A historical perspective: secularism, 'white backlash' and Islamophobia in France

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Introduction:

By first reaching back to a time when the tensions between Islam and public space were completely outside the radar of public debate in France, this chapter sets out to analyse the way constructions of Islamophobia have been shaped by potent historical forces, some of which are global in nature whereas others would seem to be more specifically French.[i] In particular, I want to place the focus on the crystallization of anti-Muslim hostility in the 1980s, which was to culminate with the first headscarf affair in 1989. A concatenation of events throughout the decade does indicate that the 1980s were indeed a crucial turning point as far as discourses on French secularism and the place of Islam in France is concerned. And it is probably no coincidence that the 1980s were also the decade when the *Front National* enjoyed its first electoral breakthroughs, in municipal (1983), European (1984) as well as legislative elections (1986). In studying the 1980s, I want to devote some time to the figure of sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad (1933-1998), probably the best sociologist on Algerian immigration and a man whose writings on secularism, however few they were, shed insight on French controversies around *laïcité*. Lastly in this chapter, misconceptions of secularism in France will be analysed through the lens of perceived preferential treatment among a growing number of non-Muslim French. These perceptions, which become ever more deeply-seated as the litany of terrorist attacks or threats have shown little sign of ending, certainly suggest parallels with 'White Backlash' discourses and what I term 'resentful autochthony' perceptions in countries like the United States, Britain, Canada or the Netherlands, despite a seeming French exceptionalism frequently seen as stemming from its assimilationist, Republican ideal of integration. I will here contend that misunderstood as it has been in France, secularism takes its place alongside backlash narratives and against affirmative action in the U.S, reasonable accommodation in Canada or multicultural policies in Britain.

Piecemeal forms of reasonable accommodations (1960s-1980s): Immigrant workers, Islam and public space

At a time when Algeria had just obtained its independence (1962) after a protracted and traumatic war, some French companies with large numbers of Muslim immigrant workers were devising ways of accommodating the cultural, linguistic as well as religious specificities

of North-African workers. This was no mere humanitarian or multicultural concern : in an effort to be competitive in an increasingly global market, these businesses thought there was sound economic rationale in making what few efforts were needed to keep portions of their workforce secure in their identities, all the better to increase turnout and generate productive companionship across ethnic boundaries.

The efforts discussed here came from private companies, who were all the more prepared to make certain adjustments to shifts, working hours and factory premises as their Muslim workforce made up a substantial proportion of the whole. The assumption was also that if these workers perpetuated their cultural religiosity this was no problem in itself: it was still believed, until the mid-1970s, that the "travailleurs immigrés" would return home after a few years, and there was no focus back then on the need for "integration". In the 1960s, there is ample evidence of company-driven efforts to let workers practice their religion. Back then, French secularism (*laïcité*) was almost never invoked in public debate. Only a few examples of these initiatives will suffice. In the north of France, where coal mines had attracted large swathes of mostly-Moroccan workers to exploit the last pits left open before bankruptcy and deindustrialization, some companies issued clearly-worded messages to foremen dealing with Arab and Muslim miners or coal-mine directors more broadly.

In a 1962 managerial note to the coal-mine directors of the northern towns of Lens-Liévin, Hénin-Liétard,[ii] Valenciennes, Douai and Oignies, one finds instructive recommendations "relative to Moroccan workers", promoting a well-intentioned *rapprochement* with them, and guaranteeing them the possibility of four religious holidays a year (notably for Eid and Ashoura).[iii] The same document suggested that mine-directors and foremen (known as *porions*) should have a smattering of Arabic to avoid misunderstandings, and that general seminars be held for them to gain knowledge of Moroccan immigrants' sociology, religion, culture and geography (Lewarde, HL 1383). Another 1967 work note for foremen at Hénin-Liétard, now a Front National stronghold, is more explicit about religion: in bold type and large letters, it issues the warning that "in particular it ought not to be forgotten that the North-African worker has:", which is then followed by sections titled , "a name", "a country and some origins", "a language", "a religion", "a family", "a culture". Under the "religion" section, one reads: "**Religion is sacred to the Muslim.** Do not make fun of it and whilst you may discuss it, only do so with workers that you know well, for the Muslim likes to be left alone about his religion and cannot bear any outside interference with it. **As a consequence,**

avoid making any reference to alcohol, to eating pork, to Ramadan, and you will only be better appreciated" (translation O.E, Lewarde HL 1383).

From the 1960s to the 1980s, there is ample archival evidence of managerial and municipal prayer room facilities being granted to Muslims, in a sort of piecemeal, reasonable accommodation kind of approach. Never was this apprehended as a breach of French secularism. In Avion, for instance, Muslim miners had been praying in the local school until, in 1985, some urban renovation projects made it necessary for them to find another place, which was duly debated with the town hall (ANT, Roubaix). In nearby Anniches, Muslim workers locally did not manage to strike out a deal with the mayor, and failed to obtain a public building to conduct prayers, but the local authority refusal had absolutely nothing to do with secularism. In Raismes-Sabatier, the coal-pit administration facilitated the use of buildings for prayer purposes, but held the "Muslim community" accountable for the maintenance of the said building (*Ibid.*).

With hindsight, the above reasonable accommodations of Muslim customs among immigrant workers invite the following comments. First, religion was seen as a non-problematic identity pillar within a gamut of intertwined identities, be they cultural, ethnic, linguistic, whereas today Islam is routinely conjured up as the *one* issue that affects "Maghrébins" by trammelling their integration. Second, instead of calling upon Muslims to fit in a secularized French space and cast off some of their religiosity in the process, non-Muslim co-workers and foremen were invited to take a tolerant approach towards Muslims and learn about them in the process, mostly by not offending their internalized sense of religiosity. Third, secularism (*laïcité*) was never invoked until the late 1980s. Fourth, current debates on abstract principles (*laïcité, identité nationale, "vivre ensemble"*) were totally absent from what were in fact pragmatic concerns about the efficient running of now ailing sectors of the economy, from the car-making to the steel and coal industries. Fifth, instead of generalized suspicion fuelled by many international developments (from the Iranian hostage crisis (1979) to 9/11, from the Algerian civil war (1992-1998) to the atrocities of Daesh and Jihadi terrorist attacks across Europe), there prevailed a well-intentioned paternalistic atmosphere, in tune with the dominant paternalistic attitude taken by corporate interests since the industrial revolution (Noiriel 2001).

The 1980s, a decade of turning-points

The "Ayatollah of Aulnay-sous-Bois" and the Shia-influenced strikes of 1982-3: the advent of socialist-governed France under François Mitterrand started off in promising ways for immigrants and ethnic minorities. For instance, the 5th Republic's first ever left-wing president granted citizenship to some one thousand immigrants, satisfying a grievance that immigrant associations had been airing for some years (Noiriel 2008). Then the year 1983 was marked by the "Marche pour l'égalité et contre le racisme", which French national memory was to digest into a community-centered "Marche des Beurs" with the active aid of the newspaper *Libération* (Hajjat 2013). The period also coincided with violent strikes in car-making plants to the north and west of Paris, which saw the massive involvement of mostly Morrocan workers. Interestingly, a mere three years after the Iranian revolution, the strikers were depicted by the right-wing press (*Le Figaro*) as well as by high-profile ministers as being influenced or even controlled by international fundamentalist networks.

In 1982-3, the strikers articulated specific demands, only a few of which were faith-based. The most important ones were about a pay-rise, the possibility of getting a 5th paid holiday, as had been introduced by Mitterrand in 1981, as well as respect by management. Specific demands were made about getting 30-minute breaks for Ramadan and the opening of prayer rooms. For the strikers, the labour dispute was about dignity and respect. The majority trade-union, the C.G.T (*Confédération Générale du Travail*), was well aware of the religious nature of certain claims and fully agreed with them. Muslim workers made up a majority in some plants, and to the C.G.T. the issue revolved around multicultural tolerance and the respect of these workers' dignity.

The religious dimension in the dispute was wildly played up by some politicians, media and corporate representatives. Innocuous invocations of "God", which are part of mainstream vocabulary in Arabic, were reported as outlandish, if not ominous. At a general meeting in Aulnay-sous-Bois, one trade-union immigrant representative declared: "Citroën workers, I want to thank you for being here today. In the name of God we all hope our demands will be satisfied, our dignity respected. In the name of God we all gather here today, we are all brothers in this strike" (Gay 2015, p. 114). And for the first time, Muslims were caught on camera praying in car parks since no prayer room was made available to them at Aulnay. This was seen as a encroachment on public space, far removed from the practices that had hitherto

prevailed, when Islam was limited to the inside of the work premises, or was literally practiced underground (hence the French phrase "*Islam des caves*" ("Cellar Islam")).

Some socialist ministers wasted no time in casting doubt about the strikers' political *bona fides*. Minister of the Interior Gaston Deferre talked about their alleged "shia influence" a few years after Khomeini had toppled the Iranian Shah. Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy lamented the fact that those "immigrant workers [were] agitated by political and religious whose frames of reference are disconnected from French reality and society". Labour Minister Jean Auroux went repeatedly further in his declarations. In the newspaper *L'Alsace*, he said: "It is fairly obvious that there has been a religious, fundamentalist dimension to the unrest we have witnessed, which makes this not strictly a trade-union question". In a national public radio (*France-Inter*) interview on February 10th 1983, he also declared: "When some workers pledge allegiance on the Quran, this stops being a trade-union question. A certain number of people out there are bent on disrupting the social and political stability of our country because we simply represent too many things in terms of liberty and pluralism" (Gay 2015, p. 124). A corporate report echoed this sentiment : "These Muslims aligned towards Mecca on the parking lot, reciting prayers amidst religious slogans shouted out in Arabic into the CGT loudspeakers: these are scenes which inevitably remind one of Khomeini-ruled Iran" (*Ibid.*, p. 119).

The immigrant strikes of 1982-3 are particularly important in that they signalled the eruption of Islam among immigrants as a social and political problem, thereby juxtaposing the inchoate "Muslim question" to the old "immigrant question". Scholars of Islam or of immigration in France have justifiably insisted on the crucial dimension of this historical turning-point (Gay 2015, Noiriel 2008, Deltombe 2005, Hajjat & Mohamed 2013). Media coverage and political declarations by ministers and the conservative opposition symbolically excluded these immigrant workers from trade-union and labour history in France, by repeatedly overplaying the importance of faith-based demands among strikers and underlining the wholly incongruous nature of the movement by traditional French labour standards. As Vincent Gay has cogently argued, the alleged permeability of the workers to fundamentalist discourses implacably entrenched the bounds between a national, French "us" and a foreign, Muslim "them", outside the bounds of trade-union disputes, irrespective of the nation's industrial interest, playing in the hands of international networks plotting against France (Gay 2015, p. 123).

In hindsight, this was a classic smear tactic in a labour dispute and, of course, also a way for the socialist party to deflect attention away from their controversial 1983 neo-liberal u-turn (Cusset 2008). What is edifying is that Islam was in the present case, and probably for the first time in the contemporary period, perceived as a disqualifying element *per se*. Although French secularism was never overtly invoked in 1982-3, the seeds of suspicion towards a failed kind of integration due to the sheer weight of Islam among certain social out-groups had been sown. These seeds would bear fruit a half decade later, when this time around not the first generation but the second generation would come to the centre of public attention around education, a domain of public policy which more naturally lends itself to discussions of *laïcité*.

A mere look into the *Le Monde* digital archives suffices to bear this out. Whilst from 1960 to 1990, a thirty-year time span, "laïcité" was mentioned 1 874 times, the figure skyrocketed to 3 957 times through a twenty-year time span from 1990 to 2010. More interestingly, prior to 1989 "laïcité" was simply never harnessed to expose Muslims' deficient citizenship. For instance, Front National's leader Jean-Marie Le Pen, whose party never had any time for "laïcité" until these last few years, argued in a February 1988 speech that it was high time some "laïcité" were injected back into the ministry of education, but it was only a scathing attack against those who he saw as "Marxist zealots" (*calotins marxistes*) wielding undue influence in the corridors of power (*Le Monde*, 15. 02. 1988).

By the end of the decade then, times were ripe for secularism to be attached to the Muslim presence in France, an association which has been constant now since 1989, the year of the first headscarf affair that erupted in a high school in Creil, to the north of Paris. That year coincided with, first, *The Satanic Verses* scandal which, albeit a British issue originally (Esteves 2011), had major international repercussions. Second, with the end of the cold war and third, with the largely acclaimed bicentenary of the French Revolution. The concomitance of these events invited numerous and facile editorials pitting the heritage of the French Enlightenment against the obscurantist schemes of Iran-driven fundamentalists who were using young school girls as stooges. All of this is well-known now and has been thoroughly researched, but it does bear repeating that to make sense of 1989 timing is key, because it ushered in a new era in the French public debate on integration and Islam. For instance, Bowen reminds us that immediately prior to 1989, the few high-school students wearing hijabs were often deliberately placed up front on classroom photos in an effort to project an

image of diversity and multicultural tolerance (Bowen 2008). By 1989 though, these girls had become political pawns in a game that went way beyond them and made them educational pariahs. In a hugely publicized collective editorial, some media-savvy intellectuals issued the following warning: "Only the future will tell whether the year of the revolution's bicentenary will have coincided with a Munich of Republican schools"[iv] (*Le Nouvel Observateur*, 02. 11. 1989).[v] Ever hungry for bombastic similes, other, less high-profile intellectuals responded in a smaller circulation publication by warning against the perils of a "Vichy de l'intégration" (*Politis*, 09. 11. 1989),[vi] whatever that might actually mean. The focus on Islam as inherently straining integration and as being an objective challenge to national identity has been more or less constant ever since.

Abdelmalek Sayad's intellectual trajectory in the 1980s : himself a scholar of Algerian immigration to France who is probably overlooked in Anglophone academia, Abdelmalek Sayad was an active participant in 1980s integration and education debates. His personal archives, which were donated by his wife Rebecca upon his death to the *Cité Nationale de l'Histoire de l'Immigration* before their eventual transfer to the national archives at Pierrefitte to the north of Paris, contain some 150 boxes which have precious little to say about secularism. This in itself is a telling sign that for Sayad crucial debates on immigration and integration of Muslim workers and their offspring simply lay elsewhere.

In 2014, *Le Seuil* published a collection of previously unreleased essays and interviews dealing with the education of immigrant education. In a 240-page volume, *laïcité* is mentioned only twice in passing and once very reluctantly, but what the great scholar has to say is very illuminating to make sense of the 1980s evolution in French public debate. Having resigned from the Jacques Berque commission on the education of immigrant children, Sayad was asked his opinion on the teaching of immigrant languages to children, a multicultural practice of sorts, which hailed back to the 1920s and to the wave of Polish immigrants. Sayad vilified what he saw as a ghettoised form of education which only further reinforced racial stereotypes regarding ghettoised children who were taught ghetto languages, instead of English, German or Spanish (Sayad 2014, p. 119). Teachers of Portuguese, Polish, Arabic were paid by Portugal, Poland and Algeria and were all subaltern staff within schools. More to the point, Sayad was scathing about the teaching of Arabic, which raised serious secular issues according to him : "To teach Arabic the way Arabic is being taught today is to teach the Muslim religion in the proselyte sense of the word. It is an actual violation of secularism,

which would be considered as a violation if the *Christian* religion were in question here" (*Ibid.*, p. 120). What is crucial to comprehend here is that when Sayad made this declaration, at a time when the French government and the right-wing press cast repeated slurs on allegedly "Shia" strikes, nobody really raised an eyelid, and the opportunity to suggest that Islam in itself raised an issue of *laïcité* was simply never taken. The times, despite the emergence of *Front National* and the growing focus on Islam, did not seem to be ripe for that. Five years later, when the first headscarf scandal had made numerous headlines and caused a national furore, Sayad was asked to give his opinion on the controversy. This he evidently balked at doing :

> Since one must talk about this issue, it is neither secularism nor religion which is at stake here […] Just look at the current situation. Without the fall of Iran's Shah, without Lebanon, without a "party of God", how do you think schools would have treated such a clothing incongruity ? Schools would have treated that as a question of civility […] French civility has been brought within the schools, in terms of school behaviour : in class, your head is not covered, if you arrive with a beret, you put it in the locker room, if you arrive with a hat, you put it in the locker room […] Without all of that, it is only in this way that the school should have dealt with this issue […] Today, it is the French schooling system which is relinquishing its own secularism (*Ibid.*, p. 201-2).

In this particular case, and as opposed to 1984, Sayad did not envisage this issue as connected at all with secularism, and appeared to have been one among a few to wholly dismiss secularism from the debate. Bourdieu's friend was therefore twice against the tide over a five-year period, and his personal stances do shed light on the sea-change that had been occurring in French public debate on the issue of Islam, secularism and pubic space in such a limited time-span.

French secularism instrumentalized : a 'White Backlash' of sorts, and some Muslim responses to it.

Evidently, secularism in France is a slippery term, which generates various kinds of controversies, although for more than a decade there has been a growing consensus on the need for a "firm line" on secularism and Islam. In broad terms, the major opposition is between secularism as being a legal principle inscribed into a 1905 legislation which guarantees freedom of religion and separates Church and State, as opposed to secularism as being (wrongly) defined as the need to make sure that religion does not encroach upon public

space, which itself confuses secularism with secularization, a sociological and historical evolution at play in Western countries (including the United States) (Baubérot 2012, p. 63-84 ; Baubérot 2015, p. 135 ; Goldman 2012, p. 112-140). The interpretation of the 1905 legislation as advocating freedom from religion (today Islam, yesterday the Catholic Church) rather than freedom of religion often rests on (deliberate ?) confusions over the meanings of "public space", a phrase which was completely absent from the 1905 law (Baubérot 2015, p. 157-8). Just as interestingly, whereas the architects and advocates of the 1905 separation of Church and State were left-wing figures (Jean Jaurès, Aristide Briand, Ferdinand Buisson, Francis de Pressencé) today many zealots of a stigmatizing, ethnocentric, anti-Muslim *laïcité* are to be found among the right, and even the far-right (Baubérot 2012, p. 29-43). But more interestingly even has been the fact that for at least ten years, "secularism" as a largely anti-Muslim narrative and story-telling has been permeating public debate all across the political spectrum, from the hard-left (Lutte Ouvrière, Nouveau Parti Anti-Capitaliste) to the Front National on the radical right (Tevanian 2006). This is largely conducive to a culturalization of citizenship whereby Muslims are seen as deficient, deviant, out-of-bounds (Duyvendak *et al.* 2016).

This tension is at play in surveys about how French public opinion makes sense of secularism. For instance, the *Commission Nationale Consultative des Droits de l'Homme* (C.N.C.D.H), in its yearly report of 2015, carried out a study of some 1020 respondents on the meaning of secularism, which is quite germane since it helps to apprehend the extent to which backlash narratives on *laïcité* have percolated. Among the respondents, 54% associated secularism with 'living together' in society (*vivre-ensemble*, a constantly used phrase in a post-2015 France ever more segregated across social and ethnic lines); 50% associated it with the banning of religious displays in public places and 47% associated it with the separation of Church and State.[vii] It is obvious from this that secularism is a hotly contested term, and that "laïcité narrative" and "laïcité juridique" vye for domination in a fierce interpretative "bataille des idées" that the French seem to have a liking for. The survey was carried out after the Charlie-Hebdo attacks but before the November 13th attacks.

French secularism as meaning forced secularization increasingly suffuses French people's thinking. This is reflected in individuals' as well as institutions' appreciation of secularism. One social worker in the French *banlieues* states quite bluntly that "Faith is about what you are deep inside, it's about private space. To wear a kippa, a headscarf, an 'I Love Jesus' t-shirt,

all of that is a personal choice. I don't want to see that in the streets" (Bouzar & Bouzar 2011, p. 69). In November 2006, a Ministry of the Interior circular advised regional agents on the following point: "Secularism [*laïcité*] proscribes any ostentatious demonstration of religious beliefs and posits as an absolute rule that religious affiliation is a strictly private matter that cannot encroach upon public life" (*Ibid.*, p. 70). Amiraux goes so far as to posit that this is a form of "gossip politics" which wields influence upon the law-making process, as was shown during the parliamentary debates on the banning of the *burqa* leading to the 2011 legislation (Amiraux 2012). Some debates and decisions following the high-profile Baby Loup crèche, as is also highlighted by Timothy Peace in his chapter, demonstrate this in no uncertain terms: for a growing number of members of parliament, secularism *simply* means freedom from religion in public space rather than freedom of religion as guaranteed by a State separated from faith groups.

Such a damaging notional ambivalence can only have detrimental effects on Muslims. Indeed, when they articulate claims that are compatible with legislative secularism, they are met with hostility by those who argue that these claims are repugnant to secularism as meaning secularization, and that therefore such demands can only come from a cumbersome, vociferous "community" that strikes out for nothing short of preferential treatment. It is precisely in this sense that French Islamophobic discourses utilising secularism are part of the White backlash narratives illustrating hostility towards "immigrants" and ethnic minorities often reified into some vague "they". Admittedly, "White backlash" is something of a misnomer since the great bulk of Muslims in France do not regard themselves as non-whites; "resentful autochthony" is just as problematic since so many Muslims were born and bred in France, therefore are just as autochthonous as non-Muslims, although their religious affiliation is often racialized into a foreign identity, as general talk of "Maghrébins" or "Arabe" clearly indicates. But what is meant here is that misunderstood secularism as a form of "White backlash" manifests itself as a deeply-entrenched perception of preferential treatment of Muslims by authorities, be they local or national. "They" are perceived as getting extra-funding for mosques, "they" get to parade with their Muslim attire in the streets, "their" wives wear headscarves with arrogant looks, "they" occupy the streets with their Friday prayers.

The perception of preferential treatment enjoyed by Muslims in France takes a form which is both more recent and quite distinct, say, from comparable perceptions in the U.K. Indeed, in the U.K. (one is tempted to say "England") Race Relations Acts have powerfully

boosted perceptions of preferential treatment, as is testified by the anti-immigration campaign by Enoch Powell just as the 1968 Race Relations Bill was being debated in the Commons. These perceptions revolve around the indignant sense that "they get laws for themselves", or "they get laws to protect them, whereas we get nothing", "we might go to jail if we don't want them, and the law protects them, not us", etc. In France, since the 1990s and more particular since the 2000s, there has been a growing sense not that "they get laws for themselves" but rather that "if they don't abide by the law (secularism) they are not punished". This is another perception of preferential treatment, which owes its existence to contested definitions of secularism. Implacably, as controversies on secularism pile up, Muslims demanding the respect of the 1905 legislation are construed as vociferous Others wanting to be more equal than others.

~~Like White backlash perceptions in the U.S and Britain, French Islamophobia rests on perceptions of an ethnic and demographic inversion which sees Muslims as making up a cohesive group that has now become a majority in some *banlieues* (Lamont 2000, p. 176-8). Such groupist and inflated perceptions are nourished by best-selling books such as *Les Territoires perdus de la république*,[viii] which wielded great influence on the former president Jacques Chirac, as well as by international conspiracy theories around the advent of *Eurabia*, for instance. Historically, and much like in the U.S and Britain, the growing demographic weight of Muslims (impossible to quantify in the absence of religious statistics) has owed a great deal to a 'white flight' accelerated by national policies on property ownership.[ix]~~

~~Word choices have also reflected this mythical inversion: "intégristes", for instance, which was much more often used in the late 1980s and 1990s than it is today, primarily refers to extremist Catholic interests in Spain in the late 19th century, which were to influence some reactionary Catholic forces that combatted the separation of Church and State. But the word "intégriste" by the mid-1980s started to refer to Muslim extremists. Here again a parallel of sorts is originally suggested between the one religion which permeated French political and social life for much of its history (Catholicism) and the historically recent presence of a religion shared by a largely immigrant underclass (Islam).~~

Perceptions of preferential treatment of Muslims erupt in numerous culture wars, often local in nature. For instance, in southern Corsica in 2015, an elementary school teacher in the town of Prunelli-di-Fiumorbu, Annelyse Hallard, a woman with much teaching experience

and much grassroots knowledge of Corsica, organised, in anticipation of the yearend school party, the singing of *Imagine* by John Lennon in five languages either taught in the school or spoken in the community: French, English, Corsican, Spanish, Arabic. Little did she anticipate the furore this would bring about. Repeatedly threatened, the teachers had to recoil and even made use of their "right of withdrawal" (a labour legislation allowing one not to go to work when one's physical integrity is menaced) in mid-June 2015. This shows that in France (and here in Corsica), Islamophobia bears a strong anti-Arab racism dimension, itself a leftover of French colonial history. But it is also possible to construe this event as a "White Backlash" incident of sorts, for this Corsican incident unleashed indignant feelings that ethnic minorities get undue recognition because their culture is dismissed as both lower and threatening, feelings that are intensified by decreasing public resources and an ethnic-linguistic dimension specific to Corsican nationalism writhing under French Republicanism. Annelyse Hallard recalls hearing a barrage of wild rumours, all of the White Backlash type: "we don't even get breaded fish fillet at the canteen", "our daughter will have to wear a veil at school", "we'll again have to struggle to get a nativity scene in the Town Hall", "we can't even wear uniforms at the base",[x] "we're tired of *halal* food at the year-end party", all of which is utterly fallacious, all of which is often fed by sheer ignorance. The substantial Moroccan community in the town was silent during the whole incident, or merely said "we never asked anything".[xi]

It is probably reassuring for the Metropolitan French to dismiss such bouts of nativism as Corsican anomalies. The truth is that such incidents could have happened elsewhere on the French territory. What these indicate is that, like the Burkini controversies in the summer of 2016, Muslims are often apprehended as killjoys, those who prevent holiday-makers from enjoying Riviera beaches, those who plot against the introduction of nativity scenes in town halls in a context where the refrain "they banned Christmas" has become internationalized through social networks (Esteves 2017), those who, as in Corsica, are seen as disrupting the normally peaceful atmosphere of yearend school parties, those who wear veils at school outings in an obvious breach of "narrative secularism". It is in this way that Muslims are seen as imperiling national cohesiveness and "vivre ensemble", preventing the deserving "autochthonous" from reaping the fruits of a liberal society where "pursuit of happiness" should be untrammeled. This theft of enjoyment pattern is inherently linked to national identity: as Žižek has argued, enjoyment itself is seen as a condition for the Nation to exist (Žižek 1993, p. 201).

Lastly, a few French Muslim responses to this backlash may be discussed. First of all, some draw a distinction between this backlash free-for-all and the calmer responses of institutions. Hassane Oufkir, head teacher at Lycée Averroès (Lille), one of the very few Muslim faith-schools to be state-financed, makes the reassuring point that "Public authorities don't have the same reaction as the public at large on secularism; civil servants read the texts and apply the texts. There's clearly a legal arsenal that protects us" (Esteves 2015). But many are those who bitterly lament a recurrent confusion: that because secularism implies the neutrality of the state, it is incumbent upon the *agents* of the state to be religiously neutral religious in their jobs, not the individuals who actually use these services. In other words, whilst it is only fair that a teacher in a school must not wear a hijab, it does not behove a pupil to do the same. This perception of double standards among Muslims is damaging for national and social cohesiveness, as is also highlighted by Baubérot, who describes this interpretative evolution as a "fallacious shift" (Baubérot 2015, p. 148).

Some express their irritation by brandishing historical symbols and hurling them back at what they see as *laïcité*-obsessed France. Mohamed Meniri, president of the association running the Bondy mosque (Seine Saint-Denis) states that "clearly, when hearing all this, Jean Jaurès must be turning in his grave" (*Ibid.*). Jean Jaurès was one of the four key architects of the 1905 legislation on separation of Church and State. Faced with fellow-countrymen who seem to have forgotten their history or learnt it in an odd way, Mr. Meniri mobilises this same history in an effort to show that "nous (aussi) sommes la nation", to quote a recent essay by Marwan Mohamed from Collectif Contre l'Islamophobie en France (Mohamed 2017). Others who are just as irked reverse the "fundamentalist" stigmata which is often attached to *practising* Muslims, by exposing what is extreme about contemporary constructions of *laïcité* : Maged Osmane, the main imam at Montreuil's great mosque in Seine-Saint-Denis, posits that "[Secularism] has become like a civil extremist religion, losing sight of what it is primarily about" (*Ibid.*). As Mayanthi Fernando has shown in her ethnographic fieldwork, many of these Muslims simply seek a "right to indifference […] on terms that do not require assimilation into majority religious, cultural, and racial norms" (Fernando 2014, p. 79). But, as opposed to this, a growing number of non-Muslim French people criticize what they see as the Muslims' advocacy of a "right to difference", itself a demand for preferential treatment incompatible with their appreciation of a secular Republic.

Conclusion

Despite a seeming French exceptionalism which has a lot to do with specifically French perceptions of secularism, much of the hostility against Muslims rests on international issues that have reverberated across Europe and the United States, from the Iranian revolution of 1979 to the *Satanic Verses* scandal ten years later, from 9/11 to the atrocities of Daesh exported to France since 2015. Lexical choices reflect this: high-profile fundamentalists in the late 1980s and early 1990s were routinely described as "ayatollahs" and, despite a *Le Monde* article referring to *hijab*-wearing school girls (10. 10. 1989), the mainstream media and politicians lost no time in exposing the "integrist" women wearing "chadors" on French public spaces, itself a word which is associated with Iran. I myself remember a great, knowledgeable high-school teacher of history in the northern French town of Tourcoing who, exactly as the Creil headscarf erupted, would refer to "chador"-wearing schoolgirls.

The other point to be made in conclusion is that the French national fabric weakened by hostility against Muslims rests to some extent on a sense of double historical betrayal. Some Muslims feel betrayed by the French Left that instrumentalised their 1980s movement striking out against racism and for equality, the same as they were to feel betrayed one generation later by an anti-globalisation movement that had little time for Muslims, as Timothy Peace has shown in his comparative monograph (Peace 2015). This French literature generally refers to as "*des occasions manquées*" (missed chances) (Masclet 2003). Muslims are also feeling betrayed by authorities whose view of secularism cannot guarantee a "right to indifference" in a country where secularism is usually defined as meaning that religion has no place in public space. Across the ethnic divide, some non-Muslim French, from corporate interests to public authorities, feel they have been betrayed by a section of the population who, instead of jettisoning the religion of their parents and embracing what they construe as a modernity which is a *sina qua non* of integration, have learnt to individually rediscover an Islam which they regard as incompatible with contemporary life in the West. That feeling seems to apply more to Muslim women and girls than to Muslim men. All of this, again, is no French exception, and finds echoes all across Europe.

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[i] I would like to warmly thank Timothy Peace for reading a first version of this chapter.

[ii] In 1971, the town changed its name into Hénin-Beaumont.

[iii] This was together with the national Moroccan independence day, on November 18th.

[iv] The reference here is to the guilty appeasement policies adopted by France and Britain at the time of the Munich agreement of 1938.

[v] Signatories to this wake-up call around laïcité were : Elizabeth Badinter, Régis Debray, Alain Finkielkraut, Elizabeth de Fontenay, Catherine Kintzler.

[vi] In this second case, signatories were Joëlle Brunerie-Kaufmann, Harlem Désir, René Dumont, Gilles Perrault and Alain Touraine.

vii Multiple answers were possible.

viii Emmanuel Brenner (ed.), *Les Territoires perdus de la République - antisémitisme, racisme et sexisme en milieu scolaire*, Paris : Mille et Une Nuits, 2002.

ix Such as the G.I. Bill of Rights after 1945 in the U.S, which although colour-blind, ultimately favoured whites, and as housing policies by Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair in Britain. In France, "right to buy" policies in the 1970s, notably under Raymond Barre by 1977.

x The Corsican town is 20 miles away from the major air-base of Solenzara, in this largely agricultural area.

xi Interview, Annelyse Hallard, 05. 12. 2015.