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Yves Orsino was awarded the prize for best paper in the Social & Behavioral Sciences category.
Yves Mai Orsino
The Social Construction of French Identity: Re-Examining the French Debate on Muslim Integration

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Introduction

In December 2009, former French president Nicolas Sarkozy introduced a series of discussions on French identity. He asked businessmen, politicians, and regular citizens what it means to be French. Sarkozy stressed these “town hall debates” were “necessary” in order to explain and reiterate “France’s values in an age of mass immigrants” (Beardsley 2009: para. 1). Sarkozy said, “France was built by immigrants, and people who come here are welcome. But they have to respect our values” (Beardsley 2009: para. 16). Sarkozy’s experiment proved unsuccessful because instead of reaching a common identity and creating unity, the town hall debates became a platform for discussing the ‘Muslim problem’ and Muslims’ failure to assimilate into French civilization. Due to the salience of the matter, this study proposes a new angle for surveying the French/Muslim conflict. It seeks to shift the focus of analysis from the ‘Muslim’ component to the ‘French’ component. In doing so, it establishes that the Republic created its Muslim problem. This paper will also highlight how the tenets of French Republicanism in conjunction with post-colonial racism are hindering a resolution while simultaneously exacerbating the negative depiction of the Muslim as a threat.

Literature Review

France is at the center of what many scholars refer to as identity politics. Identity politics interlaces the expression of cultural identities with the sentiment of anti-colonialism while questioning universalism and the separation of the public and private spheres. According to Daniel Bélanger (2003: 66), identity politics disguises an important issue in modern societies: “the problematic relationship between social regulation and the political institution of an egalitarian citizenry.” This problematic relationship was explicit during the 2005 riots when the struggles of the French Republic to coexist among “communities that want to retain their identities and live according to their own rules” were exposed (Falksohn et al. 2005: para. 8). This popularized the question of whether France can remain ‘French’; however, the majority of French Muslims under scrutiny are second — even third — generation immigrants, thus making them legal French citizens, yet the larger French nation condemns them for denouncing state loyalties.
This ambiguity led many to perceive French Muslims as a threat to the core existence of the Republic. The ensuing debates and proposed solutions addressing this ‘Muslim problem’ center either on more forceful integration into French society or diminishing the role of Islam, an integral component of Muslim identity. However, advocates of those solutions are assessing the situation with an air of elitism and under the impression that the Republic, a legacy of the French Revolution, is the pinnacle of enduring glory. This biased mentality impedes the ability to fully comprehend the problem, thus eschewing chances for a compromise. Also, in seeing the Republic (and subsequently, the French nation) as superior, it dichotomizes the Muslim as a lesser, uncivilized counterpart. As Joan Scott (2007: 19) suggested, a worldview organized in terms of binary pairs “leaves no room for self-criticism, no way to think about change, no way to open ourselves to others [and by] refusing to accept the differences of others we turn them into enemies, producing that which we most feared about them in the first place.”

Patrick Weil (2008: 1) wrote, “French nationality is less a subject about which we have a substantial body of knowledge and analysis than an object fraught with contradictory representations, beliefs, and stereotypes.” Ever since the 1789 Revolution, France has changed more nationality laws than any other democracy today, thus the matter of nationality continues to burn in political and legal debates. However, by studying French history and laws, Weil observed three stages of the construction of the modern understanding of French nationality.

The first phase of the modern concept of French national identity is characterized by *jus sanguinis* spelled out in the 1803 Civil Code. The 1803 Civil Code made it clear that one is French if “a child is born to a French father” (Weil 2008: 21). True to the principle of *jus sanguinis*, Latin for “right of birth,” nationality becomes an inheritance from the father to child and given at birth so “it was no longer lost if its holder established residency abroad” (Weil 2008: 4).

High levels of immigration during the late nineteenth century molded the second phase of French nationality. Although French-born children of immigrants can legally claim French citizenship, they rarely have; thus, “France’s foreign population had grown automatically by virtue of *jus sanguinis* and the infrequency of naturalizations” (Weil 2008: 4). The Law of 1889 transformed French nationality from the principle of *jus sanguinis* to the principle of *jus soli*. 

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Now nationality is a matter of birthplace, but France stressed a sociological approach based on education rather than nationality solely on allegiance (Weil 2008: 5).

Developing from the second phase, the third phase made nationality “an instrument of demographic policy” (Weil 2008: 5). Although the 1927 Law opened French citizenship to all immigrants through the process of naturalization or marriage, the third phase of nationality policies was infused with racism. This racist approach was the epitome of Vichy France. During the Vichy Regime, naturalizations approved from November 9th 1918 to the day Hitler seized power in 1940 were opened to annulment if the “naturalization [did] not appear desirable.” With the 1933 Law, undesirability was “determined according to national-ethnic principles ... racial, political, and cultural motives ... keeping with the interests of the Reich and the people” (Maurice Ruby 1954: 515, as cited in Weil 2008: 87, 301). Weil (2008: 87) summarized Vichy France’s nationality policies in three indicators: “15,154 denaturalizations, 446 withdrawals of French nationality, and 110,000 Algerian Jews demoted from citizens to subjects.”

Despite the fall of Vichy France in 1944, racism within French nationality laws did not cease. By the end of the twentieth century, Algerian immigrants and their children became the chief victims of racist nationality policies (Weil 2008: 5). French authorities made it their top priority to deport non-European immigrants to their home countries (Weil 2008: 153-54). The voluntary returns of 1977 were inadequate, which led to forced returns from 1978 to 1980 (Weil 2008: 154). Perceived as the most undesirable, Algerians comprised the majority in the projected goal of 100,000 deportations a year (Weil 2008: 154).

The discussion was more complicated when it came to the children of Algerian immigrants. Prior to 1962 when Algeria was still an integral part of France, Article 23 of the Nationality Code certified that all French-born children of Algerian immigrants in the early 1980s were automatically French citizens by default because of double *jus soli* (Weil 2008: 155). Until the Algerian war of independence, dual citizenship was not a problem. The matter of immigrants and nationality took a radical turn with the popularity of the National Front in the 1984 election (Weil 2008: 156). The arising debates underlined the link between “national identity and nationality law” with racist overtones (Weil 2008: 156-57). During the 1980s, the right-wing political party “questioned whether it was possible to assimilate immigrants from a culture that was ‘too different,’ from that
of Islam, and whether Muslim immigrants even wanted to assimilate” (Weil 2008: 156-57). These same concerns and questions are echoed in the contemporary French/Muslim debate, which shows that the Republic’s traditional route of examining the ‘Muslim problem’ is ineffective, thus beckoning a different analysis of the conflict.

**Significance**

In part, the Muslim debate is not uniquely French but also an issue concerning the West as a whole. For one, the French are not alone in their fear of the loss of national identity. This fright has spread like wildfire across Europe, leading many specialists to ponder, “How can a nation suddenly become so consumed by self-doubt... find themselves in such an identity crisis?” (Falksohn et al. 2005: para. 23). Experts examining this dilemma emphasize the large number of immigrants in Europe. In 2011, Eurostat estimated that nearly two-thirds of the 33.3 million foreign citizens living the European Union member states are citizens of countries outside the EU-27 (Vasileva 2012: 1). In 2010, there was an estimated 4.7 million Muslims in France, making up about 7.5% of the total French population (Pew Research Center 2011: 124). The Pew Research Center (2011: 127) also reported France’s Muslim population is expected to be around 6.9 million in 2030.

Nicknaming Europe “Eurabia,” supporters of the traditional European identity are threatened by accommodations made for the needs of Europe’s immigrant citizens. For example, prayer rooms are available in Paris’s Disneyland to service Muslim patrons. A man expressed his anger, “Our kids aren’t even served pork in school cafeterias anymore,” during one of Sarkozy’s discussions on national identity in which he associated France’s adjustments to its Muslim population as “the French republic [...] retreating in certain areas” (Beardsley 2009: para. 8). Others sharing his opinions fear that accommodation will further reduce *integration à la française* to an option, which have many doubting the survival of the Republic. As the Dutch Minister of Immigration Rita Verdonk asserted, “The days of drinking tea are over,” Europe is now adopting a more radical approach to upholding its traditions and values.

It is argued that voluntary integration is doubtful not only because of the swelling number of immigrants but also due to their inclination to reside in certain areas. This factor transforms the matter of integration into a game of tug-of-war between the host identity and the immigrant
identity with the host identity on the losing end. As immigrants live and interact with each other, communal ties are formed based on a common language, religion, and culture, thus disassociating with the host country’s customs, norms, and way of life. The rift between the host country and the immigrant deepens, as new immigrants are welcomed into the community, bringing with them fresh memories of their respective homelands. This cycle continues on and on, keeping alive the immigrants’ ‘old’ culture and beliefs — identity — while simultaneously ignoring the ‘dominant’ culture of the host country. For example, a survey shows that out of the one million Muslims living in the Netherlands, 60% of them identify themselves first as Moroccans or Turks before Dutch (Falksohn et al. 2005: para. 23).

Besides the speculated defeat of the European identity, the Muslim problem argument is supported by a larger phenomenon experienced throughout the West: Islamophobia. This irrational fear of Muslims and Islam proliferated in 2001 after the September 11 attacks. Following 9/11, the United States played a major role in propagandizing Islam as an extremist religion in its process of seeking revenge. Likewise, the 2004 subway bombings in Madrid followed by more bombings in London the following year intensified the feelings of Islamophobia. Since the spread of Islamophobia, European Muslims are faced with increasing marginalization. For example, in the United Kingdom, the 2004 census showed Muslims with the highest unemployment rate at 13% and Muslims ages 16 to 24 with the highest overall unemployment rates (European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia [EUMC] 2006: 11). Particularly in France, Islamophobia is reinforced by post-colonial racism and the construction of Muslims as dangerous enemies. Overall, the French/Muslim debacle is representative of a larger issue across Europe, and consequently a solution for France is a solution for Europe.

The French Republic

The route to a new reflection on the French/Muslim conflict is through questioning the French national identity—what is the real meaning of Frenchness? To do this, however, involves re-examining the structures of the French Republic to extract the real character of a French citizen as well as what it requires of immigrant groups for them to be fully transformed as French citizens. Despite drawing upon the broader European culture and identity, the French identity is unique in that the Republic considers itself as the epitome of all civilizations. This paper seeks to explain
France’s exceptional and elitist identity by surveying how its definition of nationalism correlates to the principle of universalism.

Nationalism

Moyra Grant (2003: 116) called nationalism “the most influential political creed of the last two centuries, generating wars and revolutions, the collapse of empires, the birth of new states, the redrawing of boundaries and the rise of new regimes.” It is an ideology so common in our everyday usage yet so potent as to ignite wars and drive humankind to the brink of destruction. The extensive study of nationalism includes (but is not limited to) debates on definition, origin, and development of nationalism. It is tradition to define what are ‘states’ and ‘nations’ when discussing nationalism. Richard Handler (1988: 7) wrote, “A nation, it is said, is a human group that may or may not control its own state; while a state is a political organization that may or may not correspond to all of one, and only one, nation.” Within the nationalism discourse, there are two major schools of thought, the primordial and the modernist perspectives, and within the primordial or the modernist frame, nationalism is characterized as either ‘ethnic’ or ‘civic’ contingent on how states view the birth of a nation. Finally, besides being ethnic or civic, nationalism can also be classified as individualist or collectivist depending on what is considered the more important unit: the community or the individual.

Pertaining to the case of France, this section will further explain the modernist school of thought on nationalism. Modernists hold that nationalism is an entirely contemporary trend constructed by society following certain prerequisites. This perspective gained momentum with the fall of the system of empires and former colonies fighting to gain nation-state status after World War II. Lucian Pye (2001: 508) explained that the challenge of nation building is the creation of “new nations...with a common sense of identity” out of a population that were most likely “culturally, linguistically, and religiously” mixed.

Civic or liberal nationalism is associated with the modernist view. Civic nationalism is political in nature because it defines nationality as a vow to defend the same values. Citizenship is determined by the concept of jus soli, Latin for “law of the soil.” However, new members can gain citizenship through the process of naturalization which legitimizes the “desire to live together” among an already established community (Renan [1882] 1999: 153). According to Renan, then, birthplace is no longer the
sole indicator of nationality; individuals can now choose where to pledge their allegiance. In theory, civic nationalism is sincere and progressive allowing for individuality and rationality — tenets of liberalism. In practice, however, it is as brutal and undemocratic as ethnic nationalism. Civic liberalism is praised for cherishing equality — welcoming nationhood to all — while paradoxically, privileging those who are born there — the ‘original citizens,’ the ones without an alien registration number.

Table 1. Types of Nationalism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Individualistic</th>
<th>Collectivistic</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Civic</td>
<td>Ethnic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example</td>
<td>England, USA</td>
<td>None</td>
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Source: Greenfeld, 2001

The Modern Unitary French Nation and Type II: Collectivistic-Civic

As determined by numerous scholars in the field, France is the perfect showcase of the second type of nationalism, the collectivistic-civic. This form of nationalism is highly problematic and “plagued by internal contradictions” due to the marriage of two diverging principles (Greenfeld 1995: 20). Following the characteristics of civic nationalism, collectivistic-civic nationalism defines nationhood on the grounds of “legal-rational principles, universalism, and voluntary attachment to the nation and its institutions” (Smith and West 2001: 81). For this reason, it is the addition of being ‘collectivistic’ that makes this type of nationalism ambivalent.

Greenfeld (1995: 21) theorized the development of a collectivist or individualist nation depends upon the “nature of the groups actively involved in the articulation of the new ideology, and the situations they face.” For that reason, the collectivist form is guaranteed if the initial “social basis of nationalism is limited: that is, if nationalism is adopted by and serves the interests of a narrow traditional elite intent on preserving its
status ... which then transmits it to the masses by indoctrination” (Greenfeld 1995: 21). The modern French nation evolved true to Greenfeld’s hypothesis.

The Revolutionaries drew heavily from Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s understanding of the nation and popular sovereignty in creating the modern unitary French nation for their purposes. The Rousseauean social contract theory acknowledges the nation as a political body, independent from the state and the only source of sovereign power. Rousseau understood the nation is a “pre-political entity that gave rise to governmental institutions” (Keitner 2007: 38); thus, the state is an intentional creation of the nation’s general will. The Rousseauean model prescribes that individuals sacrifice their self-interests for the collective good not out of fear but voluntarily because in doing so it “produces a moral and collective body ... which receives from this same act its unity, its common me, its life and its will” (Rousseau [1762] 1947: 14). Also, Rousseau saw the state as representative of the people, not constitutive, suggesting the concept of a nation-state (Rousseau [1762] 1947: 46).

From Rousseau’s natural birth of the nation, the Revolutionary leaders refined it into a community devised by “enforced conformity” (Keitner 2007: 42). The nation and its sovereignty were used during the Revolution to challenge the absolutist power of the king. The Revolutionary leaders seeking to increase their legislative and executive powers at the expense of the king capitalized on the popular notion of the nation as a sovereign political actor that can challenge the king’s powers. Echoing the Enlightenment, they claimed for the nation — the French people — the power to rightly constitute the state. The parlements knew that to speak for the nation is to control the state, which in return would satisfy their political ambitions. However, parlements realized the Rousseauean model lacked a concrete nation. Parlements set out to transform Rousseau’s abstract nation into a tangible form in order to fortify their political aims. Unlike Rousseau, the Revolutionary leaders recognized that since national character [national identity] is a by-product of state institutions, it is impossible to determine whether the people created the state or the state formed the people because “once the people create the state, the state cannot help but define the people” (Keitner 2007: 40). In order for parlements to challenge the powers of the king, they must breed Rousseau’s abstract nation into a more viable opponent. Thus, only by uniting the whole
French population as one and indivisible element can they aptly subjugate the monarch.

At the National Convention meeting in 1792, the Protestant Pastor Jean-Paul Rabaut de Saint-Etienne said: “We must, absolutely, renew the present generation, while forging the generation to come. We must make of the French a new people” (Rabaut 1792, as cited in Bell 2001: 2). Consistent with Greenfeld’s concept of collectivist nationalism, the Revolutionary aristocrats called for “an infallible means of transmitting, constantly and immediately, to all the French at once, the same uniform ideas” and so the French ‘national character’ was indoctrinated to the masses by the elites. As a result, education became the key component in creating the new French nation. Rabaut was a fierce sponsor of the re-education of the masses to transform them into the kind of nation envisioned by the Revolutionaries. Rabaut embarked on his Project of National Education (1792) to birth a new French nation by forcing the people to “a long list of obligatory civic functions, including physical exercises, parades, festivals, ‘morality lessons,’ the reading and memorization of key political texts, and the singing of patriotic songs” (Bell 2001: 2).

Collectivism rests on the perception that the group is a far more important unit than the individual. It also presumes that individuals are too egocentric to meet the needs of society, but only through the “voluntary, cooperative and non-coercive groups and associations pursuing a common purpose” will society function better (Grant 2003: 19). In relation to nationalism, collectivism defines nations as a collective individual with particular rights, interests, and will (Greenfeld 2001: 251). This implies that the interests of the collective individual will take precedent over the desires of single individuals within that nation. The crisis of French nationalism is rooted in its tradition of being a homogeneous nation. While civic nationalism promotes the rights and freedoms of each member, collectivist nationalism denies this feature as it assumes the nation to be a homogeneous, collective individual. Hence, there is “but one abstract community [in France], that of its citizens” (Pech 2005: para. 8). France’s development of the unitary nation is one of the greatest achievements of the French Revolution but in today’s politics, it plays a large role in preventing a solution to the French/Muslim conflict.
Universalism

Similar to the homogeneity of collectivism, universalism is based on the assumption that one set of values is applicable to everyone. This worldview believes in the universality of human experiences, this accepting that humankind has a single destiny. James Boyle (2000: 4) described universalism as “a way of knowing, an idea of morality, and above all, a mode of life — a plan for living.” Additionally, this paradigm considers “knowledge, justice, and personal development” as universal and that human progression should target “universal laws,” not “particular facts” (Boyle 2000: 2). It should also be noted that universalism is rooted in theology. For example, Christianity stresses the universality of salvation to all. Non-religious universalism gained momentum during the Age of Enlightenment. Enlightenment thinkers assumed that the human entity and societies were universal, thus making the ideas of progress and utopia universal goals.

No country exhibits universalist tendencies better than France. Slavoj Žižek (1998: 1007) called French Republicanism the “epitome of modernist universalism.” Louis Dumont (1994: 201) wrote, “The basic or global French ideology is as powerful as it is simple, and devoid of concrete elements. At bottom it consists of a single principle: the human subject as universal.” French universalism insists on the “oneness, the sameness of all individuals” to become the French citizen (Scott 2007: 11). France’s universalist identity prioritizes national identity (French) over group identities. Theoretically, this means France does not approve of the American practice of a hyphenated ethnic/national identity [i.e. Asian-American] (Scott 2007: 11). French universalism eliminates cultural differences — particularities — within the nation, which will then allow the Republic to better serve the people. However, it is imperative to stress that to be universal is to be French but the French nation is unique with a “particular quality or ‘character’” (Schor 2001: 43).

Therefore, this particular quality of being French requires assimilation, not simply integration, for newcomers. Both integration and assimilation insinuates conformity, but the process of integration implies fitting in with the dominant culture whereas assimilation demands absorbing into the dominant culture. French national identity is universal by imagining the “sameness of all individuals, a sameness that is achieved not simply by swearing allegiance to the nation but by assimilating to the norms of its culture” (Scott 2007: 12-3). A French Muslim is not a true French citizen.
until the cultural identity of being Muslim is renounced.

The French universalistic identity creates solidarity among its citizens, which is the way the Republic guarantees an egalitarian society. Moreover, it places state loyalties above cultural loyalties since ethnic or particular identities are removed. In *German Ideology: From France to Germany and Back* (1994: 199), Dumont provides an excellent comparison between a German and a Frenchman: “In his own idea of himself, the Frenchman is a man by nature and a Frenchman by accident, while the German feels he is first a German and a man through his being a German.” This emphasizes that French national identity is political — a Frenchman is not birthed from his family but a deliberate design of the Republic. According to Dominique Schnapper, one becomes French via “the practice of a language, through the learning of a culture, through the wish to participate in an economic and political life” (Jennings 2000: 577). Before dissecting the problems of universalism within the modern Republic, a brief look into how France acquired its Frenchness is key to understanding how valuable universalism is to the Republic. “What remains of the Nation when one takes from it nationalism, imperialism, and the omnipotence of the State? What remains of France when one takes from its universalism?” (Pierre Nora, 32, as cited in Schor 2001: 48).

**Origins of French Universalism**

It is evident that France inherited its universalist tendency from Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire, Rousseau, and Montesquieu. Yet, France’s universal characteristic can also be traced to its early relationship with the Catholic Church. First, the term ‘Catholic’ is derived from the Greek word ‘Katholikos’ meaning “universal.” Second, France is acclaimed as the ‘eldest daughter of the Church’. This recognition is a relic of Pepin, first Carolingian ruler of the Franks, in reclaiming the Church’s lands and solidifying the States of the Church (Schnüer 1912). Due to Pepin’s donation in 754, the Pope anointed King Pepin and his heirs the title ‘Patrician of the Romans,’ protector of the Romans. This exclusive relationship with the Roman Church allowed France to postulate its people as the best examples of Catholics and even rival Roman Catholicism with the French version, Gallicanism. Ironically, it was this Catholic-inspired universalism that stimulated the secularist French universalism, which led to the destruction of the Catholic Church during the French Revolution.
The period of absolute monarchy preceding the Revolution highlights additional examples of French universalism, this time concerning culture and language. Particularly with the reign of King Louis XIV, French monarchs undertook the mission of spreading the glories of French arts, etiquettes, and culture to the rest of Europe. The proposed privileges are rooted in the universality of ‘Frenchness’ – Europe (as well as the rest of the world) yearns for the exemplar French ethos. Likewise, during this period, French transformed from the “language of the king [and] of polite conversation and civility” to “the language of humanity” (Schor 2001: 44). The universality of the French language descended from France’s claims as the legitimate heir to the Roman Empire and thus, the successor to Latin, the original universal language (Schor 2001: 44). There were important landmarks in the eighteenth century indicating the emergence of the French language as the universal ideal of civilization and refinement. Descartes was first to popularize the vernacular use of French, which he saw as the “language of reason and transparency” (Schor 2001: 44). France’s right to linguistic superiority is due to its syntactical clarity. Voltaire endorsed this belief in the “French” chapter of his *Dictionnaire philosophique* published in 1764. According to Voltaire, the language benefited from the “pleasure and liberty of [French] society” to emerge with a “delicacy of expression and a finesse full of simplicity barely to be found elsewhere” (Voltaire [1764] 1924: “French”). In addition, other powerful monarchs such as Fredrick the Great of Prussia and Catherine the Great of Russia also shared the superiority nature of the French language. French, then, was the *lingua franca* of prominent Europeans across the continent.

Into the nineteenth century, ‘French’ remained an “idiom of universality” (Schor 2001: 47). The years of the Third Republic were the peak of French universalism, which subsequently also marked the height of French colonialism. During this period, universalism underlined the concepts of nations and nation building, which influenced the growth of the “ideology of France as an elect nation and guardian of civilization” (Schor 2001: 47). In assuming the rational human nature as “universal impervious to cultural and historical differences [...] transcultural, transhistorical human nature was posited as identical” (Schor 2001: 46). Thus, public schools became the center for the cultivation of ideal French citizens “grounded in a common language [and] universalistic values” (Béland 2003: 66).

Since the nineteenth century, French universalism remains one of the most contentious issues within Republican ideology. As much as the
Dilemmas of French Universalism

The first crisis of French universalism is its belief in the universality of the French identity. Michael Walzer, in his 1997 work *On Toleration*, outlined five modes of toleration within societies ranging from nation-states to multinational empires to immigrant societies. He then presented France as the first out of four ‘complicated’ case studies. France is ‘complicated’ because it represents the ‘classic nation-state’ as well as one of the “world’s leading immigrant societies” (Walzer 1997: 37). The transformative talents of *integration à la française* cloud the image of France as an immigrant society, producing a “homogeneous society with a highly distinctive and singular culture” (Walzer 1997: 38). Despite being a “society of immigrants,” France does not consider itself a “pluralist society” (Walzer 1997: 38). Since the days of the Revolution, France considered itself a mono-ethnic nation. Foreigners and immigrants were welcomed to the country “so long as they learned the French language, committed themselves to the republic, sent their children to state schools, and celebrated Bastille Day” (Walzer 1997: 38). However, today Muslim immigrants pose as the biggest threat to “eighteenth- and nineteenth-century universalism, that is to French identity [and] to ‘Frenchness’ itself” (Schor 2001: 51). As much as the Republic seeks to preserve a “universal and uniform community of citizens,” Muslim immigrants are refusing to succumb to “Frenchification” or relinquish their ethnic identities (Walzer
France’s pressure on immigrants to assimilate is done under the pretext of achieving equality. Steven Ungar (1996: 2) wrote, “French immigration policies since the Third Republic have tended to assimilate difference in the name of a single nation.” The French Republic does not tolerate the idea of ‘a nation within a nation.’ There is only one nation and that is the French nation. This policy was clearly defined during the 1791 debates over Jewish emancipation. Stanislas Clermont-Tonnerre’s famous declaration about Jews is applicable to Muslims today: “One must refuse everything to the Jews as a nation, and give everything to the Jews as individuals” (de Clermont-Tonnerre, as cited in Walzer 1997: 39). Furthermore, Jean-Paul Sartre echoed Clermont-Tonnerre’s words in 1944: “His defense of the Jew saves the latter as a man and annihilates him as a Jew ...leave[s] nothing in him ... but the abstract subject of the rights of man and the rights of citizens” (Sartre, as cited in Walzer 1997: 39).

It is the abstract individual that succeeds as a French citizen. This implies a clean slate to start over as part of the French nation. The obligation of assimilation into the French identity suggests two ideas: one, the elitism of Frenchness; and two, it essentializes the French nation with a certain ‘character.’ Besides, assimilation itself is the root tragedy of French universalism. In spite of many Republican universalists envisioning assimilation as toleration, assimilation is far from tolerant as it is the “most common form of intolerance of Otherness, or rather of the otherness of the Other” (Schor 2001: 50). Schor labeled assimilation as a form of ‘false universalism’ coinciding with Dominique Schnapper’s comments:

> The universal is assimilated to the culture of ‘I’.” ‘I’ may then pursue a politics of assimilation, which seeks to eradicate the culture of the Other and to absorb it ... It is not a matter of excluding the Other, but of including it to the extent that one renders it like oneself. (Schnapper, as cited in Schor 2001:50)

Assimilation does not mean equality. Staying true to the Republican tradition, assimilation is done for the benefits of the collective nation, the general interest, not to favor the rights of minorities or “communal particularisms” (Jennings 2000: 583).

The second crisis of French universalism is its belief in the universality of the Republican ideology. Political universalism suggests that there is a political model applicable for all. The French Revolution launched
France’s political universalism and since then, France has become the quintessence of the “rights of man, or enlightenment, and of individual liberty” and has planned to “spread the benefits of civilization across its national borders and beyond to its colonial Empire and the wider world” (Jennings 2000: 578). Considering France’s recent struggles enforcing its Republican ideology, French universalism has come to resemble a form of ethnocentrism — French domination — instead of “liberation” (Jennings 2000: 579). Political universalists are guilty of two blunders when professing their ability to “transcend their own location and particularity and thus arrive at [a] comprehensive universal moral or political proposals” applicable to everyone (Van der Linden 1996: 235).

First, claiming political universalism requires confidence — confidence in the righteousness of one’s values and morals and confidence in oneself as the fated messiah to deliver the good news. Therefore, political universalism is what Harry van der Linden (1996) called “misguided pride.” Misguided pride directs political universalists to see the goals of “political, economic, or cultural endeavors of [other] people” as their own — hence, making everyone else’s fight as their own. The standard for political universalism is that it voids any signs of “subjective interest [or] cultural expression” (Walzer 1994: 7). It does not account for particular histories, memories, customary practices, or cultures. Political universalism only aims at reaching the collective universal good. Calling it ‘philosophical high-minded-ness’ in his book *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad*, Walzer (1994: 9) wrote:

Think of the exodus of Israel from Egypt, the Anabasis, Muhammad’s hegira, the Pilgrims’ crossing of the Atlantic, the Boer trek, the long march of the Chinese communists, the Prague demonstrations: must all these merge into one grand parade? There is nothing to gain from the merger, for the chief value of all this marching lies in the particular experience of the marchers. They can join each other only for a time; there is no reason to think that they are all heading in the same direction.

Furthermore, in claiming everyone’s cause as one’s own indicates intervention. Therefore, intervention — on behalf of truth, justice, or liberty — is the assumption that “the people we are trying to help really want to be helped” (Walzer 1994: 16). This leads to the second mistake of political universalism. The destination of the ‘marches,’ reaching the ultimate political principle, is so desired that political universalists will do anything to attain their goals which includes sanctioning tyrannical acts
and methods. True to the phrase ‘No pain, No gain,’ wars, genocides, and massacres are done in the name of democracy and justice because they serve the interest of the universal human being. Should the end justify the means?

The Future of French Universalism and the French/Muslim Conflict

What is the future of French universalism — of the ‘universal revolution par excellence’? Among other core tenets of French Republicanism, universalism is of antiquity and therefore clashes with the prevailing world order of globalization and interdependency. Domestically, France continues to face ‘cultural wars’ concerning the Muslim problem. The French/Muslim conflict warns that a universalistic French ideology is no longer compatible with the current world; France is defending an ideological mission from the days before the Revolution. In addition, modern French universalism harbors oppressive and undemocratic features in the pursuit of liberty and justice. The Republican qualities of elitism and stubbornness serve to alienate and divide citizens instead of maintaining a cohesive nation. French universalism is best at condemning the Other — no matter if the ‘Other’ is the “exile, the foreigner, the displaced person, the survivor, [or] the immigrant from France’s dismembered former colonial empire” (Schor 2001: 49). Žižek (1998: 1002) said, “True universalists are not those who preach global tolerance of differences and all-encompassing unity but those who engage in a passionate fight for the assertion of the truth that engages them.”

In the international system, French universalism encounters yet a bigger challenge — the rise of multiculturalism. France’s view of multiculturalism is nothing “short of a cultural disaster, threatening the polity with fragmentation, and the nation with dissolution” (Schor, 2001: 53). Within the identity politics discourse, universalists see multiculturalism as catering to ‘interest groups,’ the particulars, rather than the ‘collective,’ the universal. Following this perspective, multiculturalist theories are dogmatic and intolerant. They are “aligned with reverse discrimination [...] demonstrating not Tocqueville’s tyranny of the majority but the tyranny of the minority; it threatens Western civilization and culture” (Jennings 2000: 588). Alain Finkielkraut (1997, as cited in Schor 2001: 54) dared to call multiculturalism “an inquisition” of the “D. W. E. M.,” dead white European males. Despite how ‘un-French’ multiculturalism is perceived, a working solution to the French/Muslim dispute to dissolve, it must
include multiculturalism. By rejecting the possibility of multiculturalism, the Republic is accentuating the particularity of French universalism, not its universality. France’s republican universalism is the real ‘inquisition’ as it posits a relationship of ‘Frenchness’ versus ‘Otherness,’ dividing the Nation; whereas, for example, American multiculturalism made the United States a “container” [a melting pot] for the “endless proliferation of the particular group identities” (Žižek 1998: 1007). While French universalism is compromised by the emergence of globalization, American multiculturalism is prospering. This verifies the claim that the antique doctrine of French universalism is unapt for advancement of the Republic or to resolve the French/Muslim conflict.

Multicultural Republicanism?

How can the French Republic possibly resolve the Muslim problem without acknowledging its role in exacerbating the conflict? Mohamed El Madani who attended one of Sarkozy’s town hall debates said, “It’s hard when you see that out of France, you are seen like France, and in France, you’re not French. You know, the symbol of France is \textit{liberte, egalite, fraternite}. We don’t practice that. I’m not equal with other French people. I’m not” (Beardsley 2009: para. 11). Therefore, is the Muslim

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Views of Muslims</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Favorable: 64%</td>
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<td>Unfavorable: 34%</td>
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<tr>
<th>Concerned about Islamic Extremism</th>
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<tr>
<td>Very: 32%</td>
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<td>Somewhat: 41%</td>
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<th>Perceptions of Muslims</th>
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<tr>
<td>Want to remain distinct: 59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increasing sense of Islamic identity: 70%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Public Opinion towards Muslims and Islam, France

problem a creation of the French state or the French nation?

A survey done by the Pew Global Attitudes Project in 2005 shows that the majority of the French public feared the growing sense of Islamic identity, but they nonetheless held favorable views of Muslims. More surprisingly, only 32% are ‘very’ concerned about Islamic extremism in France. Likewise, for those who argue the incompatibility of Islam and modernity, the 2006 Pew survey asked: “Is there a conflict between being a devout Muslim and living in a modern society?” Results showed 74% of the general French population and 72% of the French Muslim population feel there is not a conflict (Pew Global Attitudes Project 2006: 13-Nation Pew Global Attitudes Survey). The findings of the Pew surveys suggest the French/Muslim conflict is due to the structure of the Republic, not the general French people or French Muslims. Examining the ‘France’ element in the French/Muslim binary pair shows the Republic as the strategic factor in resolving the conflict. For one, the Republic is ill suited for the new era of globalization and two; the state has yet to address the problems of racism and Islamophobia.

Hence, a solution to the conflict involves renovation and acceptance. It calls for France to adapt to the era of globalization and multiculturalism. The French Nation must realize that their Republic can no longer sustain the “utopia” of an “abstract humanity” (Jennings 2000: 592). Conversely, this does not mean France should dissolve its universalist traditions, but instead refine ‘the universal’ to fit the new world order. Schnapper said, “The universal cannot be identified with any concrete historical reality; it is a principle, a horizon, a regulatory idea” (Jennings 2000: 591). According to Schnapper, the problem with French universalism is its belief in the particular historical reality of ‘Western society’ (Jennings 2000: 591). The idea of the ‘West’ institutes a paradigm where the ‘non-West’ is judged based on the standards set by the ‘West.’ Critics like Edward Said stated the binary pair of ‘West/Other’ would unavoidably result in oppressing the Others and supporting the elitism of the West. The dichotomy of West/Other is the culprit that expresses a false theory of universalism.

Schnapper’s analysis calls for multicultural republicanism (Jennings 2000: 591-2):

We must refuse the general, the unique, the global; we must choose the particular, and therefore plurality; but by inscribing it within a reference to the universal which is the very condition of its existence and of the possibility of dialogue with others, as well as of the fundamental recognition that the dignity of others, of all others, is equal to my own.
Schnapper’s theory of multicultural republicanism also requires redefining ‘nation’ and ‘ethnie’ [ethnic group]. Nation and ethnie are not synonymous, thus not interchangeable. The nation is a political unit “defined by its sovereignty, exercised internally to integrate the populations that it includes and, externally, to assert itself as a historical subject in a global order founded on the existence and relations between politically constituted nations” (Schnapper [1994] 1998: 16). The ethnie is not a political entity but is defined by its particular history and culture: imagine “those groups of men who live as heirs of an historical and cultural community ... and who share the desire to maintain it” (Schnapper [1994] 1998: 16). Schnapper’s definition of a nation as exclusively a political organ insinuates that nations are better capable of handling diversity than ethnic groups and that cultural homogeneity is not crucial to a nation’s survival (Jennings 2000: 590). Therefore according to Schnapper, Republican universalism can accept multicultural inclinations where citizens and immigrants are allowed to “cultivate their particularisms in their personal as well as social life” but only if the community of citizens “accept [and respect] the idea that there exists a political domain independent of their particular interests” (Jennings 2000: 590).

Conclusion

Reconstructing Republicanism is not an easy task and accordingly, the French/Muslim conflict and related fears will not be resolved within the next couple of years. However, the initial start of multicultural republicanism will provide both the general French public and French Muslims a more democratic and egalitarian society to coexist while projecting a more harmonious France to the world.

Aimé Césaire ([1955] 2000: 31) wrote:

A civilization that proves incapable of solving the problems it creates is a decadent civilization...A civilization that chooses to close its eyes to its most crucial problems is a stricken civilization...A civilization that uses its principles for trickery and deceit is a dying civilization.

Thus, for the sake of survival, France’s elitism and homogenization must end. The Republic needs to tolerate group and individual diversity within the nation to safeguard democracy and liberty. For that reason, France must confront its racist and discriminatory allegations toward its Muslim population. Structurally, the Republic needs to learn the distinction between religious Muslims and radical Islamists. Furthermore, France should
not stigmatize Muslims/Islam as a special case. Muslims and their religion are no different from any other immigrant group in France. It should not be forgotten that the Jews were once distinguished as incapable of becoming proper Frenchmen but that notion was overturned in 1995 when President Jacques Chirac officially acknowledged and apologized for the Republic’s role in the alienation and persecution of Jews under the Vichy Regime. It is worth applauding President Francois Hollande’s attempt in 2012 to address France’s brutal colonization of Algeria but his acknowledgement fell short of an apology and lacked the gravity and sincerity of Chirac’s apology. In the same manner, for French Muslims to fully embrace Frenchness, the Republic must wholeheartedly confront colonial racism first to combat Islamophobia, a form of post-colonial racism “...to combat Islamophobia, its post-colonial form.”
References


