THE REPUBLIC OF ISLAMOPHOBIA

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An openly racist party with deep roots in France's fascist tradition, the Front National (FN), won control of a dozen local authorities, in March 2014. Two months later it gained more seats than any other party in the European elections with a quarter of the vote. Some opinion polls in 2014 even identified its leader, Marine Le Pen, as the figure most likely to win the first round of the 2017 presidential election. Le Pen has vowed to put mosques under surveillance, tap the phones of 'proselytisers' and ban 'ostentatious' religious symbols from all public services. She has compared the sight of Muslims praying in the street to the Nazi occupation of France and promised to bring the 'gangrene' or 'green fascism' of radical Islam 'to its knees'.

In areas now under FN control, the party's mayors have lost no time in making their mark. In the southern town of Pontet, free school meals have been scrapped. In the town of Hayange, north-east France, the mayor forced a halal butcher to close on Sundays or face arrest before inaugurating a new event on the town's calendar: a Pig Festival. In the seventh district of Marseille the FN has imposed French as the only language that the mayor's collaborators are permitted to speak. Personal interventions from the mayor include halting a marriage ceremony because the Muslim bride's face was covered by a veil, and ensuring that the quiche served at an annual city hall function contained bits of bacon.

As part of her campaign to 'save secularism' Marine Le Pen herself has turned her attention to the issue of pork meat and its derivatives. Typical of the false polemics the FN has made its speciality was her vow to lift an apparent 'ban' on pork in schools. Yet pork was already on the menu in FN controlled towns, with alternative menus available, as had been the case in most schools for decades. There was no evidence that religious organisations had been attempting to intervene on the question.

Faced with the advance of an increasingly aggressive Islamophobic party, how has the mainstream political establishment responded?

The blunt truth is that instead of isolating and exposing racism, and the way it has adapted under the pressure of economic crisis, the two principal parties of government, the right-wing UMP coalition (Union pour un Mouvement Populaire) and the Socialist Party (PS), have rushed to embrace it. The scapegoating of Muslims has reached unprecedented levels, with their activities subjected to relentless scrutiny. Insulting acts that would once have invited scorn or ridicule are increasingly tolerated, even welcomed. The petty bigotry that imposes pork on menus, for example, found expression in attempts by far-right activists to organise cocktail parties serving red wine and dried sausage ('*Apéros saucission-pinard*'). This crude anti-Muslim provocation eventually found its way into the national assembly via the 'Popular Right' grouping of deputies in the mainstream right UMP coalition.

Attitudes towards diet, and meat in particular, are shaped, like most anti-Muslim prejudice in France today, not just by ignorance but by outright fantasy. In 2012 Marine Le Pen declared that she intended to ban halal meat from school canteens. The fact that virtually no schools had ever adopted a policy of serving halal meat did not prevent President Nicolas Sarkozy's prime minister, François Fillon, from warning that communitarianism was putting the Republic itself in danger, musing that perhaps religions ought to show greater awareness of health issues and update their traditions in line with advances in science and technology.

In November 2013, when a court ruled that Muslim inmates at a Grenoble prison could be served halal meals, on the grounds that secularism meant that everyone should have the right to practise their religion, the Socialist government intervened to contest the decision, which was overturned the following July. Interior minister Manuel Valls warned of the need to be vigilant, in a time of economic crisis, about anything that called into question 'our own identity' or gave the impression that 'fundamental principles' were being undermined. Secularism, he was at pains to stress, was one such principle.

Attempts to prescribe what Muslims can and cannot wear have produced three major flashpoints. In 1989 the first 'headscarf affair' saw three Muslim school students expelled for wearing the hijab. In 1994 a circular issued by education minister Francois Bayrou offered guidance on the wearing of religious symbols in schools, distinguishing between acceptable 'discreet'

religious symbols, like the crucifix and the kippah, and unacceptable 'ostentatious' ones, like the hijab. In 2004 this guidance became law. Later, in 2011, the burqa and niqab were banned in public places, as were prayers in the street, the consequence of overcrowded mosques and a lack of suitable alternatives for prayer. The interior minister at the time, Claude Guéant, went out of his way to warn that his government would use force, if necessary, to outlaw this infringement of secularist principles.

During the 2012 presidential election campaign both leading candidates, François Hollande and Nicolas Sarkozy, devoted time in their speeches and interviews, and even the televised presidential debate, to the decision of a municipal swimming pool in Lille to allow a group of obese women (some of them Muslims) to be allocated a separate aqua gym class. The two candidates were extremely concerned at this apparent violation of secular principles, with Sarkozy identifying the swimming pool timetable as a threat to the Republic itself. Those advocating differences between men and women or non-compliance with the principle of equality had 'no place on the territory of the Republic'. That the president of one of the world's leading economic powers felt compelled to set such store by the defence of mixed aqua gym classes in municipal swimming pools underlined the extent to which things were getting wildly out of perspective.

From the conservative right to the socialist left, politicians have lost no opportunity to stress their commitment to secularism. Claude Guéant, chief of staff to Sarkozy who served as Minister of Interior between February 2011 and May 2012, revealed that his opposition to granting immigrants the right to vote in local elections was motivated by fears that if elected to local office, foreigners would make halal meat compulsory in school canteens or run swimming pools without taking into account the principles of diversity. In February 2013 his successor, Socialist Manuel Valls, personally intervened in the case of a nursery worker who had been sacked for wearing the hijab. Her dismissal was justified, he argued, because the headscarf remained 'an essential battle for the Republic'.

Later that spring a fifteen-year-old school student became the subject of a Council of State decision to expel her from college. She had been wearing a long skirt over her trousers and a black headband between one and three inches wide that covered about a third of her hair. Her college's disciplinary panel believed the combination constituted a religious symbol and made her

study in a separate room away from her classmates. She was not allowed to speak to her fellow students or take part in recreation. The deputy for the area concerned raised the matter in parliament, arguing that a 'latent war' was taking place, waged by 'ideologues' who claimed to be fighting Islamophobia but were in fact trying to impose their values on French society. Although, he said, most Muslims condemned such behaviour, its effect was to increase mistrust of them.

The law itself banned symbols and dress that are 'immediately recognisable by their religious affiliation'. Of course, if the outfit's meaning was subject to interpretation then it is reasonable to question whether it could really be considered 'ostentatious'. As one Socialist deputy, Christophe Caresche, argued in the wake of the affair, the recurring debate over the hijab was less a sign of the rise of 'communitarianism' than a consequence of a narrowing of views around the question of identity in French society. This hardening of attitudes among a section of French society was producing an 'obsessive desire' to render invisible any sign of affiliation to Islam.

Racism becomes respectable

Part of the problem was that voices like Caresche's had become marginalised among mainstream parties. Instead it was the FN line that increasingly held sway. In May 2014 FN deputy Marion Maréchal Le Pen, grand-daughter of former FN leader Jean-Marie Le Pen, returned to the issue in parliament. She was concerned that in schools an increasing number of 'Islamic outfits', like sarouels and long dark skirts, were being worn. She believed this to be a subversion of the principal of secularism enshrined in the 2004 law that forbad 'ostentatious' religious symbols. How could staff verify where these clothes had come from? Would extra measures be implemented to reinforce the law?

Such interventions underline a shift in public debate. For over three decades Jean-Marie Le Pen had been railing against the 'two hundred million Muslims' south of the Mediterranean, at France's gates, and the immigrants rendered incapable of assimilation by the differences in race, religion and values that distinguished them from the 'born and bred French'. Such rhetoric is no longer confined to the fringes of public debate, as the FN poses

as the champion of secularism while the 'respectable' political establishment takes on the task of policing the behaviour of France's Muslim population.

In theory, *laïcité* (secularism) in France is the principle of religious neutrality, allowing for the maintenance of religious freedoms in public space. Initially concerned with those who worked in public education in the late nineteenth century, in order to shift control of education from the Catholic church to the state, since the late 1980s it has become increasingly directed towards school students and Muslim women. Politicians of all parties have in the process transformed secularism into a tool that hampers diversity in public space, based on increasingly arbitrary distinctions about how particular symbols are perceived. The law that banned the wearing of the niqab and the burqa in public, for example, was framed not in religious terms but on the basis that covering the face in public undermined the concept of 'living together'. Balaclavas were therefore added to the list of proscribed items and exceptions made for motorcycle helmets and masks worn at festivals.

Lawmakers in France were trying to put a rational gloss on legislation inspired purely by the desire to eradicate overt expressions of identification with Islam. If Muslims wanted to integrate they must prove their allegiance to the Republic and dispel suspicions that they may fall prey to fundamentalism, by adapting to the stipulations that, piecemeal, were refining the Republican dress code. Politicians from across the spectrum argued that Muslim women must remove these 'muzzles', 'walking coffins', 'Mickey Mouse masks'. When it came to legislation, then, it was emotion, instinct and prejudice that took precedence over rational debate, something implicitly acknowledged by François Hollande who, in his first major campaign speech of the 2012 presidential election, won tumultuous applause from his supporters as he punched the air and declared that to be president of the Republic was to be 'viscerally attached to secularism'.

Islam has for a long time been France's second religion, although the number of Muslims in France is often over-estimated. The figure is most frequently put at five to six million, although more careful estimates range from 2.1 million to 4.2 million. In other words, it is generally assumed that France's 'Muslim population' equates precisely to the numbers of people of North African background living in France. 'Islam', then, frequently describes a diverse community of millions of people as if it were a homogenous entity. Such slips contribute to the process of essentialisation that underpins the

construction of the 'Muslim threat'. There is no more a fixed identity that can be labelled 'Islam' in France than there is a single entity that can be called 'French'. The history of immigration and citizenship in France shows that it is possible to exist in more than one culture, that identity is a fluid concept and that individuals engage in multiple relationships with society that can contradict, modify, reinforce or transform a sense of self.

Reducing Muslims to an identity defined primarily by their religion and calling upon them to conform to 'norms' arbitrarily imposed by the 'host' nation impacts upon both perceptions of Islam and France itself. The Republican model of citizenship, historically based on shared identification with a set of political values, is becoming more and more aligned with ethno-cultural notions of Frenchness, which emphasise differences based on religion, culture or 'tradition' that threaten national identity. The implication that there is something innate to Islam rendering Muslims incapable of assimilation fosters the notion that they represent an 'enemy within', posing the kind of threat characterised by Samuel Huntington as a 'clash of civilisations'. In 2012 interior minister Guéant explicitly endorsed this view, announcing that he considered some civilisations to be superior to others. France, for example, respected women more than others – such as, by implication, Islam.

Debate had well and truly moved onto the FN's terrain. For the FN, France's problems derive in part from the Republican notion of 'residence rights', granting citizenship to people born in France. This, argues Jean-Marie Le Pen, means that the promise of integration is held out to inassimilable elements, tantamount, according to his bombast, to arguing that 'a goat born in a stable will be a horse'. Although most mainstream politicians would avoid such rhetoric, the 'respectable' political establishment's efforts to police the behaviour of France's Muslim population only serves to reinforce the ideas that inform it, generating a sense that a section of the population requires permanent disciplining in order to conform to society's 'norms'.

Social effects

Some of the effects of this accelerating Islamophobia were highlighted by the National Consultative Commission of the Rights of Man (CNCDH) in 2012. Noting that racist acts towards Muslims in France rose by 33.6 per cent in 2011, a report by the Commission identified 'an increasing mistrust

of Muslims'. Racist language was becoming commonplace, feeding off the exploitation of issues like national identity, immigration and religion in political debate. Reporting on its findings for 2013, the Commission noted the creation of new scapegoats: Muslims and Roma people. Both were identified as isolated groups in French society. Polarisation and distortion around questions of racism was underlined by a new phenomenon, the sense that it is the French who are the principal victims of racism, a view shared by 13 per cent of respondents. For the third year running there was a reported increase in Islamophobic acts, up 50 per cent in 2013. Women were the primary victims, subject to 78 per cent of attacks, with those wearing the hijab the principal target of Islamophobic acts and discrimination, including a pregnant woman in the Parisian suburb of Argenteuil who suffered a miscarriage following an attack.

The coming together of right-wing intolerance of Muslims with 'visceral' left-wing secularism, often bolstered by feminist objections to the hijab, has led to a process of essentialisation and dehumanisation of Muslims. What many of those who decried young women wearing bandanas or long skirts did not see was the possibility that such attire could also represent an attempt to negotiate a place for their beliefs in the context of a law that forbad 'ostentatious' religious symbols. While other students wore bandanas and long skirts as a fashion statement, a Muslim classmate was singled out and ostracised because her clothes were interpreted as an 'ostentatious' evocation of Islam in the minds of others. She was punished for being perceived as Muslim. The Republican orthodoxy that excludes Muslim students from the public space they are seeking to find or preserve a place in thus creates a self-fulfilling prophecy. By isolating Muslims, this orthodoxy is achieving through 'secular' dogmatism what it routinely denounces as the product of 'communitarian' impulses.

The CNCDH reports confirmed a trend underway in French society for some time. Two or three decades earlier 'Arabs' were more unpopular in opinion polls than Muslims. Organised racists, in the form of a group of right-wing think tanks collectively known as the New Right, had attempted since the 1970s to mask biological racism in cultural terms. According to Maurice Bardèche, one of the leading figures in efforts to revive fascism in post-war France, this would allow the right to renew itself. It would even, he claimed, allow the right to declare itself anti-racist.

In contemporary France the word 'immigrant' conveys a whole series of often unspoken racial prejudices about France's North African population and its descendants but racist rhetoric has generally focused on the claim that immigrants share a different culture, notably the Muslim faith, and are therefore incapable of assimilation. Resentment towards immigrants thus increasingly finds expression in the targeting of Islam. The opposition between Republican values and Muslims set up by actors across the political spectrum serves to legitimise prejudice in wider society. So with the collusion of mainstream parties, the Front National has achieved the ultimate objective of a strategy that set out to emphasise cultural rather than racial differences: it has made racism respectable. In the process, as Marine Le Pen has observed, the 'anti-FN wall' – the so-called 'Republican front' that bound mainstream parties, regardless of their concessions to racism, into electoral combines to exclude the FN from office – has collapsed.

The consequences of this are not simply electoral. By 2012 a leading conservative politician, Jean-François Copé, was proving Bardèche right by complaining about 'anti-white racism' in his successful campaign for leadership of the UMP. A leading Socialist, Arnaud Montebourg, spoke of the consensus shared by the PS, the UMP and the FN on the question of immigration. Sarkozy, meanwhile, declared that the FN, hitherto considered beyond the pale, was now 'compatible with the Republic', a declaration that said more about the drift of Republican values than any progressive evolution on the part of the FN.

Why did Islamophobia take hold in France?

Over the past three to four decades mainstream parties in France have experienced a hollowing out of the ideas and values that once defined their respective political traditions. Neither of the two mainstream political formations, the Socialist Party and the UMP, have succeeded in providing a positive rallying point for supporters around the market values that underpin every aspect of policy, but all parties participate in a consensus that sees these values as the best framework for shaping French society. The call to respect Republican principles has increasingly filled the void left by this absence of positive affiliation to neo-liberalism. This has led to the convergence of various strands of agitation that, from the Socialists'

attempts to define and regulate respect for 'secular' values in an increasingly multicultural society to the growing reliance on racist scapegoating by the right, have left Muslims in France with few allies in public debate.

Recent history has also seen France experience long-term social decline. Unemployment hit 8 per cent in 1982 and would remain above that level for all but one of the following thirty-two years, with youth unemployment increasing fourfold since the mid-1970s, affecting a quarter of under-twenty-fives in 2012. In the late 1960s close to three-quarters of those who passed the *baccalauréat* went into professional or managerial jobs. By the early twenty-first century only a fifth were so lucky. Social mobility has stalled with the result that today it is less likely that people will surpass the social situation of their parents than it was in the 1960s and 1970s. Growing inequalities mean that in the years following the 2008 banking crash, incomes for the richest 10 per cent rose, while those for the poorest 10 per cent fell. Over the same period unemployment rose by nearly two million, the sharpest rise since the recession of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

People of North African backgrounds have suffered disproportionately from social decline. As university graduates their chances of being unemployed are five times greater than the national average. School leavers from non-French backgrounds are more likely to be unemployed than those from French backgrounds with equivalent qualifications. Research has also shown that people with non-French names are systematically discriminated against when applying for jobs. Yet studies have also provided evidence indicating strong identification with French citizenship and Republican values by Muslims in France, conflicting with the widespread view that it is Islam that generates segregation. As the uprising that swept France's *banlieues* in 2005 demonstrates, however, anger and resentment produced by discrimination is also likely to find expression.

Accusations of 'communitarianism' serve to mask the reality that Muslims from North African backgrounds find themselves living in areas like the *banlieues* not because their religion dictates that they must separate themselves off from the rest of society, but because their prospects of social mobility are blocked, relegating them to life in impoverished housing estates. The social and economic pressures that create such situations are obscured by the focus on religious and cultural differences which, as some commentators have observed, contributes to an 'ethnicisation' of social relations.

Nowhere was this more apparent than in reactions to the urban uprising that swept the *banlieues* for three weeks in the autumn of 2005. Around 300 areas were affected nationally, 10,000 cars were burnt out, 5,000 arrests made and over 100 million pounds' worth of damage caused to property. The riots were sparked by the characterisation of *banlieue* youth as 'scum' or 'rabble' by the then interior minister, Nicolas Sarkozy. These are areas of profound social deprivation: in 2005 over 700 of them, with a combined population of 4.5 million, were officially classified as 'in difficulty'.

According to a secret service report circulated in the aftermath of the uprising, the protagonists were motivated by a strong sense of identity, not primarily based on ethnic or geographic origins so much as their social condition, notably their exclusion from French society. The state's preoccupation with Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism meant that it had neglected the problem of the *banlieues*. The heads of both branches of the secret service units administered by Sarkozy went on to assert that the part played by Islamic fundamentalists in the violence was 'nil'.

Such voices were ignored, drowned out by a much louder chorus. The philosopher and media personality Alain Finkielkraut argued that the roots of the rioting could be traced not to reactions against racism in France but instead to hatred of the west, just like the 9/11 attacks. It was therefore an 'ethno-religious' revolt, an 'anti-Republican pogrom' carried out by Arabs and blacks of 'Muslim identity'. The head of the police officers' union wrote to Sarkozy complaining that forces in the *banlieues* were faced with 'a permanent intifada', a civil war orchestrated by 'radical Islamists'.

Fox News ran televised reports of the upheaval with the strapline 'Muslim riots'. According to Prince Alwaleed bin Talal bin Abdul aziz Al-Saud, a Saudi Arabian shareholder in News Corporation, his phone call to Rupert Murdoch complaining about the coverage resulted in the strapline being changed to 'civil riots' within half an hour. If any calls were being made to government ministers in France, however, they weren't having any impact. Sarkozy declared that, 'To try to understand is already to excuse'. As if to reinforce this view a number of prominent politicians, including the employment minister, the head of the ruling UMP's parliamentary party and Sarkozy himself, identified what they believed to be the cause of the riots: polygamy. It was the absence of father figures in polygamous families that left children prone to anti-social behaviour, rendering them unemployable.

France is not alone in experiencing social and economic problems, a crisis of identity relating to loss of empire or a mutation of its political traditions. Yet few countries have seen racism, and in particular the scapegoating of Muslims, become a feature of mainstream political life quite so emphatically as in France.

There are three main reasons for this. First, the emergence, growth and durability of the Front National, a party dedicated to isolating and denigrating immigrants and their descendants at a time of economic crisis, a party that poses a genuine threat to democratic values but which has managed to shift public debate onto its terrain by establishing the defence of 'national identity' as a political prerogative. Second, the incapacity of mainstream parties to counter this scapegoating, partly in the mistaken belief that by proving its own 'get tough' credentials on immigration and Islam it would undermine, rather than bolster, the FN's credentials to do the same. This vicious circle has seen these parties imprison themselves in a logic that can only benefit the FN. In linking arms with the FN to defend 'the Republican tradition', mainstream parties have contributed to the shrinking of a set of ideas that once provided a reference point, however flawed, for anti-racists, into a disenchanted and defensive reflex. Significant steps will have to be taken for these parties ever to come to terms with, let alone defend, multiculturalism. Third, this alarming drift has been allowed to accelerate due to the lack of an anti-racist movement able to provide united and consistent opposition to the FN and the accommodations of the mainstream. Here, affiliation to the Republican tradition has created a blind-spot when it comes to defending a victimised minority: at key turning points this most basic function of anti-racism was subordinated to the need to uphold 'Republican values', putting the onus on Muslims to integrate while the institutions of the Republic, and its pathways to integration – the school, the workplace, public space – failed them. Their relentlessly stigmatised lives and behaviour were then held responsible for this failure.

Conclusion

This process has taken place amid wider international developments. The 'headscarf affair' first emerged in 1989 in the wake of the 'Rushdie affair' when the Ayatollah Khomeini issued a *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie and those involved in the publication of his *Satanic Verses*. Likewise, the rise in Islamophobic acts and rhetoric following the 9/11 attacks provided a

context and justification for those who saw Islam as a threat to a 'French identity' and were already struggling to come to terms with the disorienting effects of decolonisation and globalisation. Structural unemployment, falling social mobility and rising tensions in the most deprived urban areas have further contributed to this atmosphere of permanent crisis and national decline. The emergence of a racist authoritarian party, in the form of the Front National, as a fixture of the political landscape, awakening suppressed memories of the Vichy regime, has both reinforced this sense of decline and contributed to the identification of France's Muslim population as its cause.

The divisive and discriminatory interventions of FN mayors since its local election gains of 2014 offer a glimpse of the kind of narrow, racist communitarianism that the organisation is seeking to impose nationally. Concessions to the Front's politics and, increasingly, attempts to outbid it by mainstream parties have been shown only to favour the development of an organisation that poses an immeasurably greater threat to social cohesion in France than Islamic fundamentalism, which remains a limited and marginalised phenomenon. 'Getting tough' on Muslims or immigrants on the basis of myths that hold them responsible for unemployment, crime or rising social tensions only exposes the impotence of mainstream parties. Since these groups are not the cause of social decay it will not be eradicated by targeting them. Scapegoating is a perpetual spiral; it has no end point. Ultimately frustration at the persistence of problems that 'getting tough' is supposed to resolve risks only increasing the attraction of 'outsider' parties like the FN, always ready to propose going one step further.

The persistent targeting of Muslims is preventing the effective management of diversity in French society. It is exacerbating tensions and obscuring the fundamental social and economic problems besetting France. It is encouraging the growth of the Front National. The only way to escape this vicious circle is to target and isolate the very real threat posed by the FN. The principal obstacle to this remains Islamophobia, in all its guises.

Citations: For more detailed analysis of Islomophobia and racism in France, see Peter Fysh, Anne Curry and Jim Wolfreys, *The Politics of Racism in France* (Palgrave, London, 2003), second edition; Joan Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton University Press, 2007); and Liz Fekete, *A Suitable Enemy: Racism, Migration and Islamophobia in Europe* (Pluto Press, London, 2009)