law separating church and state was perceived as a victory for many French who, although they had been raised as Roman Catholics, believed the church's influence should be contained generally and kept out of the educational sphere in particular. Two other major religious bodies in France, Protestants and Jews, did not perceive any hostility towards religion in the 1905 law as it recognized the right of every individual to their own beliefs (Weil 2005:66-73). It cannot be denied, however, that the relationship of the state with religion has always been difficult and this may explain why secularization has gained the status of a religion—why it has become sacralized. The state keeps religion at a distance and yet gives it salience at specific moments, constructing categories that trigger fears, which is the case now with Islam. It is indeed an illusion to think that the boundary between political and religious opinions is impermeable.

A Difficult Recognition of Differences

That fundamentalist Islam should be used by some as a means of revolt against accepted conventions and norms is easily understood. Some Muslim girls with headscarves explain that it is out of a status of subordination and victimization in French society that they require their unique identity. "Belonging is an unquestionable good, indeed a necessary precondition for meaningful and effective political action and representation within any given society or social situation . . . [T]he whole point of the post-national 'beyond' the integrating nation-state is that there might be resources of power and cultural action, to be found by refusing (or better playing with) the logic of belonging; by rejecting, countering or evading social norms that are imposed and enforced on newcomers and out-

siders when they are integrated (or 'tolerated' or 'welcomed') into a national political and social culture" (Favell 1999:220). The French integrative machine—the school system in particular—which assimilated Corsicans, Bretons, Basques, patois-speakers, East European Jews, Poles, Spaniards, Italians, and Portuguese has not worked so efficiently for the children of post-colonial migrants. This failure is at the core of the headscarf controversy as the wearing of the headscarf even by a minority of Muslim girls challenges the modes of cultural assimilation performed by the public school system in France.

One needs to remember that there are few countries where civil society has been moulded for so long by the state, and that the laws of the Republic abolished intermediary bodies associated with the monarchic regime and religious hierarchy. Unlike the U.S., the state constructed itself against these intermediary bodies, liberating individuals from the control of the church and of the aristocracy. No legitimacy or rights were granted to associations drawing upon ethnic, racial, or religious identities. The centrality, continuity, and unitary identity of the nation-state were not questioned; communitarianism and balkanization along ethnic lines have been demonized ever since. Under this conception, the country is seen as temporarily multiethnic, but not as permanently multicultural.

Currently, however, the principles of secularization and equal treatment that had been the backbone of French national belonging are in deep crisis due to the macro-challenges posed by globalization, the European Union, a more competitive economy, and, most of all, the fact that French people from different national origins are becoming more autonomous, more heterogeneous, and more demanding. It is no longer possible to claim, through the magic of universal silence, that the phenomenon of racism and ethnic discrimination simply does not exist (Taguieff 2002). Institutions can no longer remain silent about what their agents know, hide, or sometimes reveal at the individual level. In essence, France is experiencing the ethnicization of social relations whereby groups are recognizing and setting boundaries and working to limit opportunities to groups outside of those boundaries.

As in other countries, two types of closure are usually at work in France. One is vertical, based on the defence of privileges fought for historically by dominant classes or groups, such as unions and civil servants. It explains why seven million jobs are still out of reach for non-nationals. The other is horizontal, working to preserve a distinction between "insiders" and "outsiders" (de Rudder et al. 2000:62). Due to the economic and social insecurities posed by the macro-challenges mentioned above, the vertical approach has dominated in the French public debate. Cultural assertion and denunciation of racism might have been more visible had the socioeconomic crisis of the two last decades not served to weaken or distort antiracist movements.

The stigmatization of "visible" second generation immigrants from formerly colonized countries cannot be ignored. How can this ethnicization of identities be explained in a country which does not recognize ethnicity in the public

sphere? Why are not they just considered members of the working class? As just noted, one explanation has to do with macro-changes in the social sphere. "Exclusions from the past are taken over by present exclusions and the changes induced in the role of nation-states give way to a neo-racism or even to a post-racism" (Balibar and Wallerstein 1988:19). Post-racism is to be understood as one of the multiple convulsive reactions to current macro-changes. New pathologies emanate from what Bauman (1998) calls *unsichersheit*—insecurity, uncertainty, and vulnerability—among groups who had hitherto received protection in terms of work, status, benefits, housing, and mobility for their children. "Who gets seated at the table and in what order matters less if the table is piled high" (Gitlin 1995:232). This is no longer the case. Current processes of disempowerment, disenfranchisement, and "social exclusion" fracture the political body and call into question the integrative function of the state. The growth of socio-economic inequalities, spatial polarization, long-term unemployment, the concentration of families with social problems in large public housing projects, and the failure of mass education to promote social mobility for lower classes are typical explanations for intolerance of cultural diversity.

The more "French" immigrant children become, the more the competition intensifies and the more ethnic markers are used to discard them. It is a racism without race, a cultural racism hidden under a public discourse on social disintegration. In distressed urban areas, suspicion becomes generalized among generations of different origin and mutual avoidance the rule (Body-Gendrot and de Rudder 1998). Alienated residents, whether old stock French, second generations, or even state agents working in derelict areas, share acute problems of social stigmatization and, as a consequence, establish bright boundaries between individuals and groups.

The Failure of Social Integration: Muslims as Second-Class Citizens

Concerning Islam, demands for its recognition have been timid, marked by a context of urban decay. Muslim immigrants settled in large apartment complexes built rapidly and cheaply in the *banlieues* to accommodate population growth and alleviate the pressure on city centers. Some 10 million housing units were thus built, most frequently—but not always—on cheap land, at the periphery of cities. Among other things, the problems with these urban spaces were environmental (the first oil shock prevented the development of adequate public transportation, of social amenities, and of commercial facilities), social (the arrival of working-class immigrants and their families, followed the exodus of former, upwardly mobile tenants), and political (a change in policies favored aid to home ownership over the improvement of public housing units).

The crisis was exacerbated by rising rates of long-term unemployment and under-employment, by a difficult mixing of cultures, and by the accelerated decay of the buildings (Body-Gendrot 1993). In the early 1990s, 50% of youth of Algerian nationality and 30% of Algerians with the French nationality were cur-

rently unemployed, including many who had some level of higher education. These facts were well known among the youth who started to leave school early and make a living out of the underground economy. The widespread vandalism of buildings and of public amenities is both a protest against social stigmatisation and an expression of frustration from vanished hopes of ever joining the mainstream.

The apparent absence of hope for a better future forms the background to young males' efforts at control over young women. Attempts at collective control in enclosed spaces are indeed frequently initiated by groups of young males searching for boundaries in a world which has largely been deserted by adults. It can be perceived as a takeover of authority. The *immigré* fathers of second generation males who came to France to work have often had little to pass on to them. Many Algerians fought against France during the colonial war (1954-1962), yet they later came to work in the enemy country. They did not become French themselves, but their children are French, brought up between two cultures. Other Algerians siding with France (*Harkis*) during the war experienced infamous conditions of living in camps and were neglected by the receiving country. What prevented the French from considering these *immigrés* as future citizens of the nation? An amnesic discourse of unity, already mentioned, prevented them from seeing that, like previous waves of immigration, those *immigrés* now settling in France were going to stay and be part of the nation. The 1970s were marked by the reunification of families after the doors of immigration closed, interrupting the flows back and forth across the Mediterranean Sea. *Immigrés* were no longer going to be just a labour supply responding to the needs of an industrial state and to its demographic concerns.

No research at that time focusing on workplaces, working-class history, family, or public housing took into account the impact of those *immigrés* on nation-building. One tenth of the population and its contribution were ignored in theory and in practice. The mothers who settled in France occupied indeed a subordinate position and did not learn French because no alchemist locally approached them to help them "melt in." The fathers, disrespected and humiliated throughout their work and residential experiences, remained silent because they did not feel that they "belonged" to the receiving country. With more precarious job conditions, an identity crisis erupted, a crisis of self-definition. Not being defined by work, how were these men going to exist?

Islamic Demands for Recognition in the Public Sphere

In response to these problematic social circumstances, different quests were launched. One of them was linked to Islam. Between 1975 and 1980, as the myth of return was fading away, unable to express themselves with a ballot, *immigrés* resorted to "political secondary rights." That is, they looked to mediating structures such as informal networks and associations, and asked for prayer-rooms and mosques (Body-Gendrot 1993). This particularist demand was accepted by local

authorities as a measure meant to appease reactions to segregation and racism. Negotiations with housing authorities or mayors over the control of religious spaces represented a process of settlement for Muslim fathers. They were eager to socialize their children through the transmission of a transplanted, socially acceptable Islam.

Then, in 1975, strikes were launched in hostels where single male *immigrés* dwelled. In the negotiations that followed, demands for prayer-rooms were taken into account and the managers of these hostels found it an acceptable way to buy social peace. The first claims for Muslim prayer-rooms erupted, then, in a context of an identity crisis. The following year, in 1976, during the month of Ramadan, a petition circulated requiring the creation of a mosque at Boulogne Billancourt and the management of Renault agreed. Unions then asked that the future mosques be under the leadership of unionized imams. The control of Islam thus became a stake between employers and employees, Islam being perceived as a vehicle for peaceful social relations. In large public housing projects, with their sons contesting their authority, Muslim fathers gradually got together in spaces which after a while became prayer rooms. Sometimes an imam was invited to teach religion to younger children. Again, the management of public housing projects approved the prayer rooms, and yet, it was from this residential space that the issue of Islam became visible in the public space.

After the oil shocks of 1973 and 1979, an influx of "oil-dollars" from the Arabic peninsula allowed the purchase of lands and buildings for mosques and Islamic associations' centers. In 1979, the building of a mosque in Mantes-la-Jolie in the Parisian region met with little opposition even though it was financed with Saudi Arabian and Libyan funds. But after the Iranian revolution, other similar projects ran into strong opposition, as this visible use of space provoked unrest among neighborhoods' residents. The extreme case is the city of Romans, a middle-sized city situated in the center of France where the mosque was bombed a few days before its opening during the night of May 2, 1982. Social scientist Gilles Kepel carried interviews there at that time: "See what happens in Iran, in Beyrouth?" a resident lamented. "Mr K. [a moderate Muslim leader from the city] promises that fundamentalists will not take over. What does he know? He won't watch the place night and day. At the hospital, Muslim nurses wear chadors and refuse to care for men. You would never have seen such a thing three years ago" (Kepel 1987:310). A politicization of the "non-political sphere" had taken place, the local sphere entailing a reclassification of political forces. The demagoguery of the far right targeting scapegoats for electoral returns was indeed able to link the themes of Islam, joblessness, and unrest in racist overtones. In neighborhoods with a high percentage of foreign populations, this xenophobic discourse was received favorably and the French working class was confronted with a dilemma: the racialization of its modes of thought and communication or the eradication of latent racism in the collective conscience. Islam thus appeared as a crucial detonator, revealing class and cultural contradictions.

This is the context in which the uneasy debate concerning headscarves needs to be understood. On the one hand, under the influence of Muslim leaders in the 1990s, a narrow interpretation of the Koran and of the position assigned to females took place. "Retrograde preachers nicknamed 'imams from the basements' developed a political, machist reading of the Koran, constraining individual freedoms . . . Many young men experienced a crisis due to school failure, unemployment and discrimination. They were stigmatized and had the feeling that they would never make it. In their quest for identity bearings, one of the only answers they found was radical Islam" (Amara 2003:74). Instead of solving conflicts with street educators or community leaders, imams now had the last word and became the new regulators of social control in the eyes of local authorities. This intrusion of religion into local affairs became a threat to Muslim girls' status. Why was not a wider support from French progressive minds brought to their cause?

PART III: THE LAW BANNING RELIGIOUS SIGNS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

It was only in 2004 that a law banning headscarves in public schools came to be seen by a majority of the French as a way to support the choice of Muslim girls who wanted to emancipate themselves from male or fundamentalist control in their communities. The Stasi report argued that without a law it would be impossible for students who were subjected to their peers' pressures, insults, and violence to denounce the perpetrators if they belonged to the same religious community. The denouncer would be seen as a traitor to his or her community. One example cited in the report concerns a student, with her arm broken out of physical violence, who lied to her parents to avoid denunciation and maybe retaliation. However, religious signs are not banned in universities or in the world of adults, since the latter have ways to defend themselves that juveniles do not have. Muslim women wanting to wear a scarf on a public job can look for justice in courts, just as Muslim converts did recently in New York.² The consensus in France is that girls with headscarves should not exert pressures on those without them. According to a December 18, 2003 editorial in the *International Herald Tribune*, the 69% of the French supporting the law banning the head scarf in public schools came from a wide political spectrum.

Article 9 of the European Convention of Human Rights signed in Rome in November 1950 also deserves attention. It enforces the right of thought, con-

²The March 2002 case involved two Muslims who insisted on wearing their *hijabs* while driving New York City Transit buses and were ordered to remove their religious garments or to wear their uniform caps over their scarves. When they refused, they were transferred out of the public eye to jobs parking and cleaning buses.

science, religion, and the public expression of one's religious belief. But this right is limited in cases of public disorder or attacks on the freedom of conscience of others (Weil 2005:69). To invoke this limitation, the national governing body of a country must pass a law stating as much. This is part of the context motivating the French Parliament to get involved with the issue of veiling in schools.

Nevertheless, there is a more obvious reason for resorting to a law to settle the controversy, it is the politicization which surrounded this issue and turned France upside down. This could have been avoided. It is always difficult to rewrite the past, but the fact is that the wide coverage given to the controversy occurred after a teacher present at the school council called the Left newspaper *Libération* to draw its attention on the case of the two Levy girls who had been summoned by local school authorities for wearing headscarves. They were the daughters of a militant atheist Jewish lawyer and an Algerian teacher, and it seems that the use of the headscarf was meant to influence a family dispute. Soon after, the media became frantic. The outcome, given the religious and colonial legacy of France, was predictable. Teachers and principals claiming to fear the accommodation of religious particularisms and pressing for a law "protecting" them from the threat of "the Islamization of France" were a more profitable constituency for politicians than progressive constituencies favoring tolerance.

As remarked by Tocqueville, "in politics, fear is a passion which frequently increases at the expense of others. One easily fears anything when one no longer desires anything with fervor" (quoted by Terray 2004:110). Fears of fanaticism are the worst to combat and no one can evaluate how serious the threat of radical Islam is. The Stasi Commission openly denounced "political-religious militants," "extremist political and religious trends," an "activist minority," "organized groups testing the resistance of the *République*," and "political and religious communautarist groups," all of which more or less refer to Al Qaida in popular imaginations (Terray 2004:109). *Le Monde* rightly pointed out that what the Stasi Commission had undertaken was a sort of "psychoanalysis of the French conscience" (Citron 2003). Psychoanalysis supposes an anamnesis, a deconstruction and a reconstruction of the national memory taking totems and taboos into account and then giving birth to a hybrid, vivid, secular collective identity for which the country is currently not prepared. We wish it had been so. For more than twenty years now, the ideology of the far right has convinced a very large majority of the French, including the Left, that Arabs and Muslims will not melt in the French *République*, and any international event—most of all 9/11 and terrorist events in various countries—is used to give ground to xenophobia. What the headscarf issue reveals is the nature of ethnic boundaries marking differentiation between majorities and minorities in France. Ethnic markers such as religion and culture construct boundaries among peers with similar socio-economic life chances. The boundaries around the salience of ethnicity help people distinguish those who are like them and with whom they identify (roses) from those who are visibly "different" (peonies).

France has always experienced fear regarding the dislocation of its unity that would come from “Dangerous Others.” In the 20th century, the plots were said to come from the Free Masons, the yellow peril, perfid Albion, the communists, delinquent youth of post-colonial origin, and now Islamic fundamentalists. This construction of Dangerous Others who do not want to become the “Same in a One and Indivisible Republic” has been reinforced by politicians for petty profits in the same way as Europe has been scapegoated for all kinds of national failures by the same politicians. No wonder that the French would react with fear to an object that they cannot identify positively. That 90% of Muslims practice a peaceful Islam is shown in a 1987 survey (Leveau and Withol de Wenden 1987). That they wish to pursue upward mobility in French society for themselves and their children, as most French do, is also proven in survey after survey (Etienne 2004). However, no mass pedagogy is undertaken to tell majorities that they can live together harmoniously while still respecting differences.

Finally, as with other issues, a missed opportunity is once more to be regretted. The conditions of a genuine public debate have never been offered to French society. The public debate would have acknowledged the issues of Muslim immigration in France, of the social inequalities experienced by families of postcolonial origin, and of the discriminations they undergo which are not publicly denounced. It would have deconstructed imaginary fears linked to the threat of a communitarianism which does not exist as such (Body-Gendrot 2003). The debate would have denounced the amplifying role the media have when they play on fears. Political initiatives could have been taken to accelerate the social and political mobility of Muslim populations in French society, as was done with the second and third generations of European immigrants. It was easier for a short-sighted political class to opt instead for a narrowly focused law, a move fostering international misunderstandings. But maybe the unanticipated effect of the law is to be found elsewhere, as suggested by Weil (2005). When French nationality was ascribed automatically to *immigrés*’ children through birth, the parents were relieved that it occurred by itself as a constraint collectively imposed and not as the result of individual and voluntary actions. “Eventually, naturalization produced something like a satisfaction which, for a whole series of reasons, requires that it remain secret and, sometimes, to which one resigns,” Sayad observed (1999:352).

Similarly, it is likely that a large majority of Muslims in France who do not want to impose the headscarf to their daughters—but who also feel uncomfortable with being unfaithful to religious dictates and who are subjected to the pressures of friends, neighbors, or family members—are relieved, after all. From now on, they will be able to refer to the law to derail criticisms.

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