

## **POSTCOLONIAL COLONIALISM?**

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FRENCH STRUGGLES AGAINST ETHNIC-RACIAL DISCRIMINATION AND THE EMERGING “POSTCOLONIAL” CRITIQUE OF THE REPUBLICAN MODEL OF CITIZENSHIP

### **POLITICS IN FRANCE TODAY: A BRIEF OVERVIEW**

FRANCE IS ONE of the few countries in the so-called advanced capitalist world where class issues can result in open political confrontation between broad mass movements and the state. This was the case of the struggle against the CPE (*contrat de première embauche*; first hiring contract), a youth work scheme very advantageous to employers; proposed by the government of Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin in early 2006, and defeated by a determined movement of students and labor activists over a period of several weeks in the spring of that year (see the article by Dennis Broe in this issue). It was the case as well with the defeat, in a May 2005 referendum, of the European Constitutional Treaty, since most of those who voted against it were expressing a refusal of its neoliberal underpinnings. France is also the birthplace of the ATTAC movement, one of the initial pillars of the global justice movement. Although currently deeply divided over issues of French politics, and in painful convalescence following a voting fraud scandal that implicates a fraction of the leadership; ATTAC continues to be a space of action and reflection for many people who, whether or not they belong to a left-wing party (many of its roughly 30,000 members do not), put much effort into understanding and struggling against neoliberalism on a national, continental and world scale.

It would be wildly excessive, however, to assume on the basis of these facts that all is rosy on the French left today. The above-mentioned movements show that there is a potential mass base for a challenge to neoliberalism, but the organizations that hold such objectives are divided. The Socialist Party, the main party of the left, resembles the U.S. Democratic Party a little more each day. To the left of the Socialists are three organizations whose presidential candidates totalled over 13% of the vote in 2002: the French Communist Party, whose Stalinism is a thing of the past and whose internal regime these days is relatively democratic, but whose share of the vote has dropped precipitously since the days — as late as the mid—1970s — when they commanded more than 20% of the national vote; the *Ligue communiste révolutionnaire* (LCR, Revolutionary Communist League), a neo-trotskyist organization with brilliant intellectuals and a modest but solid presence in

the trade union movement; and *Lutte ouvrière* (Workers' Struggle), which could be defined as a paleo-trotskyist organization, characterized by dogmatic discourse, narrowly "workerist" politics and an allergy to lasting alliances with other forces. *Les Verts* (Greens) are a very mixed bag, some identifying with the anti-neoliberal left much more than others.

The division plaguing the left contributed to the presence of National Front leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen, in the second round of balloting in April 2002 (he edged out Socialist candidate, Lionel Jospin, by 16.86% to 16.18%). To combat this problem *without* aligning themselves with the Socialists, a group of forces "on the left of the left" (Communists, LCR, the left-wing think tank *Fondation Copernic*, and independents) have initiated a procedure to come up, "by consensus," with a common presidential candidate in 2007. It remains to be seen whether this scheme works, that is, whether the party apparatuses involved will actually allow themselves to be subordinated to the common cause.

If the elections were to take place tomorrow, the likely winner would be Nicolas Sarkozy, current Minister of the Interior (head of the police), and president of the neo-Gaullist *Union pour un mouvement populaire* (UMP, Union for a Popular Movement). His main international claim to fame is, of course, his declaration — in the midst of the youth riots in several cities, in November 2005 — that he would like to "hose down" the housing projects where this "hoodlum scum" lives. Clearly, Sarkozy is fishing in the same racist and anti-immigrant waters as Le Pen, whose influence remains high and whose vote totals may even rise in 2007. Sarkozy's recent, very restrictive immigration law and his determination to expel from France several thousand school children whose parents are said to have "insufficient ties" to France confirm this tendency. At the same time, Sarkozy has been smart enough, or devious enough, to project himself as being open-minded about "integrating" Islam into the French religious landscape, and as being ready to entertain ideas about fighting discrimination with a form (unspecified to date) of affirmative action.

Sarkozy's only serious challenger, should he or she survive to the second round of balloting in April 2007, would be the Socialist candidate — most likely, Ségolène Royal, several times a government minister and wife of the Party's Secretary-in-chief. Royal has defied party procedure for designation of candidates by appealing directly to the public on the basis of her undoubtedly charm and technical competence. She is, nonetheless, obliged to battle it out for her Party's nomination with two other contenders:

Dominique Strauss-Kahn, former Minister of Finance and Professor of Economics, whose policies were highly appreciated by big business; and Laurent Fabius, who, as Prime Minister (1984-86), was the agent of the Socialists' neoliberal turn after the first three years of the Mitterrand presidency. Fabius has recently tried to transform his image by taking an active role in the campaign against the European Constitutional Treaty, and by declaring himself to be the candidate of "purchasing power;" but he is hardly convincing in his new role as the Socialists' left alternative.

Social movements in France today are, as ever, unpredictable. The tidal wave of the anti-CPE movement was the great, redeeming and totally unexpected movement of 2006. It caused the government to take a backward step and all but toppled the Prime Minister, who, as a presidential candidate, defended the CPE stubbornly for weeks. This movement, driven by students, could not have succeeded without the tactical aid of the trade unions; which, in an uncommon display of unity in their own ranks, called out their troops on two or three major occasions to demonstrate to the government that neoliberal labor schemes are highly unpopular. Nonetheless, this was a defensive struggle and it hardly made a dent in the prevailing social model. The unions, as a whole, are not in good shape, although public sector unions, in general, are suffering less than those in the private sector. Historically, the French model of unionism has not relied on mass membership, making "union density" rates appear extraordinarily low in comparison to other European countries, such as Germany, where union membership is nearly automatic.

Other social movements are mostly of a highly defensive nature these days. One, which has drawn much attention, is the movement known as the *Réseau éducation sans frontières* (the "education without borders" network), which defends school children threatened with expulsion by Sarkozy's Ministry of the Interior. The movement has compared Sarkozy's tactics to those of the Vichy regime, and has vowed to protect these children of immigrants, just as Jewish children were hidden during the Occupation in order to prevent their deportation. Another highly popular movement has been built around the defense of 500 undocumented workers and their families, mostly from West Africa, who were expelled from a building in which they had been squatting in Cachan, a southern suburb of Paris, in August 2006. Such movements serve to remind us that antiracist activism and networks of solidarity are still alive in France. Clearly, however, they are more effective in their efforts to save people from the direst circumstances, than in organizing groups that suffer from discrimination. One way of understanding the

riots and car-burnings of November 2005 is to see them as the result of a failure to organize the sons and daughters of immigrants in defense of their right to equal treatment.

This brief overview of the state of the left and of social movements in France, which future issues of *Situations* will address in greater depth, is by way of an introduction to what follows in this article, which approaches France today from a different and complementary angle. How, indeed, does France deal with its rampant problem of ethno-racial discrimination? To what extent can the problems related to the presence of immigrants and their French offspring be defined as class problems with class-related solutions? To what extent are they a result of racism and discrimination, and to what extent do they call forth more ethnically and racially targeted solutions? To what extent does the persistent discrimination experienced by these youth lead to quests for new identities, and to what extent is France, with its prevailing official model of citizenship, ready to recognize such expression of diversity? As we shall see, these questions are proving to be difficult tests for the French left today. They have great divisive potential, but they are nonetheless of momentous importance in themselves and need to be met head-on.

### **THE MULTICULTURAL QUESTION IN FRANCE TODAY**

For reasons that have as much to do with a traditional snideness about France in the U.S. media as with the current neoconservative impulse, the tendency has been to paint France as indeed a very suspect ally; because of its “pro-Arab” and, therefore (or so goes the reasoning), “anti-Israeli” stance. On the other side, an image has grown within the dominant French media of their own nation as a place where, in spite of pompous official pronouncements about “republican integration,” Muslims or Arabs (the distinction is not always finely drawn) are failing to become integrated and are getting decidedly out of hand. France is seen as a one of the chief bastions of “Eurabia.”

However, tendentious and ill-informed criticism of France is not a monopoly of the right wing. A number of left and left-leaning intellectuals in the U.S. (as well as Canada and Western Europe) also appear to have an “attitude” about France and the dynamics of French society. With the most generous and democratic of intentions, they target for withering criticism the dominant French model of citizenship, known as the *republican model* (small r); which, they believe, denies cultural diversity in the name of an abstract

universality by putting strong pressure on people of foreign origin to abandon their cultures of origin or risk exclusion from a national community — which is conceived as a static, monocultural entity. Much unwitting caricature of what actually goes on in France ensues from this reductive representation, according to which, French policy expresses a stubborn resistance to anything resembling multiculturalism.

And yet, anyone spending any amount of time in France cannot help but notice that this country is anything but monolithic in cultural terms. To take just one example, in the realm of music, France is anything but stuck in national narcissism. A glance at concert programs in all urban areas or at the FM radio band reveals how much France is a prism of the whole world. There are radio stations representing a broad range of “cultures” (North African, West African, Arab, Caribbean, etc.), which are off the map of ordinary, middle-class Franco-conformity; but which, nonetheless, occupy a respectable and growing place in the public sphere.

The distinction made by sociologist Michel Wieviorka between *multiculturality* and *multiculturalism* is pertinent here. *Multiculturality*, defined as a state of society, is an undeniable social fact. As for *multiculturalism*, defined as a range of political orientations, which recognize this condition and seek to protect and encourage it through enlightened policies, it is true that the notion itself is not an easy sell in France. In official circles, it provokes strong reservations in the name of protecting the prevailing republican model, one of whose main features is that citizens as such — that is, as participants in the public sphere through public institutions — should not be divided into categories. And yet, such thinking does not result in anything resembling the active suppression of foreign cultures. Criticism of French policy is certainly necessary, as we shall see; but the “progressive” stereotypes portraying France as simply denying its multiculturality are just as unhelpful for understanding the situation, as are the (neo)conservative images of a France overcome with a diversity it cannot control.

## THE “REPUBLICAN MODEL OF INTEGRATION” AND ITS ANTINOMIES

This dominant French normative “model” or “public philosophy” of citizenship is referred to, in a more typically French vocabulary, as a “model of integration.”<sup>1</sup> According to the most commonly understood terms of the model, the idea of multiculturalism (or cultural pluralism) is indeed something of a taboo. Why? Because in this perspective, there is a strict separation to be observed between the public sphere and the private sphere. Particularisms of all sorts (“ethnic,” cultural, religious, linguistic, etc.) may be cultivated as much as one pleases in the private sphere; but in the public sphere, which is the common ground of citizenship, one is simply a citizen, equal to all others. As a result, the expression of ethnic, religious or other cultural particularisms is not prohibited, to be sure, but often not made to feel entirely welcome either.

As a normative discourse, the “republican model of integration” claims to have a strong philosophical coherence and to be deeply rooted in national history. While these claims are not entirely unfounded, it is important to understand the model’s very contemporary implication in political struggles. It claims a pedigree that would make it almost synonymous with modernity itself: this idea of a universal community of equal citizens is said to spring from the Revolution of 1789 in its efforts to overcome a heritage of religious wars and persecutions, and to promote the ideals of the Enlightenment. It is also said to spring, in part, from the ideals of the early Third Republic (b. 1871), in which the notion of *laïcité* — the radical separation of church from state and, more broadly, of religious identities from public ones — first became written into law. And it is true that the concept of *laïcité* has been given a place of honor in the two most recent French constitutions (1946, 1958). Nonetheless, the reconstruction of republican values into a full-blown normative “model of integration” is mostly a product of the mid-1980s, when Jean-Marie Le Pen’s anti-immigrant National Front first emerged as an extreme political force to be reckoned with.

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<sup>1</sup> The notion of “integration” in its current usage can be traced back to the sociological thought of Durkheim and the Third Republic in France. See Stéphane Beaujouan and Gérard Noiriel, “Penser l’intégration des immigrés,” *Hommes et migrations*, June 1990. For a good account in English of how the “republican model of integration” operates in theory and in practice, see Adrian Favell, *Philosophies of Integration: Immigration and the Idea of Citizenship in France and Britain*, Macmillan, 1998, and a more recent edition (2001).

This contemporary version of the model was indeed the result of a consensus forged between mainstream political forces of the right and the left with the aim of marginalizing the National Front. According to the prevailing argument at the time, racism and xenophobia could only be combated in the name of a universal notion of citizenship, not in the name of any particular group interests, such as the interests of “minorities” (the very term became a no-no). Otherwise, it was said, two dire consequences would ensue: 1) the minority groups themselves — for which other euphemistic names had to be found, such as people “coming from immigration” (*issus de l’immigration*) — would be tempted to organize along “community” lines and thus contribute to the rise of “*communautarisme*,” another definite no-no; and 2) as a result of this (supposed) danger of particularistic expression by ethnic groups stigmatized by racists, the racists themselves would have a good pretext for accusing the dominant order of “favoring” the immigrants, while neglecting the “true” French people — and this would presumably result in a ballooning of the National Front’s share of the electoral vote. By occupying the terrain of national citizenship and by defining it as a non-racialist, non-particularist, universal form of collective belonging, the republican model was conceived as an arm of struggle against the far right.

Because of this contemporary political dimension, the model’s claims to philosophical coherence are also somewhat overblown, since the norms to which it gives rise can be declined in different ways according to political leanings. In its contemporary guise, the republican model was, as we have just seen, an attempt to reach a consensus or *modus operandi* across political lines between the moderate right and the mainstream left. However, the consensus is a fuzzy one and leaves room for much creative construction on both sides. Left versions of the republican discourse are more likely to include a stronger conception of social rights, while the conservative version will emphasize a more vague “equity” within a market framework.

At the same time, political differences in the construction of the republican model are not simply a function of right-left polarization. It is also true that, on the left as well as on the right, some are more “republicanist” than others; that is, more unbending than others in their defense of the idea that the expression of particular identities constitutes a danger (the danger of “*communautarisme*”) to the Republic.

Finally, although the republican model does provide terms of reference that are familiar to most citizens, and although there is enough general assent to these terms for the republican model to be plausibly considered

“hegemonic,” it is not always an accurate gauge of actual social and political behavior. In some domains, the model dictates hard and fast rules; in others, it simply provides “principles” for behavior, while leaving much to the discretion and even the imagination of individuals or group actors.

Certain practical implications of the model are clear enough. Clearly, it makes it difficult or impossible to count people in official statistics using ethnic or racial categories. Clearly, it would also rule out the formation of political parties structured around religious or ethnic solidarities. However, when it comes to defining political orientations with respect to France’s actual multiculturalism, the model — however sharp some imagine its lines to be — gives rise these days to much ambiguity, polemics and soul-searching. In matters of religion, the boundaries between public and private spheres are, to say the least, not always clear.

One important example will suffice to illustrate this point. For the past fifteen years, successive governments of the left and right have labored, not without success, to press the various tendencies and factions within French Islam to organize themselves into a common representative body which could then become the privileged interlocutor of the state in matters involving Islam’s relationship with the state and the law. Why Islam? Presumably, because the Catholic Church, with its hierarchical and centralized form of organization, is in no need of such a body. Protestants and Jews, for their part, long since gave birth to such institutions. Muslims, on the other hand, belong to a “new” religion in France, since most of its adherents are products of recent immigration (first or second generation). Islam in France has been very weakly institutionalized and chronically divided among groups that (usually) reflect the orientations of the countries of origin: Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Turkey, the Comoro Islands, etc. — although there is also some doctrinal influence from places like Pakistan, Egypt, and sometimes Saudi Arabia.<sup>2</sup>

It was in 2003 that the *Conseil français du culte musulman* (CFCM) finally saw the light of day. Many would argue that it is far from being truly representative, and the case for this argument is strong when one considers that the body’s president, appointed by the Minister of the Interior, is none other than the head of the Mosque of Paris; for all practical purposes, a functionary of the Algerian state. Clearly, he was imposed as a choice, because

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<sup>2</sup> For a useful descriptive account of French Islam today, read Xavier Ternisien’s *La France des mosquées*, Albin Michel, 2002.

the official, state-sponsored version of Islam in Algeria is considered “moderate,” “a-political,” and, above all, anti-fundamentalist; and because in matters Islamic, Algeria is inclined to conform to the rules of French *laïcité*, however those are defined at any given moment. The point, however, is that — whether or not one takes the CFCM to be representative — it is impossible to consider the politics of Islam and its constitutive currents to simply be an internal matter for religious communities to work out on their own. For whatever reasons, good or bad, the politics of Islam have become a very public and political issue in France; it is patently impossible to confine such matters to the private sphere.

The public/private boundary is a fuzzy and moving one, which the notion of *laïcité* cannot magically establish in the abstract. It needs to be negotiated on a pragmatic, case-by-case basis, and this has always been true. Ever since the major 1905 law instituting *laïcité* in the school system, the rules governing the relationship between the public schools and the private religious school sector have been tremendously complex and laden with details about how to manage buildings, land, state subsidies, school programs, etc. Such agreements have had to be renegotiated periodically, and conflicts have sometimes occurred over how precisely to define the public/private boundary.

## ISLAM AND THE CHOICES FACING THE REPUBLICAN MODEL

*Laïcité* is, thus, by necessity a flexible doctrine, and when the requisite flexibility is absent, the model of citizenship that *laïcité* embodies can fall into the trap of its own rigidity. An obvious case in point is the question of the Islamic headscarf (*hidjab* in Arabic; *foulard* in French) and the rules governing the right to wear it or not in public secondary schools. This question exploded onto the scene as a highly-charged symbolic issue in 1989, and has continued since then to be a major defining test for the French republican model and its capacity to assure Islam a place of its own in the nation’s social and religious landscape. What makes the headscarf issue a particularly thorny one is that it raises questions about the boundaries between the private and the public as defined by *laïcité*, and it also provokes discussion about the role of women in society. Above all, the symbolism of the headscarf is tied up with widespread perceptions of Islam itself as a threatening force. Those who are Islamophobic find *laïcité* to be a useful fig leaf for their intolerance. This kaleidoscope of viewpoints has caused public opinion to fracture and become chronically inflamed, and achieving consensus has taken exceptional efforts.

It is impossible here to rehearse the arguments of every party involved, but it is important to understand why and how the republican model finds itself under challenge in this situation. For those who simply do not see any problem in letting young women in the public schools cover their heads or not as they so choose, the headscarf question has been cited as the clearest possible proof that the republican model is flawed, rigid, and unable to adjust to the actually existing multiculturality of French society. For those who defend the autonomy of women against the influence of religious tradition, the defense of *laïcité* naturally requires an affirmation of the boundary between public and private spaces. In response to such feminist arguments against the headscarf (although there are also some feminists who reason very differently), the defenders of the right to wear it in public schools react with at least two arguments. First, isn't there something rather ethnocentric and even colonial about declaring Islam to be an anti-feminine religion? Isn't this tantamount to declaring enlightened French civilization to be the savior of Muslim women against their own religious identification and against Muslim men? Secondly, why not listen to what the schoolgirls themselves have to say when they articulate their reasons for wanting to wear the headscarf?<sup>3</sup> Their motivations can vary greatly, and usually have nothing to do with a sense of submission to superior male authority.

It is not difficult to understand, after all, why the whole headscarf affair might be construed as evidence that the republican model is both overly rigid and guilty of applying different standards to different religions. Following more than a decade of uncertainty about how to handle the headscarf in the national public school system — during which, public policy shifted back and forth between tolerance and repression — the National Assembly, in March 2004, passed a law banning the wearing of religious paraphernalia of any sort in the public schools. The law is clearly discriminatory: although it never explicitly mentions either the headscarf or Islam, it was obvious to all concerned, thanks in great part to the theatrics of the parliamentary hearings, that the law was conceived to counter the supposed subversion of *laïcité* by Islam.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> As early as 1995, an important work of sociological research studied, through in-depth interviews, the motivations of girls who defend the right to wear the headscarf to school. See Françoise Gaspard et Farhad Khosrokhavar, *Le foulard et la République*, La Découverte, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> As matters currently stand, the law has been largely respected. The main currents of organized Islam in France, even those favoring the use of the headscarf, have chosen not to press the issue. The cases of local confrontation over the headscarf continue to be very few in number. The community-versus-community battle predicted by some has not occurred.

I would argue, however, that there is nothing in the content of the republican model itself, or in the notion of *laïcité* itself, that dictated as a necessary outcome this exercise in discrimination. All told, there have been only a few hundred cases of headscarves worn to school since 1989, and most of these have been resolved through mediation between school authorities, families and a state-appointed mediator — at least during those periods when government policy has favored mediation over confrontation.

*Laïcité*, it must be understood, does not stop with the separation of spaces, public from private. The very purpose of such separation is to prevent conflict, and thereby guarantee freedom of conscience; *laïcité* presents itself as the best guarantee for the peaceful coexistence, and mutual tolerance among different religious heritages. (It has been, for example, an invaluable tool of those brave militants who have undertaken to calm tensions between Arabs and Jews in France over the Israel-Palestinian conflict.<sup>5</sup>) It is possible to imagine a *laïcité* respectful of the individual decision to wear a headscarf to school and to be able to accept the fact that no one who does so is seriously interested in proselytizing for Islam, any more than a pupils wearing small crosses around their necks are actively trying to convert their schoolmates to Christianity. *Laïcité*, in short, could — and has been — construed in a more pluralistic and “multiculturalist” way.

It cannot be denied, however, that in many ways French society as a whole, including certain state policies, have made it difficult for Islam to find a comfortable place; and to this extent, it can be said that there is a certain lack of “multiculturalism” to be deplored and struggled against — and this has begun to happen. It is also true that in France one finds no small amount of what can only be called Islamophobia,<sup>6</sup> sometimes overt and virulent (as in the propaganda of J-M. Le Pen, B. Mégrét, P. de Villiers), but usually silent and insidious. Double standards are too often at work in the denunciation of acts of violence motivated by racism: for example, public officials jump to condemn, very publicly, any act smacking of anti-

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5 See the remarkable book *Les banlieues, le Proche-Orient et nous* by Leila Shahid, Michael Warschawski and Dominique Vidal, Paris, Editions de l'Atelier, 2006. Leila Shahid is the charismatic former spokesperson for the Palestinian Authority in France (she now occupies a similar function in the European Union); Michael Warschawski is a veteran Franco-Israeli militant for joint Israeli-Arab opposition to the occupation of the Palestinian territories; Dominique Vidal is an editor of *Le Monde Diplomatique*. Together, they undertook a long tour through sensitive urban areas in France, and this book is a summary of what this encounter made possible in terms of greater mutual understanding between Arabs and Jews.

6 See Vincent Geisser, *La nouvelle islamophobie*, Paris, La Découverte, 2003, for a balanced account of what Islamophobia looks like in France today.

Semitism, but the same is not true of other racist crimes whose victims are people of North African or West African descent. Certain intellectuals stubbornly refuse to acknowledge the existence of a problem of Islamophobia, claiming that such acknowledgment can only lead to *communautarisme* — thereby contributing insidiously to the problem.

Given these disturbing trends, some will ask whether it is worth the trouble to try to salvage the republican model. Would it not be preferable to invent another model that is more systematically multiculturalist? I would argue in reply that a normative model of citizenship so deeply engrained in people's minds, accompanied by such practices as the French republican model, will not simply wither away, nor will it be instantly replaced by a new alternative. There are hardly any partisans in France of difference for the sake of difference, and there is much acknowledgement of the need for a common ground of citizenship. Sociologist Michel Wieviorka, one of the most consistent critics of the republican model in its rigid and dogmatic forms, calls for a limited dose of multiculturalism which would not frontally challenge the republican model, but instead would adapt to it by coaxing its acceptance of multiple expressions of identity without automatically taking them to be threats to republican unity.<sup>7</sup> Muslims who fight discrimination against Islam find the republican model and the notion of *laïcité* well suited to their struggle, because it is a language everyone understands and it appeals to notions of basic fairness and equal treatment. And, after all, it cannot seriously be denied that the French state, in large part thanks to the republican and *laïc* model, has taken important measures to guarantee Islam a respectful place in French society.

My feeling is that, within another generation, the presence of Islam in French society will become banal — the best possible result — and that, in the long run, the prevailing set of republican references will persist in a modified, moderately multiculturalist form and be mobilized in favor of a more harmonious integration of Muslims — as Muslims *and* as citizens — into French society. Thanks to Islam, it might be said that France is groping, within the evolving terms of reference of the republican model, toward a *sui generis* encounter with its own multiculturality. As we shall see further on, the current spate of studies and political initiatives based on a “postcolonial” critique of social relations demonstrates that French critical thought is full of resources that are already serving to challenge the republican model, as

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, his book *La différence*, Editions Balland, 2002.

much from within as from without. Some of the model's key references today are floating and are subject to much debate, but they continue to embody a coherent enough set of principles, in enough direct contact with the practical problems of French society to be able to adapt and become more flexible.

## FIGHTING ETHNORACIAL DISCRIMINATION THE REPUBLICAN WAY

If I had to define the essential problems with republicanism in France, I would not locate them so much in the area of cultural recognition as under the heading of the distribution the social wealth (to borrow a useful distinction from Nancy Fraser). One of the key questions currently facing France is how to most effectively combat ethnoracial discrimination in hiring (combined, of course, with other forms of discrimination, in particular by gender). Naturally, such questions of “recognition” and those of “redistribution” often go closely together, but political dynamics in France today are more directly driven by social and socio-economic factors — the struggle against systematic inequalities — than by “identity politics.”

The riots and car burnings that took place in several urban areas of France, in November 2005, provide an important case in point. Contrary to certain outrageous media frames used to account for these events internationally, militant Islam was not a factor. The youth involved in the riots had neither any clear political agenda, nor any implicit ethnic or religious one. They were revolting against the situation they experience every day — a situation of stigmatization (as “Arabs” or “nègres” or “Muslims”), which seriously affects their life chances by keeping many out of work, on the streets, and under the brutal surveillance of police who categorize them as “troublemakers” (“racaille” or hoodlum trash, in the delicate expression of Minister of the Interior, Nicolas Sarkozy). They were, for all practical purposes, screaming out for a decent chance to work and prosper in a society where the (republican) promises of equal opportunity are omnipresent, but which the system abysmally fails to deliver. They were demanding respect for their rights more than they were asserting an “identity.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See the excellent dossier on these events (“Les émeutes, et après?”) in *Mouvements*, no. 44, March-April 2006.

Some of the most severe challenges to the republican model in recent years have been formulated in the very terms of the model itself. As it emerged from the political debates of the 1980s, the model tended to harp so insistently on the universal principle of equality among all citizens, that it came, in its more dogmatic versions, to blind itself to the very existence of a problem of ethnic/racial discrimination. In other words, the universal equality of all citizens, proclaimed by the normative discourse, was hypostasised into a “truly-existing” equality of opportunity. Sociologists researching the subject of discrimination have been able, through their studies, to pierce the veil of this fetishized republican discourse, and to show that discrimination is massive and systematic in employment and housing.<sup>9</sup> A growing movement involving a variety of collective actors has shown with greater and greater clarity how there is an unspoken, institutional type of discrimination that occurs in the world of work, and especially in the hiring of professionals. The huge dimensions of the problem can no longer be hidden. This rampant discrimination most typically affects French citizens whose parents or grandparents immigrated from North African. They live in districts where public schools, though theoretically on a par with all other public schools, do not deliver a quality education and produce much failure. They are stigmatized by employers because of their ethnoracial origins or by their address in the neighborhoods they come from. It has been shown, in case after case, that highly qualified job candidates with five or more years of higher education are denied opportunities, because employers do not want to risk hiring someone with an Arab surname or who comes from a reputedly “difficult” neighborhood.

It was not until the late 1990s, under the Socialist Party government of Lionel Jospin, that the French state began to recognize the existence and the massive nature of the problem. And it was only then, that serious reflection began about how to expose discrimination, fight it and prevent it from happening.

The obstacles to such a fight rapidly became apparent. Under French law, discrimination can be proven when the *intention* to discriminate is shown. And in order for that to happen, an employer has to be stupid enough to actually make his prejudice explicit, in writing or recorded conversation. In recent years, some legal efforts have been made to enhance the possibilities

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, the works of Philippe Bataille, *Le racisme au travail*, La Découverte, 1997; Véronique de Rudder, Christian Poiret, François Vourch, *L'inégalité raciste : l'universalisme républicain à l'épreuve*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2000; numerous articles by demographer Patrick Simon, etc.

of proving discrimination by shifting the burden of proof to the accused discriminator, but this has not resulted in any significant rise in the number of convictions. A toll-free number has been instituted to facilitate the reporting of incidents; but few of these are ever acted on, because of the complicated process by which a complaint takes legal form. Local or department-based commissions have been formed to institute a voluntary and euphemistic sort of affirmative action, that is, to promote the job candidacies of youth who would otherwise be likely to fall victim to discrimination in their quest for jobs for which they are certified as qualified. An independent authority, known as the HALDE (*Haute autorité de lutte contre les discriminations et pour l'égalité*), was created by law in 2004. It has been more effective in documenting discrimination than in actually combating it.

Slowly but surely, since the late 1990s, people of a broad range of political sensibilities have begun to come to the conclusion that discrimination is a stubborn problem, and that energetic measures need to be taken. And now that the reflection has reached this point, inevitably the topic of affirmative action has arisen — though it is usually referred to as “positive discrimination.” This term, steeped in bias, was introduced by certain intellectuals consciously seeking to cast such policies in a negative, anti-republican light — but now, the term has stuck and is invoked by more and more people as a desirable option.

It must be said, that the debate over “positive discrimination” has emerged in a particularly confused way. Sarkozy’s famous suggestion in 2003 — soon fulfilled in deed — that a “Muslim”<sup>10</sup> be named *préfet* (appointed representative of the central state in each *département*) was accompanied by the remark that “positive discrimination” may not be a bad thing. However, Sarkozy did not bother to explain what sort of policies he meant, aside from appointing the occasional “Muslim” to such and such a position. Clearly, he could not be referring to US-style affirmative action; he was necessarily referring to something more voluntaristic and less systematic. But, what?

In spite of the reigning confusion on these matters in public discourse, debate on this subject has begun to be placed into sharper legal, political and philosophical focus by several excellent researchers, who have produced insights about “positive discrimination;” which can only encourage the

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<sup>10</sup> Sarkozy never bothered to explain either why he spoke of “Muslims” rather than “Arabs.” Was he harking back, consciously or unconsciously, to the old colonial order in which Algerians were ascriptively classified as “Muslims?”

republican model to become more self-conscious about its approach toward discrimination.<sup>11</sup> One of the incontrovertible results of this discussion is the recognition that the republican model does not now, nor has it ever in practice, required that all citizens be treated in a strictly equal manner in the service of some abstract republican equality. In France, there are already certain forms of “positive discrimination” which do not resemble U.S.-style affirmative action, but whose very existence proves that voluntaristic solutions are possible within the framework of the republican model. Two well-known examples will illustrate this point. First, the legislation, dating from 2000, which enforces gender equality in the electoral arena by requiring political parties to respect gender parity in composing their lists of candidates. (True, this requirement has been honored as much in the breach as in practice, because parties often prefer to pay fines rather than stretch parity into a strict 50-50 reality.) Second, there are measures of “positive discrimination,” which take as their basis not given ethnic or racial groups but given territorial units, providing compensatory measures for disadvantaged school districts and depressed economic zones — usually located in the *banlieues*, built in the urban periphery. (True, the supplementary aid these districts have received is more of a stop-gap measure to reduce very high levels of frustration, and it has made no decisive difference in combating structural inequalities.)

These programs have not produced brilliant results, but their existence demonstrates that measures involving unequal and compensatory treatment can be used to promote the greater goal of equal opportunity, when the criteria retained are those of gender or territory. Which leads inevitably to a sharpened, radicalized debate over ethnic and ethnoracial categorizations: why can’t they, too, be used to promote the same lofty goal? Here is where the debate gets interesting, but also results in great division. The creative confusion to which the republican reference is now being exposed will no doubt continue for some time.

On the one hand, there is the “ultra-republican” attitude, according to which there must be no recourse to ethnoracial categories whatsoever. This attitude has direct political effects, as we have seen, in official statistical methods. Here is one barrier that is not about to go away. Very few demographers within the

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<sup>11</sup> Aside from the work mentioned above (footnote 7), see Gwénaële Calvès, *La discrimination positive*, Presses Universitaires de France, 2003; Daniel Sabbagh, *L'égalité par le droit: les paradoxes de la discrimination positive aux Etats-Unis*, Economica, 2003; and an entire issue of the journal *Pouvoirs*, no. 111, ed. Seuil, 2004.

*Institut national d'études démographiques* (INED) call for more “American-style” data gathering, in which people would be asked to identify with given categories as a general indicator. The one most public proponent of such a solution, demographer Patrick Simon, an activist of the radical left, recognizes the near-impossibility of advancing on this front for the foreseeable future.

On the other hand, there is growing appeal for more voluntary sorts of solutions — “soft” affirmative action without recourse to statistics or ethnicity. For the past several years, the *Institut d'études politiques de Paris*, the elite school commonly known as *Sciences Po*, has begun to diversify its recruitment of students by instituting preparatory classes in several high schools (*lycées*) located in socio-economically depressed areas — the same areas in which children of immigrants are likely to live, although not all students recruited correspond to that profile. The program has, naturally, been contested by those who believe that the meritocratic principles of the republic are being violated; but the program is now in its fifth year, has gathered much support and is likely to continue for a long time.

Over the past two or three years, public and private groups have sprung up with the mission of promoting the professional careers of youth “of immigrant origin” or of members of “minorities” of color. Although some believe these groups are, by definition, engaging in “*communautarisme*” and violating the spirit of the Republic, there is nothing illegal about them and the language they employ remains well within the frame of reference of the republican model. One example is the *Conseil représentatif des associations noires* (CRAN, Representative Council of Black Associations), founded in 2005, which seeks to “be a pressure group in the classic sense and to carry out a republican mission,” according to spokesperson Louis-Georges Tin. Among the “frequently asked questions” on the CRAN’s website is the quintessentially republican (rhetorical) question: “Is the CRAN *communautariste*?” And the answer is:

No. The CRAN works toward equal opportunity, so that the diversity that constitutes French society can be better represented. But this dynamic implies a questioning of established hierarchies. Those who are bothered by such criticisms take refuge behind an abstract universalism which masks (very badly, in fact) a symbolic order that is masculine, white, bourgeois, Catholic, etc. A lazy defense offers itself to those who are ill at ease with diversity: denouncing as “communautaristes” all those who struggle for equality; that is, blacks, Arabs, Jews, homosexuals, etc. Indeed,

the CRAN says yes to universalism, but no to what might be called “uniformism.”<sup>12</sup>

## **THE EMERGING “POSTCOLONIAL” CRITIQUE AND ITS POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS**

On the basis of the challenges to the republican model enumerated so far, one might well wonder whether critical thought has taken up these questions in a more radical manner. The answer is a qualified yes. As mentioned earlier, a new “postcolonial” challenge to the model has been emerging over the past 2-3 years, both among intellectuals and among activists. The intellectual challenge appears to be a sustainable one, with important effects on the way that French society looks upon itself and its history. As we shall see, the political challenge, which of course draws no small inspiration from the intellectual one, is more iffy.

Is racism in France a result of colonialism and of the ethnoracial hierarchies established in the colonial framework? In one sense this is a no-brainer: of course, the main victims of racism in France are natives, or descendants of natives of former French colonial territories — or of territories which have been incorporated as French *départements*, but which remain in some important senses colonies. And, of course, there is a perpetuation of colonial social relations in French society today. This general idea is apparent to anyone who knows an ounce of history, and it has been evoked for years now in the work of people like philosopher Etienne Balibar, and of historian Benjamin Stora, an expert on Algeria and Franco-Algerian relations. Nonetheless, one of the effects of the republican model, in its abstract universalist form, has been to efface colonial history by encouraging good citizens to transcend the painful colonial heritage, to consider it a thing of the past, and to turn resolutely (though obliviously) toward the future.

To combat this tendency toward patriotic and ethnocentric forgetfulness, the emerging postcolonial current of writers, a large number of whom are historians, dedicated its first major campaign to reclaiming the memory of the colonial past, the better to explore its links with the present.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> [http://www.lecran.org/newsdesk\\_info.php?newsPath=34\\_40&newsdesk\\_id=52](http://www.lecran.org/newsdesk_info.php?newsPath=34_40&newsdesk_id=52)

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard, Françoise Vergès, *La République coloniale*, Albin Michel, 2003; Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel et Sandrine Lemaire (eds.), *La fracture coloniale : la société française au prisme de l'héritage coloniale*, La Découverte, 2005, Part I (“Histoire coloniale et enjeux de mémoire”).

*La République coloniale* (The Colonial Republic) was the provocative title of the book published in 2003 by Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard and Françoise Vergès.<sup>14</sup> Their purpose was to show that the Republic has not always operated according to the lofty principle of equality among all citizens; and that during the colonial period, not only were there forms of oppression that systematically maintained colonial subjects in subaltern statuses, but that French metropolitan society was permeated with official racist thinking — couched in universalist, republican rhetoric — to the effect that colonized peoples needed to be raised to the level of modern civilization before they could claim truly equal status.<sup>15</sup>

One of the stakes that the postcolonial authors have defined for themselves is to change the way French history is presented in school textbooks. This became more of a battle than expected with a law that was passed in February 2005; which, bizarrely, incited the national education system to emphasize the “positive achievements” of colonization, particularly in Algeria. In intellectual and educational circles, this law was greeted with more scorn and ridicule than anything else. It is likely that over time the effort to “decolonize” historical memory will succeed, because of the sheer weight of the evidence produced by such authors as Olivier Le Cour Grandmaison, Marcel Dorigny, Benjamin Stora, Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard. These and other authors demonstrate the dehumanizing character of the colonial and slave regimes, and their paradoxical relationship, to say the least, with claims of the Republic that it promotes equality among all citizens.

While historians in the “postcolonial” current tend naturally to emphasize historical memory, there are other even more difficult questions at stake regarding the traces of the colonial heritage in contemporary social life. It is interesting, in this regard, to examine the variety of offerings in the

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<sup>14</sup> Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard, Françoise Vergès, *La République coloniale*, Hachette, 2003.

<sup>15</sup> This dynamic of postcolonial critical thinking in France was not born essentially as an academic movement. It is true that a few of its more cosmopolitan authors are abreast of developments over the past quarter century in Anglo-American philosophy and cultural studies, and are striving to the founding of a Francophone branch of postcolonial studies, drawing with renewed force on the works of Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire. Of this project I will say little here, my main purpose being to explore the connections between this intellectual movement and the attempts to turn it into something more political. Françoise Vergès, who is a native of La Réunion (a French département in the Indian Ocean) and a specialist in Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire and the question of slavery in the French Caribbean, and who happens to work in the UK, is certainly a key figure here. See her recent series of interviews with Aimé Césaire, followed by a long “Postface,” in which she demonstrates the connections between the Anglo-American (and Anglo-Asian) currents of post-colonial thought and the nascent movement in France: Aimé Césaire, *Nègre je suis, nègre je resterai*.

collective volume, *La fracture coloniale* (*The Colonial Fracture*), published by La Découverte in 2005. Beyond the historical dimension of the enterprise, to which the entire first section is devoted, several authors examine, among other aspects, the role of the republican model in suppressing critical thought about race (Achille Mbembe); its role in marginalizing postcolonial migrants and their descendants, while promoting the myth of a French melting-pot, called creuset (Ahmed Boubeker); the neocolonial aspects of French foreign policy (François Gèze); the manifestations of postcolonial racism in social relations in sensitive urban areas, known as *les banlieues* (Didier Lapeyronnie); the mechanisms by which the media stereotype Arabs and Muslims (Thomas Deltombe and Mathieu Rigouste); and the subtle ways in which anti-Arab racism is tied up with gender relations (Nacira Guénif-Souilamas). Patrick Simon, the demographer mentioned earlier, recognizes that the republican model has made concessions to the language of "diversity," if only to hide from itself its own "incredible rigidity... with respect to the existence of minorities." France now faces a choice, he says, between two paths: "a 'soft' valuing of difference in a system which keeps its hierarchies intact and avoids asking about its responsibilities in producing these same differences, and the deconstruction of the supremacy of the majority... and the institution of a pluralist mode of regulation of relations between majority and minorities."<sup>16</sup>

While the professed intention of the postcolonial authors is to demonstrate a link between yesterday's colonialism and today's social relations, most of the authors simply take this link for granted. Urban sociologist Didier Lapeyronnie, one of the few who makes an effort to demonstrate this link, writes:

More than poor people or victims of exclusion, the residents of these areas experience themselves as "colonized people" (*colonisés*), in the sense that Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi or V.S. Naipaul give to this term: they are defined by external and dominant perceptions (*le regard*) and categories, and they end up internalizing these and being "de-realized" by the treatment they receive. The result is a profound and obsessive deficit in self-image, present in all conversations... The social fracture is thus

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*Entretiens avec Françoise Vergès*, Albin Michel, 2006. See also several contributions to *ContreTemps* no. 16, January 2006: "Postcolonialisme et immigration."

<sup>16</sup> Patrick Simon, "La République face à la diversité : comment décoloniser les imaginaires?", in P. Blanchard, N. Bancel et S. Lemaire (eds.), p. 238.

nourished by a “colonial fracture,” which gives it meaning and institutes it as a normative order, as if immigration were inscribed in a colonial relationship that continues beyond independence.

He goes on to say:

Just like colonized people, the inhabitants of the “sensitive zones” have the impression, first of all, that they have no political existence, that they are not considered as citizens, or that they are second-class citizens. Not being actors or citizens, they are submitted to an incessant moral discourse by various institutions, which call on them to “take charge of their lives” ... as if to stress their incapacity to do so.<sup>17</sup>

Because of this “colonial dimension inscribed in the Republic,” which is “at the heart of the experience” of the urban areas inhabited by immigrants and their offspring, Lapeyronnie stresses the urgency of their “reincorporating memories and history” — the one way, he believes, of giving meaning to their experience and allowing “those whom republican universalism has denied” to “construct their own integration into society.”<sup>18</sup>

Further demonstrating the connections between the colonial system *per se* and what some refer to, for lack of a better term, as “postcolonial colonialism”<sup>19</sup> will assuredly be an ongoing project for critical researchers in the coming years.

## THE MILITANT GUISE OF THE POSTCOLONIAL CRITIQUE

Because the “postcolonial” critical current is not merely an academic enterprise, but one with definite political implications, it was only a matter of time before certain of its exponents attempted to build a movement around

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<sup>17</sup> Didier Lapeyronnie, “La banlieue comme théâtre colonial, ou la fracture coloniale dans les quartiers,” in P. Blanchard, N. Bancel et S. Lemaire (eds.), op. cit., p. 210-211.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 218.

<sup>19</sup> The followers of Peruvian sociologist, Aníbal Quijano, an associate of Immanuel Wallerstein, propose an alternative conceptualization, which might prove fruitful as a way of overcoming the ambiguities of “postcolonial colonialism.” I refer to all the work done by Quijano and others, such as Walter Mignolo, Ramón Grosfoguel, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, around Quijano’s concept of “coloniality of power.” See, for example, the editors’ introduction to Ramón Grosfoguel, Nelson Maldonado-Torres and José David Saldivar (eds.), Latin@ in the World-System: Decolonization Struggles in the 21st-Century U.S. Empire, Boulder-London, Paradigm Publishers, 2004, p. 3-27.

their critique. In January 2005, a very mixed group of militants and intellectuals, representing currents of the radical left, activist Islam and feminism, published a manifesto entitled *Nous sommes les indigènes de la République*.<sup>20</sup> This title alone requires no small amount of explanation, for French people as well as others. Literally, it means “We are the indigenous people of the Republic,” but the keyword “indigenous” is used here in a special historical sense to refer, with irony, to the days when the colonial subjects of Algeria were governed by a special code (*le code de l’indigénat*), which wrote into law their differential, subaltern status. To say that one is an “*indigène de la République*” is a mordant way of saying that one is not quite a citizen, or that the promise of equality has been betrayed by a treatment reminiscent of colonialism, if not a direct continuation of it. The subtle irony is lost on many.

The Appeal begins as follows:

Discriminated against in hiring, housing, health, in school and in leisure activities, the people of the ex-colonies or of the current ones, or whose presence in France is a result of post-colonial immigration, are the primary victims of social exclusion and privation. Independently of their actual origins, the populations of the “*quartiers*” [literally, neighborhoods; but it is used as a common euphemism for ghettoized areas] are “indigenized,” that is, relegated to the margins of society. The “*banlieues*” are designated as “zones of lawlessness,” which the Republic is supposed to “reconquer.” Identity checks, provocations and persecutions of all sorts are multiplied; police brutality, sometimes extreme, is only rarely sanctioned by a system of justice that functions at two speeds...

A little further along, Islam comes into the picture:

The colonial mechanisms of the management of Islam have been updated with the creation of the *Conseil français du culte musulman*, under the authority of the Ministry of the Interior. Discriminatory, sexist and racist, the anti-headscarf law is a law of exception that smells of colonialism.

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<sup>20</sup> The followers of Peruvian sociologist, Aníbal Quijano, an associate of Immanuel Wallerstein, propose an alternative conceptualization, which might prove fruitful as a way of overcoming the ambiguities of “postcolonial colonialism.” I refer to all the work done by Quijano and others, such as Walter Mignolo, Ramón Grosfoguel, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, around Quijano’s concept of “coloniality of power.” See, for example, the editors’ introduction to Ramón Grosfoguel, Nelson Maldonado-Torres and José David Saldívar (eds.), *Latin@s in the World-System: Decolonization Struggles in the 21st-Century U.S. Empire*, Boulder-London, Paradigm Publishers, 2004, p. 3-27.

Paragraph two further broadens the appeal while attempting to close a wound of colonial origin: “Equally colonial in nature is the marginalization of the *harkis* and their children.” (*Harkis* are those Algerians who fought on the French side in the Algerian war. They and their families were brought to France and marginalized in camps far from urban centers — an ongoing source of shame in a country that claims to swear by human rights.)

Next, the question of political citizenship is raised:

The categories of people coming out of colonization and immigration are also the object of political discrimination. The few elected officials from these categories are generally limited to the role of token “*beurs*” (Arabs) or “blacks.” The right to vote is refused to those who are not French, but the “national roots” of those who are French are challenged.

After a brief reminder of the system of domination historically embodied by French colonialism, the text goes on to assert that “France remains a colonial state.” Reference is made here to the territories that are formally a part of the French Republic as *départements* (Martinique, Guadeloupe, Guyane, La Réunion) or as overseas territories (Nouvelle Calédonie, Tahiti, etc.), but whose level of development is far below that of the metropole. “In France,” the text states, “the children of these colonies are consigned to the status of immigrants — second-class French citizens who do not have all their rights.” Then, the question of neocolonialism is briefly taken up: “In certain of its former colonies, France continues to have policies of domination. A great part of local wealth is sucked up by the former metropole and by international capital.”

The Appeal comes to the heart of the matter with the assertion that “the treatment of populations who are products of colonization prolongs colonial policy.” However, the text is clear that such treatment is not *reducible* to its colonial dimension. The treatment in question is summed up as follows:

Not only is the principle of equality before the law not respected, but the law itself is not always equal (as witnessed by the “double punishment” of prison followed by deportation imposed on some; the observation of repressive codes of personal status for women of Maghrebin and Sub-Saharan origin)... The figure of the “*indigène*”... has become interwoven with other logics of social oppression, discrimination or exploitation. Thus, today, in

the context of neoliberalism, immigrant workers are made to play the role of deregulators of the labor market in order to facilitate the extension of the logics of precarious living and flexible production to the entire wage-earning population.

Next, the republican model — or a certain dogmatic version of it — comes in for a direct hit, as the Appeal associates it with “Bushian, clash-of-civilization” thinking:

certain “ideologues” who receive heavy media attention are recycling the theory of the “clash of civilizations” in the local language of the conflict between “Republic” and “communautarisme,” [resulting in] an attempt to pit Berbers against Arabs, Jews against “Arab-Muslims” and blacks. . . . Under the rubric — never defined — of “fundamentalism” (*intégrisme*), the populations of African, Maghrebin or Muslim origin are identified as being the “fifth column” of a new barbarism threatening the West and its “values.”

Such thinking, the text asserts, is not the monopoly of the far right or the right in general, but has also spread “like gangrene” among progressive forces. It would have been more helpful, in my opinion, had the appeal been more explicit on this score, rather than suggesting that the entire left is affected by this vicious malady; which I do not think is true.

What, then, needs to be done to remedy this situation? Two types of measures are recommended. First, “the state and society need to make a radical critical return to their colonial past/present. It is high time for France to question the Enlightenment; high time for the egalitarian universalism, affirmed during the French Revolution, to repel the form of nationalism that clings to the “chauvinism of the universal,” which is thought to “civilize” savages...” Second, “it is time to promote radical measures of justice and equality in order to put an end to racist discrimination in access to jobs, housing culture and citizenship,” eliminating those “institutions which relegate populations who are products of colonization to a sub-human status.”

The text ends with an appeal to dignity, drawing inspiration from oppressed colonized peoples of past generations, and then invites signers and sympathizers to attend the “*Assises de l’anti-colonialisme*” (*Anti-colonial Assembly*) to prepare a “common struggle of all oppressed and exploited people for a social democracy that is truly egalitarian and universal.”

This Assembly, which took place in spring of 2005, was not broadly attended, nor was the Appeal itself able to reap wide support among critical intellectuals invited to sign it (see the full list of signers on the website indicated in footnote 20). Many intellectuals whose antiracist credentials cannot be challenged and who have not hesitated to question the republican model in its dogmatic guise refused to sign the text. Some found it badly written and full of inaccuracies or vague allusions; others found it strange to be invited to identify as “colonial natives” (or descendants of such), since they themselves were not; still others were worried that the insistence on colonial relations was a way of assuming a victim status rather than striving toward equality in a future-oriented way. Entire political organizations, such as the *Ligue communiste révolutionnaire*, a neo-trotskyist group of some intellectual influence on the left, were split down the middle by the appeal. A few prominent feminists signed the appeal (sociologist Christine Delphy being one of its originators); but many others were leery of any public association with the controversial figure of Swiss theologian and activist Tariq Ramadan, who has been stigmatized by many as a fundamentalist and an enemy of the Republic, although his public pronouncements would tend to show that he is in search of a sincere dialogue, with the western left in particular, over the status of Islam and Muslims.

The Appeal, whatever its flaws, became the founding statement of a movement, known as the *Mouvement des indigènes de la République*, which has been struggling ever since, amidst much controversy and internal dissension, to work its way into the French political landscape. In a document entitled *Qui sommes-nous?* (“Who are we?”), a synthesis of the movement’s first plenary debate, held on March 13, 2006,<sup>21</sup> the movement’s spokespersons seek to make it clear that “the ‘we’ of the *Indigènes de la République* is neither ethnic, nor religious nor cultural nor based on origins . . . our identity is secular and political.” This identity is defined, they say,

in opposition to those who deny the existence of forms of discrimination based on origin and those who recognize these forms but consider them secondary, as well as those who recognize them but adopt an attitude of impotence (“we can’t do anything about it, except wait for time to have an effect”); in opposition to those who refuse to recognize that France remains a colonial power and is still characterized internally by a postcolonial situa-

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<sup>21</sup> For the complete text in French, go to [http://www.indigenes-republique.org/auteur.php3?id\\_auteur=19](http://www.indigenes-republique.org/auteur.php3?id_auteur=19).

tion; to those who defend “positive discrimination,” only to avoid attacking the social structures themselves; to those who are content to denounce the symptoms without questioning the causes.

The *Mouvement des indigènes* has a designated enemy: not individual racists and their conduct, but “systematic discrimination” as manifested in “organizations, hiring procedures, competitive exams, mechanisms of professional orientation, and tacit practices in the distribution of public housing.”

As for the criticisms levelled at the movement about the notion of *indigènes* being inappropriate or imprecise or overly oriented toward victimhood, here is the reply: “Although researchers... may accuse us of lacking precision, this expression speaks to us and speaks to the *indigènes*, because it designates a real experience.” The term, they write, “expresses a present reality and not a timid withdrawal into a particular identity.” It will disappear “when equality becomes a reality in our country.”

Why an autonomous movement of *indigènes*? Because “no political or trade-union force has given the necessary attention to the populations emerging from colonization.” This autonomy is “neither a goal nor an ideal, but a necessary means for building alliances on the basis of equality.” Nonetheless, the *indigènes* do not claim to have a “generalist” vocation or to replace other social movements striving for equality.

It is too early to tell whether the *Mouvement des indigènes de la République* will achieve any lasting success in forging a specific role for itself in a crowded field of militant groups. Its very existence, however, suggests that something is changing in the world of the French republican model. An open challenge is being mounted to those who claim, based on a dogmatic understanding of the spirit of the model, that organizing as “minorities” is in and of itself an activity subversive of republican citizenship. At a time when the movement against the *Contrat de première embauche* (CPE) has succeeded in unifying the entire left with youth of all conditions in a successful protest against a patently neoliberal governmental program (I refer you again to the article in this issue by Dennis Broe) — and when protests against repressive immigration policies have some potential, as well, to reunify progressive forces — it is troubling to some that the left is divided by issues pertaining to memory and identity, but this is no doubt a necessary moment in the clarification of questions that have too long been swept under the rug in the name of an abstract republican unity.