

Islamophobia, race and the attack on antiracism: Gavan Titley and Alana Lentin in conversation



Gavan Titley¹ and Alana Lentin²

Abstract

In our work together, going back to the mid-2000s, we have always felt that it was impossible to engage fully with the ever circulating, scavenger nature of race and racism from the narrow Anglo-American vantage point that often predominates and orients public and scholarly discussions. Especially, when attempting to think with and against race in Europe and to excavate the attempts to ‘bury it alive’ we always attempted to seek out the parallels and overlaps between contexts that attempted to portray themselves as distinct, mirroring indeed the sedimentation created by a politics of race. Reading race in France, and in particular over the last two decades Islamophobia, has been central to that work in common. In this conversation, we reflect on debates on race, coloniality and the spectre of ‘Islamism’ in the France of 2020–2021, against the backdrop of both a global pandemic and a worldwide movement against racial violence. Through this dialogue, we think about what has changed, and what remains the same, ending with a recognition of the international importance of decolonial and political antiracist politics in France and the energy they inspire in the face of the most reactionary of forces.

Keywords

France, decoloniality, ‘Islamism’, Islamophobia, political antiracism, race, racism

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You have long suggested, Alana, the need for a conversation about what makes France an exemplar of all that is pressing about the contemporary onslaught on antiracism. Turning to it now, in the spring of 2021, the question is increasingly central, and also critical to understanding the specific trajectories and wider productivity of contemporary Islamophobia. There is plenty to work through, theoretically and historically, in making this connection. And, our shared work has, contra the self-declared exceptionalism of the political formations we analyse, always emphasised the importance of discursive genealogies and the generativity of transnational ideological and communicative flows. Nevertheless it is important to do some detailed contextualisation of the current political moment in France, as the extent of the legislative, political, and ideological onslaught on anti-racist movements and ideas, as nothing less than a threat to the Republic, requires urgent attention and therefore demands some initial mapping.

In the book *After Charlie Hebdo: Terror, Racism and Free Speech* (Titley et al., 2017) that we were both involved in, the idea of violent and traumatic incidents as transformative ‘events’ is widely considered. That is, a key aspect of the authoritarian response to the 2015 attacks was a dependence on political spectacle, framing them as a necessarily definitive rupture between past and present, a break that therefore demands renewed moral clarity and ideological purpose, and leads to the performance of ‘. . . a largely symbolic politics with real repressive effects’ (Valenta, 2017: 133). This combination of the symbolic and the repressive is the established grammar of anti-Muslim racism in France – and western Europe more broadly – and it has been notably reinvigorated over the last half year. The vicious assassination of Samuel Paty in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine on 16 October 2020 has driven a marked intensification of repressive governmental intervention, and licenced a discursive free-for-all on the ‘question of Islam’. As Pierre Tévanien (2020) wrote in the week after the murder, the sadness and horror of the moment was already foreshadowed by awareness as to how quickly the death of a fellow educator was being politically instrumentalised, and integrated to the securitarian logics ascendant after the attacks of 2015.

Reflecting back on this state response in May 2021, Marwan Mohammed (2021), in a neat inversion of political register, has described it as a ‘radicalisation of Islamophobia in France’. This intensification has proceeded on a number of fronts. Still in process at the time of writing, what came to be called the ‘anti-separatism’ legislation first proposed in February 2021 promises a raft of yet-to-be-ratified measures which mark an explicit return to the spectacular politics of the prohibition of religious symbols and practices in public. This intensified policing

of public space is co-joined to an increasingly explicit – internal – border politics, potentially tying the renewal of identity cards and social security benefits to respect for ‘Republican values’. In December 2020, the government dissolved the Collectif contre l’islamophobie en France (CCIF) by way of the *code de la sécurité intérieure*, levelling extraordinary accusations of support for terrorism—with Interior Minister, Gérald Darmanin going so far as to describe it as an ‘enemy of the republic’¹—against an internationally recognised anti-discrimination organisation. This attack on associative freedoms may be further expanded, in the proposed legislation, to interventions in political campaigns, a move which adds a specifically anti-Muslim complement to the wider assault on civil liberties and political freedom symbolised by the – recently passed – *loi sécurité globale*.

From one perspective, the renewed relentlessness of the political pressure heaped on Muslims in this period has a familiar feel, with reliable set-piece controversies being re-animated or adapted. The passage of the ‘anti-separatism’ bill has been accompanied, for example, by a new front in the struggle against public religiosity, this time an amendment targeting a projected epidemic of ‘Islamic prayer in university corridors’. We can recall here Emmanuel Terray’s (2004) assessment of the 2004 ‘headscarf law’, as one where the ‘hysterical community’ ‘. . . substitute[s] a fictive problem that can be solved purely in terms of discourse and symbols’. It comes as no surprise, then, when this ‘problem’ is revealed to have little or no basis in reality,² nor when this revelation has little purchase on the political vitality of the projection – the shallow tendency to focus debates about ‘post-truth’ on the disruptive effect of the Internet and social media obscures how this fantasy structure of fictive substitution is integral to nationalist articulation. What matters, as Sivamohan (2019) Valluvan argues, is as much the form as the substance of such ‘debates’:

. . . the exclusionary principle that the nation hinges on not only ‘inferiorises’ those who are defined as not belonging but also renders the excluded Other the overdetermined and outsized object of political discourse – determining in turn the character and content of putatively democratic deliberation writ large . . . To be at the sharp end of a nationalist politics is to know yourself not only as an outsider, but also as an outsider who is actively and incessantly spoken of. (pp. 35–36)

Mayanthi Fernando (2021), therefore, is clearly correct to approach these punitive spectacles as a somewhat desperate – and depressing – politics of repetition. It is driven both by an exhausted dependence on this substitutionalism and its mediatised dividends, and the specific calculations of Emmanuel Macron’s ‘rightward turn’ – a shift informed both by the electoral threat of Marine Le Pen, and, as Fernando argues, the glaring intractability of structural

unemployment, precariousness and social inequality, and the very real spectre of social unrest. In her assessment, this ‘political theater’ is a grubbily familiar script burnished for a new stage:

Making the threat of Islamist separatism front and center, Macron’s government has committed to a law-and-order paradigm that seeks to re-establish national identity, republican values, and the authority of the Republic. What is ironic – both farce and tragedy – is that neoliberal restructuring has always been a political decision, made and instituted by governing elites like Macron. By scapegoating Islam, these political elites disavow their own responsibility for the precarious situation in which many French citizens find themselves. That is the farce.

The tragedy is the punishing ritual enactment of law and order on Black and Brown people. This ritual works through a kind of synecdoche: by re-establishing republican authority in one domain – on Muslims – the French state seems to, and is seen to, re-establish its authority in all domains. This is also political theater, of course, but effective theater nonetheless: the political decisions, by Macron and by his predecessors, that have made social and economic life precarious for many French are both obfuscated and symbolically resolved by ‘taking action’ against always-suspect Muslims. Republican authority is ‘reasserted’ on Muslim lives and Muslim bodies, all in the name of French secularism. (Fernando, 2021)

Of course, to complete this initial temperature-taking exercise, we need to consider the backdrop of Covid-19, and here also it may be plausible to see the endless debating in French politics and media of the object of ‘Islamism’ as a distraction from the failures of the state to protect the population deep in a pandemic, which continues as we write to cause the loss of life and human security. As Ilyes Ramdani (2021) puts it, it is certainly odd that in the midst of a public health crisis, ‘Senators spent hours debating the veil, public swimming pools, flags at marriages, and prayers at universities’. Philippe Marlière (2021), for his part, notes that the launching of a culture war at the very time that Covid-19 in France was at its most murderous goes hand-in-hand with the anaesthetisation ‘of social movements and the paralys[ing] of the struggles against social inequality’. He correctly states that ‘the government, the forces of the right, of the extreme right, and sometimes even the left’ have used the Covid crisis to reinvigorate a moral panic about the presumed threat to the French republic and its universalist values in order to delegitimize those struggling against economic, as well as racial and gendered discrimination.

At the same time, the repetition and distraction of a ‘symbolic politics with repressive effects’ is only part of the story. What also characterises this period is, inter alia, a striking resemblance between attacks on anti-racism in France and in the Anglophone world, that is, in the sites so often held up as the race-obsessed, multicultural other of French republican

exceptionalism. Furthermore, these broadly comparable attacks are strangely idealist, insisting on the putatively subversive power of theoretical ideas-in-themselves – ‘critical race theory’, ‘intersectionality’ ‘decoloniality’, and so forth—to effect profound ideological effects. So, as in the French national assembly, so also the parliaments of the United Kingdom, Denmark, Australia and state assemblies in the United States, critical theories of race and gender are being discussed as a threat to political and social cohesion, an elaborate and frantic re-working of the postracial commonplace that to speak of race is to enact racism where it does not or no longer exists. Thus, across these sites, there has been a marked intensification of political attacks on academic freedom—and also violent harassment of academics – that are motivated by a political desire to marginalise anti-racist ideas in the wider public domain as a toxic leakage from increasingly politicised, and politically vulnerable, universities. The intensification of these attacks in the slipstream of the anti-racist energy inspired by 2020’s Black Lives Matter mobilisations is not accidental; the focus on university indoctrination seeks to frame anti-racism as not just excessive and extreme in societies hegemonically convinced of their own postracial innocence, but also as driven by ‘imported’ concepts being foisted on ‘ordinary people’.

This too is a symbolic politics with real, repressive effects, but it strikes me that, while there are clear antecedents for this—where radical, anti-state and anticolonial antiracism has gained ground, it has always been attacked for purported sectarianism or, in the French context, ‘communautarisme’ – that this bizarre idealism and transnational synchronicity require exploration. Furthermore, if we take the United States and United Kingdom as points of comparison, the backlash against anti-racism is not as invested in state Islamophobia as it is in France. Perhaps you could reflect on this somewhat, and take up the specific modality of this in France, which is the notion of ‘Islamogauchisme’?

Alana Lentin

We could dive straight into that and argue that the current level of obsession with the spectre of ‘Islamogauchisme’ may be properly read as a stand-in for a deep anxiety striking at the heart of Europe regarding the stability of future whiteness as signified through the hegemonic markers of democracy, human rights, secularism, and the like; the carriers of coloniality in the neocolonial age. It’s no accident, for example, that it was in France that we saw anti-white racism being made the object, not only of mainstream political discourse, but also of legal pursuit as in the case of Houria Bouteldja. We wrote 10 years ago in *The Crises of Multiculturalism*, about the ultimately unsuccessful case taken against Bouteldja, then the spokesperson of the Parti des indigènes de la République, for ‘anti-white racism’ by the far

right-wing AGRIF group (Lentin and Titley, 2011: 67). We also wrote about the endorsement by antiracism organisations—that political antiracists in France refer to as the proponents of ‘moral antiracism’—of a statement against ‘anti-white racism’ which was made equivalent with the racism aimed at Black, Brown, migrant, Muslim and Roma people and so on (Lentin and Titley, 2018). So that anxiety about whiteness and the wish to protect it from perceived harm coming from negatively racialised people – particularly when they are from the *banlieues* and seen as posing a threat of violence – who are portrayed as having the upper hand, has been around for a good while.

The backdrop for this is the first decade of the twenty-first century which was framed by a narrative of civilisational decline, a Europe under threat from a proliferating and uniquely violent threat in the form of the chimeric figure of the Muslim, heralding in the more extreme variants on this discourse, the spectre of ‘Eurabia’. France is often seen as at the vanguard of this European brand of Islamophobia. Its early move to ban Muslim school-goers from wearing a hijab in 2004 set the tone for a newfound acceptability in the post-multicultural age, such as it was construed by elites and pundits, of repressive measures targeting not just the spectre of ‘Islamist terrorism’, but the significations of faith displayed by individual Muslim people. Certainly, France has had at its disposal the ideological armoury of universalism and a manipulated interpretation of its doctrine of ‘laïcité’ to make the argument that public religiosity runs counter to citizenship, a framework not as easily available to other states. Indeed, the draft ‘anti-separatist law’ which you mention essentially bakes Islamophobic hysteria into law, demonstrates the extent to which an obsession with Islam and Muslims has become the dominant mode in which a largely fictive Frenchness is asserted and reproduced.

As you set out, Gavan, politics and the media in a France emerging from a period of intensified social conflict – particularly over the Macron government’s veering into accelerated austerity predominantly affecting the young working class who, like elsewhere, are significantly Black and Brown – have become obsessed with debating the polyvalent object of ‘French values’. It is in this context that, following the assassination of Samuel Paty by a young man of Chechen origin, a renewed fervour about the threat posed by ‘Islamism’ became the order of the day. The killing of Paty allowed for the suturing together of a number of ideological strands long deployed by the French state and its elites. While the spectre of ‘Islamogauchisme’ has accompanied the particularly French brand of Islamophobia at least since the emergence of the Mouvement des indigènes de la république (MIR, subsequently PIR) in 2005, today the obsession with the influence of ‘Islamism’ on French social and cultural life takes particular aim at education and civil society where it is said to have entered and spread far beyond the realm of

Muslims themselves. Hence, in addition to the deeply punitive ‘Anti-Separation law’ with its direct targeting of observant Muslims as ‘matter out of place’ in public life, the specific focus on the purported impact of an ‘Islamic leftist’ ideology in the realm of education widens the net far beyond those who are actual adherents of Islam, or those who can be racialised as such.

It is in this atmosphere that, directly after the Paty killing, the Minister of Education, Jean-Michel Blanquer, could assert that ‘indigenist, racist, and “decolonial” ideologies’, imported from North America, were responsible for ‘conditioning’ the violent extremist who assassinated the school teacher. Following up, the Minister for Higher Education, Frédérique Vidal called for an investigation into ‘Islamogauchisme’ within French universities. This followed her claim on 14 February that Islamogauchisme was having a gangrenous effect on the whole of French society. Seeing the transparency of Vidal’s statements as a ‘weaponisation of science’, the French national research institute, the CNRS, denounced the attempt to ‘delegitimise various fields of research, such as postcolonial studies, intersectional studies or research on the term “race,” or any other area of knowledge’.³

These attacks on educators have rightly garnered condemnation from scholars across the world, however, it is important to note how these attacks work to widen the net beyond Muslims to all those who are deemed not to ‘respect the principles of the Republic’, and thus serves to undergird the state’s determination to outlaw autonomous expression by racialised people. The neologism, ‘Islamogauchiste’, said to describe an alliance between elements on the left and reactionary Muslims – ‘designating those who, in the name of a communitarian perspective and an Americanisation of identity, combat universalist feminism and laïcité’, in the words of the Islamophobic radical secularist, Caroline Fourest – is thus transported into the realms of policy-making. What this alerts us to is the targeting of an amorphous group of educators, activists, researchers and others as collaborators whose purported acceptance of religious fundamentalism enables their shunning and even criminalisation by an ever more authoritarian state in alliance with those who badge themselves feminist, pro-LGBT, and yes, antiracist. We saw this with the statement on anti-white racism I mentioned before which was signed by the two oldest French antiracist organisations, the MRAP and the LICRA, the latter in particular becoming a major mouthpiece for an anti-Muslim as well as a pro-Israel agenda (the two often going hand-in-hand). On this, we will remember the February 2019 protest by politicians, led by Macron together with these mainstream antiracist groups and the representatives of the official Jewish community in France following anti-Zionist remarks made by pro-Palestine *gilets jaunes* demonstrators against Alain Finkielkraut, a central figure in French anti-antiracism and Islamophobia.⁴ So, it is undeniable that in France there is a strong alignment between

mainstream antiracism organisations endorsed by the state and an expressly colonialist and often anti-Muslim positioning that insists on a separation between universalist antiracist ideals and the actual demands of activists whose politics are anti-statist and anti-imperialist including anti-Zionist. This of course is not new: unlike most other countries, there is a long tradition of French official antiracism according to which racism is an anathema to the Republic (Lentin, 2004) and, so the idea of institutional or state racism is seen as a contradiction in terms.

Coming back to the intense focus on ‘islamo-gauchisme’, the point I want to stress about the current scenario is that the attention given to education and research as realms in which French republican values are said to be disrespected, and consequently weakened, ultimately ricochets back on to marginalised, racialised groups. Far from the lecture halls and lycée classrooms where the work of counter-republican ideological brainwashing is said to be being done – importing a foreign North American obsession with racial difference – it is most often people who are excluded entirely from higher education, from adequate schooling and dignified employment who are its ultimate targets. They are not seen as capable of developing thought independent of either manipulative imams or difference-obsessed teachers, drunk on shiny American theory, forgetting the Republic whose meritocratic colourblindness is that which gave them education in the first place.

The current obsession with the sites of education as places of manipulation and ‘indigenist’ indoctrination is intimately connected with the question of how, or indeed whether, to publicly discuss the longer history of colonialism and ongoing coloniality. But I think it’s entirely consistent with long-standing efforts, which are not unique to France, to shut down the interrogation of colonialism and its continued shaping of so-called postcolonial Metropolitan societies. Anecdotally, I remember going to watch *The Battle of Algiers* in a cinema in Paris in around 2004 which was the first time it had been shown after having been censored in France for 40 years.⁵ And when I carried out my primary research for my PhD, which I published as *Racism and Antiracism in Europe* (Lentin, 2004), I was told by one of my interviewees, an older white French antiracist activist, in a phrase that has always stayed with me, that ‘France has a problem with *its* Algeria’.

Mythicised re-tellings about the inclusivity and colourblindness of French universalism obscure the extent to which a colonial vision continues to underwrite France’s relationship with those who, to paraphrase C.L.R. James, are *in*, but not *of* it. So, it is not surprising that the efforts of educators and students to bring that colonial present to the fore and to work actively to decolonise knowledges, institutions and social and political relations is perceived as a threat, be it in France or elsewhere across the Global North. Particularly when it comes to the centrality of

Muslim women to the construction of contemporary Islamophobia, the ideological war to ‘save’ Muslim women from the ‘obscurantism’ of Islam did not, begin in 1994. It was famously Frantz Fanon (1965) who observed that the French occupying force in Algeria targeted the hijab, defining what he called a ‘precise political doctrine’ which declared ‘if we want to destroy the structure of Algerian society, its capacity for resistance, we must first of all conquer the women; we must go and find them behind the veil where they hide themselves’ (pp. 37–38).

What has perhaps subtly changed, although this is a matter of discourse rather than practice, is the openly repressive character of the euphemistically named ‘anti-separatist’ law. While France’s relationship to its ‘Indigènes’ may in the past have been expressed in the softer terms of assimilationist inclusion, the full force of the state has been exercised against those who were always characterised as irredeemable: the *racaille* of the wildernesses of the structurally neglected *banlieues*. What we have now is a ‘mask-off’ authoritarianism addressing not only the usual suspects but also those who are seen as their abettors. The mistake would be to see this merely as a strategic centrist attempt to fold in far-right ideas with the aim of warding off their electoral success (which may well come anyway). Rather, the extension of racist authoritarianism beyond its habitual targets is the culmination of a project of racial-colonial rule that must always extend to ‘race traitors’ to achieve full hegemony. Having said this, it is important not to forget that the current war waged on the ideological front does not translate to a cessation of the violence meted out by the police and in prisons, the recurrent deaths in custody, the brutality of daily interaction between these ‘forces of order’ and poor Black and Brown people, as campaigns such as the *Collectif des familles des victimes tuées par la police* bring to light. In fact, the ideological front serves merely to spread this violence, or rather its threat. While it is the poor and the racialised who bear its brunt, it is traitorous academics and insurgent activists who legitimate it by endorsing anarchic, foreign anti-Frenchness. That anticolonial resistance was always a feature of Black and Brown existence in the metropole, not necessitating the rubber stamping of the academy, appears a point lost on those for whom thought must always be either engineered or policed.

Gavan Titley

Your resistance to any straightforward idea that we can understand the racist politics of the current conjuncture as a more-or-less straightforward process of an opportunistic centre ‘mainstreaming’ far-right ideas reminds me that a lot of the thinking we are doing here began to come together in *The Crises of Multiculturalism: Racism in a Neoliberal Age* (Lentin and Titley, 2011). The invitation to contribute our thoughts on Islamophobia, Racialisation and

Cultural Studies in France allows us the opportunity to reflect on what we have learnt from observing the politics of race in the French context since we began working on that book in 2008.

As you note, this idea of ‘mainstreaming’ has never been sufficient to account for the multi-faceted production of racist discourse in France, or anywhere else, and I will come to that below in sketching some parallels between the obsession with multiculturalism in the 2000s, and the hysteria about ‘imported concepts’ right now. At the same time, it is worth considering carefully the much-discussed ‘mainstreaming’ of far-right discourse in the context of the Macron government, most recently noted in a call, published in May in *Libération* by a broad grouping of trade unionists, left-wing politicians, activists and academics, to take a stand against ‘far-right ideas as they spread to the government’.⁶ We can do this by remaining with the frenetic politics of anti-separatism a while longer.

The sudden conjuring up of the spectre of university corridor prayers by Les Républicains as an issue during the debate on the ‘anti-separatism’ legislation certainly echoes Marine le Pen’s infamous comments in 2010, describing Muslims at Friday prayers in the street as an ‘occupation’. At the same time, the other panicked amendment proposed during this period, targeting purported racial ‘separatism’ in student union meetings and driven by Marlène Schiappa of La République en marche, is a carbon copy of the Socialist mayor of Paris Anne Hidalgo’s attempt in 2017 to ban the Nyan-sapo Afro-Feminist festival on the grounds that it was ‘banning whites from attending’. It seems to me that these pliable obsessions indicate that a number of things are happening simultaneously, including what could be termed far-right mainstreaming, but also wholesale competition to intensify a politics of punitive spectacle across the centre to right.

Concomitantly, the latter incident underlines your point about the wider purview of ‘mask-off authoritarianism’, in that the focus on asserting ‘Republican values’ has produced a renewed surveillance of anti-racist activism that is held to promote ‘separatism’. In this witch hunt, the practice of facilitating ‘non-mixed’ groups – of, for example, racialised women – aiming to build understanding and solidarity around a shared experience of oppression is held up as anti-democratic, despite, as some commentators have pointed out, its place as a practice in histories of popular mobilisation from the Commune to Nuit Debout (Dasinieres, 2021). The reason, of course, is that these forms of solidarity are easy to represent in the terms of the dominant Republican insistence that any attention to race is a failure to respect the principle of the Republic, an argument that, when reproduced in these political debates easily becomes extended to the accusation that you note as taking shape in the Sarkozy era, that it is de facto ‘racist

against whites’.

Macron’s ‘right turn’ is assembled from all of these available materials. On the one hand, his relatively recent shift from ‘communautarisme’ to ‘séparatisme’ is consistent with, as Nabli and Matyjasik (2020) argue, a ‘sarko-vallsiste’ co-joining of the ‘securitarian and identitarian dimensions of republicanism’. This is evident in how the projection of separatism is infused with a far more active, divisive agency, where, according to Macron, separatism is ‘when, in the name of religion, or of this or that external influence, one says “I no longer respect the laws of the Republic”’ (Nabli and Matyjasik, 2020). At the same time, as David Chavalarias (2021) has shown in a study of the usage of the term ‘Islamogauchisme’ on Twitter between 2017 and 2020, the term has been integrated into the governmental lexicon after having been ‘massively and near exclusively used by accounts from the far-right’. And, in this rapid translation, it retains a key, radical nationalist insistence on treachery, of acting as an enemy of the Republic. This is certainly the danger recognised in the call published in *Libération*.

We should recognise that this focus on externally imported threats, while certainly quasi-fascistic, has another important political grammar. Let me take up, then, the suggestive parallels between the intensive focus on ‘multiculturalism’ we wrote about previously, and the wider spectrum of dangerous ‘imported’ ideas today, to reflect a little on this question of mainstreaming and the extent to which it enhances and/or limits understandings of racialising politics. In that book, we were interested in the ways that a largely exaggerated and frequently fictive multicultural past provided the foundations for a prevalent narrative of multicultural failure, a history of tolerance and generosity that facilitated ‘migrant’ cultural excess or separatism, and that thus now required recuperative forms of integration and socio-cultural disciplining. In the gap between empirical histories of weak and patchy state and institutional multicultural commitment and provision, and strong narratives of a coherent multiculturalism having been tried and failed, a politics of ‘assertive integration’ was given shape:

The range of processes of social dissolution and varieties of anomie that multiculturalism is held responsible for is scarcely credible. Blamed for everything from parallel societies to gendered horror to the incubation of terrorism, the extent to which multiculturalism was given official imprimatur, public support or governmental form in any context is regarded as somewhat irrelevant. As a loose assemblage of culturally pluralist sentiments, aspirations and platitudes, or more darkly as a euphemism for lived multiculturalism, it provides a mobilizing metaphor for a spectrum of political aversion and racism that has become pronounced in western Europe (Lentin and Titley, 2011: 3).

The narrative of multicultural failure provided a kind of postracial alibi, a way of re-

centering the problem of racialised ‘migrant’ populations in emerging forms of neoliberal governmentality. ‘We tried, they failed’, and thus social and cultural cohesion required a renewed focus, the argument went, on a combination of individual autonomy and ‘shared values’ that problematic populations would need to demonstrate not just their loyalty to, but compatibility with. Most obviously, in these prime years of the ‘war on terror’, it was Muslims who were the central focus of a spectacular politics of prohibition – banning religious symbols – and proscription; you must demonstrate to us that you subscribe to values that are simultaneously presented as universally valid and particularly national. I’ll let you dive deeper subsequently into the ways in which the threat of – multiculturalist – ‘communitarianism’ was mobilised in France during this period, legitimating the hardened *néo-laïc* politics that has dominated the post-2015 landscape. For now, I will focus on the shared, generic elements of backlash politics. Take the striking similarities between a French hostility to the importation of ‘Anglo multiculturalism’ and the concomitant British rejection of a specious multicultural past. Writing about Conservative government of David Cameron and its ‘muscular liberalism of British values’, Jan Dobbernak (2014) makes the important point that these political initiatives were not ‘stimulus-response models’ determined by the actually existing sociality of British Muslims, but were rather a ‘display of sovereign assertiveness for which the implementation of liberal ideas offers nothing more or less than a conduit’ (p. 15).

I think it is the performance of sovereign assertiveness that Dobbernak identifies which has become more marked in the attack on anti-racisms. The conjoined ferocity and absurdity of these attacks seem to be informed, in France but also internationally, by a combination of political exhaustion and perpetual motion, that is, of ideologies that reproduce themselves not through processes of substantive renewal but through a frenzied surveillance of threats that function best when unmoored from any substantive referent. The attack on Islamo-gauchisme that you detail, Alana, has obviously been taking shape over time and through intersecting strands, and it certainly intensified after 2015 when it became more and more pronounced, politically, to accuse activists and academics of ‘victim-blaming’ and of ‘intellectual complicity’ in terrorism and radicalisation (then-Prime Minister Manuel Valls’ 2015 pronouncement that ‘to explain is to excuse’ is perhaps the most egregious of these). And, as Nadia Fadil (2020) has argued, building on Vincent Geisser’s (2004) notion of ‘Islamismophobia’, the nationalist-securitarian hardening of *laïcité* positions any form of public religiosity as a manifestation of ‘political Islam’, and therefore entire fields of study that confront this determinism with any kind of minimal complexity and context are opened to the expansive charge of ‘Islamogauchisme’.

National cohesion and non-racism is made possible by the given values of the Republic, yet it is anti-racism which legitimates difference and incites separatism through what is presented as a hyper-theoretical radicalism, dangerous concepts that, in a kind of bucket theory of mind, emanate from the academy to legitimise the wilful lack of assimilation to republican values that ‘Islamist’ Muslims stand accused of. This is a key manoeuvre of what you term ‘mask-off authoritarianism’, in that it acts coercively in defence of democracy – for example, in the debate over the *loi de programmation pour la recherche*, the argument was that academic freedom could be regulated to ensure that, contra the barely disguised activism of ‘Islamogauchisme’, intellectual inquiry is conducted within the parameters of ‘respect for the values of the republic’. The coordinates of backlash against anti-racism are thus highly particular, but they are also strikingly generic. The irony is that it is through the obsession with the problematic foreignness of theory–imported and imposed on the innocent polity – that the generic, transnational character of the ‘display of sovereign assertiveness’ comes into view.

In *The Crises of Multiculturalism*, one of the key ideas we explored was the production and circulation of what Michel de Certeau (1984) termed ‘recited truths’, that is, social facts produced through the resilient circulation of narrative and intensively mediated repetition, and which thus, in a ‘forest of narrativities [. . .] have a providential and predestining focus’ (p. 186). This is clearly what is happening with the fashioning of stereotypes of dangerous theory; as Éléonore Lépinard and Sarah Mazouz (2021) point out in the introduction to their pamphlet *Pour l’intersectionnalité*, after Jean-Michel Blanquer, in the immediate aftermath of Paty’s murder, pointed to the complicity of ‘une matrice intellectuelle venue des universités américaines et des thèses intersectionnelles’ (p. 5). Of course, as they point out, the subsequent debate involved the production of a sliding signifier, ‘intersectionality’, which bore no relation to any recognisable body of academic thought. It’s no surprise to find, then, some months later, the Danish right-wing, which has watched France closely since the 2005-6 *Jyllands Posten* ‘cartoon crisis’, stage a series of debates in parliament targeting ‘politics disguised as science’ – with shamefully little resistance from the social democratic left. The ‘excessive activism’ in question? Gender theory and the study of race and racism (Bothwell, 2021). Travelling further, in all sorts of ways, take the coordinated attempts to outlaw the teaching of ‘critical race theory’ in a bunch of US states legislatures as part of a drive to combat the ‘promotion of divisive concepts’ that present the United States as ‘fundamentally racist’ (Harris, 2021). In the most recent of these efforts, the Idaho senate made it a crime to promote the idea ‘that individuals, by virtue of sex, race, ethnicity, religion, color, or national origin, are inherently responsible for actions committed in the past by other members of the same sex, race,

ethnicity, religion, color, or national origin'. In keeping with the reversals of mask-off authoritarianism, the bill was explicitly presented as a law to 'promote dignity and non-discrimination', and named 'critical race theory' as a 'divisive' school of thought which is 'contrary to the unity of the nation and the well-being of the state of Idaho and its citizens'.

In emphasising that, in these spectacles, 'critical race theory' does not refer to the specific, eponymous body of legal scholarship but functions as an 'empty signifier for any talk about race and racism at all', David Theo Goldberg (2021) reads this onslaught as evidence of the post-Trump Republicans paucity of ideas; as a rearguard effort, post Black Lives Matter, to sunder discussions of racism from histories of racial exploitation and the inequalities of a racialised capitalist system; and a politics of distraction, seeking to stoke white resentment in a pandemic context of manifest inequality. Adjust the coordinates and references, certainly, but the drive and form of these twin Republican onslaughts are disturbingly comparable. Divisive ideas, coming from outside, introducing division where they otherwise don't exist, look over there! This is the politics of exhaustion and perpetual motion.

Alana Lentin

You have spoken about the way the incessant debates on multiculturalism relied on a circulation and laundering of vaguely pieced together ideas about 'too much diversity', to quote one of the central figures, David Goodhart, and the limits of European tolerance to what are still thought of as 'guest cultures'. Let me focus this more specifically to France. In the work we did on travelling 'multicultural crises', we paid attention to how discourses of French laïcité were used to draw a false distinction between the public and private realms in terms of religious practice and how, even in France itself, there was a pronounced lack of historical knowledge underpinning these discussions. Historian Jean Baubérot's (2021) most recent intervention on the issue of laïcité, a critique of the book *Laïcité, point* written by the Minister Delegate in charge of Citizenship, Marlène Schiappa, one of the principal architects of the anti-separatist law, was a reminder of the significance of these same debates to our work.

The issue of the *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, on 'The Crisis of Multiculturalism in Europe' we published in 2012 emerged from the conference we co-organised at Maynooth University a few years earlier which brought together a group of thinkers from around Europe reflecting on what it meant politically to declare multiculturalism a failed project, as was de rigueur across the continent from the early 2000s on. The conference was attended by Pierre Tévanien, who joins Baubérot in arguing that the way laïcité is mobilised in French public and state discourse today bears little relation to its origins in the 1905 law. Tévanien (2015), as well

as the feminist scholar Christine Delphy (2011), shows precisely how the use of the law on *laïcité* to permit the banning of public religiosity twists its original intention – which was to prevent the state from intervening in the religious affairs of groups or individuals, and to ensure the separation between state and ‘church’. As these three authors demonstrate, the public discussion of what can only be interpreted as a knowing lack of regard for the actual tenets of the 1905 law is revealing of the extent to which what we might think of actual Republican values are of little concern to those determined to wield the power of the state to constrain and punish Muslims.

Our insistence in *The Crises* was that the idea that multiculturalism had failed performed a laundering of racism. This operated both through the denial that racism continues to be a force in society, and a concomitant rehabilitation of key themes around migration, globalisation, and the nation-state. Thus, the book was preoccupied with ‘the ways in which the rejection of multiculturalism depends on a repudiation of racism while being important in the reshaping of racism’ (Lentin and Titley, 2011: 3). We argued that objections to the excesses of multiculturalism were the primary mode in which racism found expression in the public sphere at a time when to speak openly of race was taboo presaging an elevation of culture as the framework for encapsulating and regulating difference, a way of speaking about racism without race.

In France, the singling out of what were euphemistically referred to as ‘religious signs’ for state regulation is a key example of the racialization of culture that has always been intrinsic to the project of racial rule, as the reference to Fanon’s discussion of the role of the hijab in French-occupied Algeria makes clear. One of the key points we returned to throughout was that the effort to separate racism from culturalism, or what the increasingly right-wing analyst of race in France, Pierre André Taguieff (1989) referred to as ‘differentialism’, served to deny the formative role-played by race in the formation of Europe. As someone who has been following Taguieff’s (2014) work for many years, it is not surprising that even one of his former supporters, the editor Jean Birnbaum, called him an apologist for the *Front national*⁷ after the publication of his 2014 book, ‘From the Devil to Politics: Reflections on Ordinary Anti-Le Penism’. However, while the French liberal-republican that considers him/herself antiracist lines up against the vulgar fascism of Le Pen father and daughter, they meet Taguieff (2020) where he joins in in condemning what he calls the ‘decolonial imposture’ in his most recent book. But Taguieff (1989) hasn’t veered far at all from his position of the late 1980s when he blamed those who he called ‘Third Worldist’ activists for inserting a divisive cultural relativism that perverted the universalist aims of antiracism. In his latest book, he takes up

against the decolonial antiracism of younger activists which he crudely portrays as ‘reducing’ racism to ‘white domination’ by insisting on the existence of institutional and structural racism. In a similar vein to those who oppose the straw-person of critical race theory in the United States and elsewhere, he argues that ‘neo-antiracists’ see all white people everywhere as racist, a position which he claims denies the existence of ‘anti-white racism’. By mobilising the category of race, Taguieff claims that antiracists engage in ‘racialist’ thought, and are hence racist, a ‘racism’ that is expressed as anti-westernism.⁸ Taguieff’s pronouncements underline the extent to which these hegemonic conceptualisations of racism, which are part of what I call ‘not racism’ (Lentin, 2020), are deeply invested in side-lining what Miri Song calls the ‘history, severity and power’ of racism (Song, 2014). The French variant of this global drive against the use of race as a critical analytical tool foregrounds universalism because of the centrality of a top-down state antiracism as intrinsic to national myth-making, as I mentioned earlier: just as antiracism must be universalist, never grounded in the experiences of those negatively constructed as racialised, so too racism itself can but be universal, deracinated from the actual contexts in which racial rule emerged, ‘colonially constituted’ as Barnor Hesse (2014) has put it.

I think what’s interesting is that there seems to be more engagement in the question of what the stakes are for antiracism today and a growing awareness of the need for vigilance of the ease with which racism can be severed from its roots and antiracism can be watered down and co-opted. Yet, it is important to remember that the attacks on antiracism themselves are not new. For as long as there has been resistance to racism, there has been its discrediting and repression. It is also interesting to observe that, despite periodic attention being given to France, usually accompanying the announcement of the passage of a piece of racist legislation targeting Muslim women, until recently, France has not figured centrally in global discussions on the configuration of race which still tend to centre on the United States. Despite the importance of leading Francophone figures of anticolonial resistance, most notably Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, to not mention Toussaint l’Ouverture, the resonance of their contributions to the Black radical tradition has often been in their universal applicability rather than in what they have to say about France as a colonising force and a racial state.

In cultural studies, preeminent work on race, racism and antiracism has emerged from and followed in the footsteps of the Birmingham School, as guided by Stuart Hall and later by Paul Gilroy, Hazel Carby, Gail Lewis, David Scott, and many more. There have also been serious debates about the extent to which a Black British cultural studies approach to the study of race has detracted from a more material analysis that foregrounds the practices of racialised

capitalism under colonialism and (neo)imperialism. In contrast, we do not tend to think of French cultural studies as an arena in which race is theorised as a cultural phenomenon or where these debates are had. From a perspective from outside France, both the reticence of the French academy to give space to the study of race and the linguistic barriers which preclude many non-French speakers from reading scholar-activist texts to be found in more marginal publications, means that we have little international engagement with work on race produced in France.

Recent years have seen the publication of key works by scholars whose work has been translated or who work within the Anglo-American academy, such as Françoise Vergès, Mame Fatou-Niang, Didier and Eric Fassin, or Houria Bouteldja. These add to studies by English-speaking scholars of race in France such as Mayanthi Fernando, Miriam Ticktin, Jean Beaman or Crystal Fleming all of whom have, in recent years, illuminated the workings of specifically French dynamics of Islamophobia, anti-Blackness and anti-migrant racism.

However, what has received less attention until very recently has been the rich tradition of what we might call scholar-activist writing emerging from the French political and decolonial antiracist arena (although we note with enthusiasm the 2021 translation of former PIR activist and intellectual Sadri Khiari's *The Colonial Counter-Revolution* into English). This space is fertile ground for the working out of critical issues of antiracist theory and praxis. Their tracing back to at least the 1970s with the first mobilisations of migrant workers, that Selim Nadi (forthcoming) refers to as the precursor to today's 'political antiracism' has been formative for our own thinking about racism and antiracist mobilisations and the counter-attacks on them in their various guises (Lentin, 2004; Lentin and Titley, 2011). In my view, the French political antiracist and decolonial spaces of intellectual debate and activism are among the most fertile in the Global North today, not least perhaps because of the strength of the attacks on them which might create the urgency necessary for productive thought. The 2018 Bandung of the Global North meeting organised in Saint Denis in Paris, for example, was a key moment for bringing together a diverse spectrum of decolonial, antiracist and community organisers to think critically about the urgent issues facing them, including difficult subjects such as 'intra-ethnic racism'. It gave rise to a series of events run under the banner of the Ecole décoloniale organised at the now shut La Colonie in Paris.⁹ More recently, in light of Covid there has been an interesting use made of digital platforms such as Instagram and Twitch by broadcasters involved in the Parole d'Honneur YouTube channel which produces panel debates and explainer videos on a range of topics related to race and coloniality.¹⁰ These initiatives have emerged out of the fragmentation of the PIR following the resignation of Houria Bouteldja and several other key members in October 2020 due to the 'toxicity' that had become attached to her

person in particular, continually characterised as the ‘witch’ whose participation in the public sphere, as she put it, puts a stop to the debate.¹¹ Leaving aside the polarisation that the name Houria Bouteldja attracts within the French leftist milieu (to not speak of the right) and beyond, it is undeniable that the contribution made by the intellectual arm of the PIR to the theorisation of French racism and antiracism in many ways turbo-charged the debates on race, forcing the contradictions of the Left on issues such as Islamophobia and the role assigned to antisemitism, for example, to be denuded.

The growing visibility of these debates beyond France are contributing to a joining up of the dots of antiracist thinking across different locations which may play a part in increasing the transnational potential of these struggles. In particular as other places seem to be turning away from the focus on Islamophobia that you mentioned earlier, it is useful to seek instruction from France because it is clear from looking at political events there, especially as we move towards a presidential election, that a hyper-focalisation on Muslims will be key to the agenda. The polyvalence of this kind of racism, not confinable to Muslims qua Muslims, but to be found in fixations of undesired migrants, shadowy Jews, and unassimilable Indigenous people means that – unfortunately – there is always something to be learned from the patterns of racialisation that take form in France, but also from the struggles against them.

Notes

1. <https://www.hrw.org/fr/news/2020/12/04/france-la-dissolution-dune-association-antidiscrimination-menace-les-droits-humains>
2. For a discussion of the flimsy substance of these ‘allegations’, see: <https://factuel.afp.com/y-t-il-des-prieres-dans-les-couloirs-des-universites-comme-lassure-un-senateur-lr>
3. <https://www.cnrs.fr/fr/l-islamogauchisme-nest-pas-une-realite-scientifique> / also add here our open letter**
4. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/we-are-not-at-place-de-la-r-publique-because/>
5. <https://film334.community.uaf.edu/the-battle-of-algiers-censorship-and-the-memory-wars/>
6. https://www.liberation.fr/idees-et-debats/tribunes/appel-pour-les-libertes-contre-les-idees-dextreme-droite-20210504_XRVRUYXD5RDGPG6YY2TWUV6MQY/?fbclid=IwAR2wdXgYx1RSRsO6NBYaLEH95UB7O0P17kH1bmT3-Vw3vyysr5cW1IHSMZI
7. http://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2014/05/29/ces-intellectuels-qui-dediabolisent-le-fn_4428431_3260.html
8. <https://www.marianne.net/societe/pierre-andre-taguieff-ce-pseudo-antiracisme-rend-la-pensee-raciale-acceptable>
9. <https://www.lacolonie.paris/archives/2019/juin/ecole-decoloniale/>
10. <https://parolesdhonneur.com>

11. <https://ehko.info/houria-bouteldja-sorciere-ca-arrange-tout-le-monde-interview-de-la-fondatrice-du-parti-des-indigenes-de-la-republique/>

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