

CERS Working Paper

The Racialisation of France: French identity and the myth of religious races

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Introduction

France is one of the most hostile countries in the European Union towards cultures and traditions considered foreign to the nation state. With aims to oust or assimilate immigrants and emphasise the secular values of the state, France does not appear an attractive destination for racial and religious minorities. Yet such people continue to exist in France whilst practising their religions and not successfully assimilating—at least to the extent of fully embracing the ideals of French life. Whilst emphasising the idealistic French culture that the republic considers of paramount importance, it is easy to ignore the foreign impacts on France that have seen her change and adapt. Key events such as the Nazi occupation during the Second World War and new immigrations have augmented antisemitic views and fascist sympathy and forced France to deal with a flux of eastern european immigrants and diverse religious groups in its secular land. The response of France to such developments will here be analysed with specific reference to the treatment of the Roma, the racialisation of the Jewish population, the rise of Islamophobia and the crisis of the identity of the nation state.

Roma

There are many peoples in France who are penalised by the system for not being French or conforming to French culture. This can be on a basis of ethnical origin, lifestyle, religious persuasion and racial stereotypes. The Roma are a prime example of the racial exclusion of immigrants in France. According to a statement by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) (2010) Roma migrants “are held collectively responsible for criminal offences and singled out for abusing EU legislation on freedom of movement” in France. Five years prior to this statement, ECRI encouraged France to give Roma rights to housing, education and health, yet the 2010 report found many still living in poor conditions and in temporary camps that they are often evicted from. The ECRI was and continues to be dissatisfied with France’s ignorance toward anti-Gypsyism and claim that policies “based on evictions and ‘incentives’ to leave France... cannot provide a durable answer.” The 2013 ECRI report further criticised France’s insufficient reception of the Roma with regards to housing and education. According to the ECRI report, the Court of Audit revealed in October 2012 that the enrolment of Roma pupils was insufficient in many regions of France. In the same year, between 5000 and 7000 Roma children remain insufficiently educated by the end of compulsory education at the age of 16 (Battaglia, 2012). This is partly due to the displacement of Roma communities through evictions, also noted by the ECRI, which affects the rate of Roma children returning to school. “The trauma they have gone through is important: they have lost their home, their lands, their businesses, their schoolbags... I doubt that many have been able to return to school.”¹ Krasnopolsky from the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) and Education without Borders Network (RESF) expresses his desire for a ban on evictions if there is no permanent solution of rehousing them and explains that officials use the evictions and thus lack of accommodation as a pretext to keep the Roma out of schools (Battaglia 2012).

According to Amnesty International (2013a), 42 evictions took place in July/August, displacing 4066 Roma, of which only 19 of these evictions provided rehoming and that was only temporary. However, before becoming President of France in 2012, François Hollande condemned evictions of the Roma and wanted alternative solutions for those in squalid conditions. Amnesty International claim that after a year of his presidency, the efforts to prevent evictions have been insufficient, with 11,982 Roma being evicted in 2012

¹ Translated from French: “Le traumatisme qu’ils ont subi est important : ils ont perdu leur toit, leurs repères, leurs affaires, leur cartable... Je doute que beaucoup aient pu revenir en classe.”

and an unprecedented 10,174 in just the first two trimesters of 2013. Research by the Interministerial Mission of General Inspections (la Mission interministérielle des Inspections générales) IGA, IGAS, CGEDD and IAGENR (2013), reveals that there are approximately 20,000 Roma in France as of May 2013, which has been stable for several years beforehand. It is difficult to give an accurate figure of the Roma population in France but Romeurope (2013) estimate that it is around 15,000 to 20,000 and agree with the aforementioned research that this figure has been stable for about 15 years. The population of Roma children in France is estimated to be about 40% of the whole Roma population in France (Romeurope 2009). Statistics of non-francophone enrolment in the French education system provided by la Direction de l'évaluation, de la prospective et de la performance (DEPP) (2012) show that in 2010-2011 there were 38,100 new immigrant students in education. This is a mere 0.4% of all enrolled students, which shows that immigrants as a whole do not strain the education system. With there being less than 10,000 Roma children, it is clear that the Roma children—especially given eviction rates— and immigrants as a whole are but a drop of water in the French education system.

The Interministerial circular of 26 August 2012 on the 'evacuations' of illegal camps states that social assessments of the Roma must be carried out before evictions. Actions regarding transport, school meal and school supplies must be anticipated to be able to ensure that compulsory schooling is maintained amongst Roma children. Regional health agencies are responsible for promoting access to healthcare, emphasising immunisation and maternal and infant health. Temporary emergency housing should be allocated where necessary, favouring those most vulnerable. However, temporary relocation is dependent on whether there are enough places to accommodate those 'evacuated'. This means that there is no desired effort to increase temporary housing to guarantee that all evicted Roma people have shelter, however in certain cases temporary housing may be constructed to promote integration depending on the local authorities and the State. Amnesty International (2013b) have criticised the circular a year on claiming that it must be amended to ensure that no evicted Roma is rendered homeless after eviction, that a consultation takes place between those affected before the operation and that they are notified in detail of the operation in good time. Furthermore, the circular must ban all evictions over the harsh winter periods.

Along with the shortcomings of the circular, it has largely been ignored and evictions continue with disregard for human rights and dignity. A recent report by the Human Rights League (LDH) and the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) published April 1st 2014 denounces the strict and 'stubborn' policies of France, particularly over the winter period. Between January and March of 2014, 3,428 people have been evicted, 3,007 in 2013 and 2,153 in 2012. The interministerial circular has not received further implementation: social assessments of the Roma before evictions have hardly ever taken place; adequate housing has not been allocated; social support is not provided.

The aforementioned 2014 report explains that the Minister for Housing wishes to 'eradicate slums' whilst the Minister for the Interior's approach to Roma eviction is systematic with no regards for the welfare of those affected. The evicted Roma move down the road and create new slums worse than those which preceded them. This systematic approach only exacerbates the issue. A memo revealed by *Le Parisien* (see Fig. 1) on 15th April 2014 revealed plans by the Chief of Police to "locate Roma families living in the streets of the 6th arrondissement of Paris and oust them systematically", whether they have pets or not and whether they have children or not. Paris already has the largest proportion of Roma evictions in France (73%) and it is plans such as this that encourage and maintain that figure and also reveal France's unwillingness to make serious developments in the amelioration of Roma living conditions and human rights.

The approach France takes in dealing with Roma camps does nothing to eradicate slums but just displace them. The lack of social aid and adequate housing makes these environments very dangerous places to live. On February 12th 2014, an eight year old girl was found dead after a fire destroyed a quarter of her camp. With no electricity, candles are necessary under darkness and it is this that is thought to have caused the accident (RFI, 2014 and ERRC and LDH, 2014). Such fires are not uncommon and as long as France continues to treat the Roma as outsiders and criminals, the living conditions and failure to integrate into French society will remain in their current states. As it stands, the Roma are seen as a threat to the French identity.



Fig. 1: Internal note written by police official 11/4/2014 and published by Le Parisien 15/4/2014

French Identity

The French identity is one that France seems to try to maintain and defend. It is for this reason that foreign cultures and religions are unwelcome. After the Second World War, French leader, Charles de Gaulle, credited France's ethnically diverse population of "yellow... black... and brown Frenchmen" but then stressed that it is important for such groups to remain minorities or "France would no longer be France" (Facing History and Ourselves Foundation, 2008, pp.57). However, he also stressed that the country was of Christian faith, which many today would refute due to the emphasis on secularism or *laïcité*. The French identity is but a mythical ideal that there is a homogenous French lifestyle that is unchanging and universal apart from amongst those who have failed to assimilate into such lifestyle. To an extent, those who conform to the French identity are of the *French race*.

With the processes of globalisation and immigration, racial discrimination has changed due to a redefinition of 'outsiders' based on cultural traits rather than biological ones (Silverman, 1999). New immigrations have changed what being French (or of the *French race*) means, resulting in a higher emphasis on assimilation and integration into France's language and traditions.

The Roma, with issues in education and failed integration due to France's lack of motivation to facilitate it, largely speak their native tongue and frequently live in squats. It is overlooked, however, that with more devotion on France's part the problems concerning the Roma could change. Spain has managed to accommodate the Roma better than France and is home to the largest population of Roma in Western Europe (Ringold et al, 2005). There has been greater investment and projects like the National Program for the Development of Roma (NPDR) set up in 1988 that have helped to raise awareness of the Roma, educate them and house them. According to Ringold et al (2005), the Roma were generally employed in Central and Eastern Europe during the socialist period and many are still expecting the state to intervene and provide occupations. This causes frustrations amongst Roma in Central and Eastern Europe and result in them looking to the West for jobs. With France reluctant to give substantial aid to the Roma and its continuous evictions of camps, they are left unsheltered, unemployed and uneducated. Though many Roma are not easily willing to give up their culture and integrate into the French life—or that of other European countries—the French government's approach to dealing with them prevents their economic engagement and contribution, which goes on to perpetuate the negative attitudes that France holds towards them. It is a vicious circle whereby the Roma are maltreated for their own living conditions by the French authorities due to the very same authorities failing to provide them with better living conditions or a means to get better living conditions; by contrast they are thrown out of their camps and unto the streets in worse conditions than

before. If France largely bases racial discrimination on cultural differences as Silverman (1999) claims, then it is clear that it is not devoted to dealing with failures of assimilation where it may incur a cost on the part of the French state.

Racism, at least in its blatant form, is not common amongst western parliaments bar the Front National. Less aggressive language is used by parliaments including those in France that will emphasise tolerance and fairness whilst using words like 'but' or 'only' to make exceptions or explanations for why immigrants are causing great strain on employment and the country's finances (Van Dijk, 1992). Van Dijk quotes the Le Pen, leader of the Front Nationale in the Assemblée Nationale:

"We are neither racist nor xenophobic. Our aim is *only* that, quite naturally, there be a hierarchy, because we are dealing with France, and France is the country of the French" pp.112.

Here the Front National claims not to be racist before using the highlighted 'only' to make a highly racialised statement by assuming that immigrants cannot be French and by claiming there should exist a 'natural' hierarchy based on race. Van Dijk also explains that the government will also generalise their views to the public, expressing their interpretation of immigration as standard for the common man. The denial of racism on their part is also followed by reproaching the accuser as though being criticised of racism in such a tolerant age is ridiculous and thus reversing the whole scenario. In some cases, the Front National will accuse the opposition of 'anti-French racism', whereby they criticise the left-wing parties for allowing so many immigrants into the country and giving them the same rights as French nationals. It is a tenuous argument to suggest that the French nationals are at some great disadvantage to immigrants and is evident that though many laws protect and equalise immigrants with nationals, structural racism and indirect racism persist, as has been proven with the aforementioned internal police memo on systematically ousting Roma people.

Anti-Semitism

The desire of the Front National is to encourage secular assimilation amongst immigrants so that the French culture is maintained. Culture, french or otherwise is transmitted through the family, education and media- the latter two highly influenced by the state (Hargreaves 2007). The family is the first means of socialisation of offspring and so parental values and native culture will be the first to be transmitted. The media has a great deal of independence in modern day France but should one consider France under Nazi occupation between 1940 and 1944, it was strictly controlled, with challenging newspapers and broadcasts in clandestine. This had a large impact on France's antisemitic views and racialisation of the Jew. The concept of race is constructed through various fields of legitimation. One contributor to a school of thought of racial typing was Arthur de Gobineau. He stressed the supremacy of the white race over the "black" and the "yellow" and claimed that should the types have remained separate and not interbred, the "yellow and black varieties would have crawled for ever at the feet of the lowest of the whites" (Gobineau, 1853, pp.208). Such ideas have perpetuated the view of white supremacy and legitimated African and Asian subordination and inferiority. This separation of peoples of different skin colour and simplification of said peoples into one of three categories is an example of the construction of race. With regards to the racialisation of people of faith, Corcos (2005) stated, as a French accused-jew who escaped from France during the Nazi occupation, that anti-Semites had no concern for jewish beliefs but "considered Jews to have distinct, inferior, and evil biological characteristics" (pp.10). Such beliefs about a typology of people, in this sense typology based on religion over colour, create a false idea of a jewish race. Under the Vichy regime in France, one was considered a jew even if one had two jewish grandparents, so Corcos, despite not being a member of the jewish community, was in danger of being sent to a death camp. The view of the 'jewish race' held by the French public and Nazis legitimated their maltreatment and placed them as a biologically distinct people from the rest of the French. This racialisation of the Jew developed with the French Revolution and secularisation of France; anti-judaism, a form of discrimination based on the Jewish faith, became antisemitism, whereby the Jewish faith became less relevant to discrimination and the Jews were seen as a race of people (Miles 2004). Miles (2004) claims that the view of human beings as *tabula rasa* "threatened to erase the boundary between the Jewish people and the rest of society" (pp.31). Bauman (1989) also stated that the nature of Jews had to be reformed to emphasise a non-cultural distinction from other people. As a resistance to the equalising consequences of modernity and secularisation, Judaism was replaced with being a Jew; that is to say, a religious choice was replaced with being of the Jewish race.

The discrimination of the Jewish race continues today with examples of antisemitic protests as recent as January 2014. According to Israel National News (2014), approximately 17,000 people marched through Paris as part of a “Jour de Colère” on International Holocaust Remembrance Day, whilst shouting such slogans as “Jews out of France”, “The story of the gas chambers is bullshit”, and quite simply but perhaps the most aggressive “Jew, Jew, Jew!”. The protesters also sang a song by comedian Dieudonné mocking the Holocaust. Dieudonné is an outright anti-Semite who claimed the Jews to be a sect and that their holy book conceals sinister interests that transcend spiritualism (Wieviorka 2005). Although there is an evident antisemitic presence in France it is not universal, however, out of eight EU member states surveyed by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) (2013), France’s Jewish population was the most afraid of being subject to antisemitic abuse; 70% afraid of verbal abuse and 60% of physical attack. Furthermore, qualitative information from the survey gives an insight into the antisemitic reality that remains prevalent. One man claimed that Jewish “religious places are under systematic police surveillance” and that this showed that the “threats are real and that the government takes them seriously” (pp.35). A woman highlighted that Jews are asked to “disperse quickly” upon leaving synagogues where there are “special security services” that are not necessary for other religious places of worship (pp.36). There is a perpetual resistance to the Jews, as a ‘race’ of people, in France that causes fear for their safety amongst the community.

The Nazi sympathy and antisemitic views were largely challenged after the Second World War, with Jews becoming the symbol of multiculturalism in France by the 1960s (Wieviorka, 2005). They held the ideas of the French republic as well as their Jewish identity; Jewishness was able to be expressed in the public sphere. However, Wieviorka (2005) demonstrates a separation of Jewish and public life, with an increasing number of Jewish children attending Jewish schools- 28,391 in 2002 compared to 15,907 in the 1980s. This was not due to an influx of Jewish people in France and, in fact, the Jewish population decreased by 35,000 between 1980 and 2002 to 500,000. This was due to Jewish people migrating to Israel. This separation coincided with a rise of antisemitism from the extreme right, resulting in a lower influence on assimilation and a higher amount of Jewish discretion. The faith became more exclusive to the private sphere. However, Wieviorka (2005) claims that strong and active communities of Jews already existed and only increased in population since the rise of anti-Semitic abuse. This prevented their ability for discretion but also gave them a powerful voice against antisemitism. The Front National was one of antisemitic voices. Its leader at the time, Jean-Marie Le Pen claimed that “Jews have too much power in the press” and that the Holocaust, in which around 6,000,000 Jews were murdered en masse, was a mere “detail” of the Second World War (Silverman, 1999, pp.45). The Front National saw its first success in 1983 by-election in Dreux, around the time that anti-Semitism was rising (Wieviorka, 2004). It is not only the French right wing parties such as the Front National that disliked the Jews. Their tightly knit and developed communities were the envy of new immigrants, such as North African and Caribbean youths in the 1990s, who had no communities of their own. The higher the intolerance, the more reclusive Jewish people became. This causes a return to the republican model of separation, whereby faith, Judaism and Islam in particular, is repressed. This led to the separation of Jews and public life and the rise of fear amongst Jews that can be seen even today.

Islamophobia

France’s intolerance of outsider cultures can be seen through the tighter regulations of religious expression and increased popularity of the Front National. Participation of immigrants in France’s labour market, the prime reason many emigrate there, requires acculturation but inevitably the immigrants bring with them their own cultures (Hargreaves, 2007). According to Hargreaves (2007) this has been seen as a threat to French culture and thus the Nation State of France, particularly with respect to immigrants from Islamic countries. According to Viorst (1996), Muslims have largely come to France from its own former North African colonies. Their presence in France dates back to the First World War but only significantly since the 1960s; France granted asylum to many Algerians who fought on their side during Algeria’s war for independence. This along with the economic needs for labourers brought in most of France’s Muslim population who then settled throughout France. It is then no surprise that Islam is the country’s second religion.

Despite France’s secularist state, private religious schools persist and even receive funding from the state, most of which are Catholic—the most popular religion in France. Muslims, now the largest religious minority in France, receive no such funding and have only one Muslim high school, Averroès, in Lille which

opened in 2003 after being twice refused of a permit (Hargreaves 2007). This could be due to Muslim immigrants being less affluent than French natives that are Catholic, meaning that private Muslim schools are impractical and that free state schools are the only option for most immigrants. However, France24 (2013) reports that the school has grown in number and success in a decade to become one of the top-rated schools in the country. It must also be noted that as of 2008, Averroès is *sous-contrat* with the state and thus receives state funding (France24, 2013). Despite this development, it remains the only Muslim high school in the country.

The desire to prevent Islamic growth and acceptance is evident in Mantes-la-Ville, where newly elected Front National mayor, Cyril Nauth, has tried to stop the development of a new mosque or Muslim “prayer room” in the old treasury. This has given rise to Islamophobic and anti-Muslim abuse towards the Association of Mantes-south Muslims. This included receiving slices of pork through their letter box and a letter comparing Muslims to cockroaches (Liberation 2013). The former exploits and mocks the Islamic faith’s views towards swine. However, the delivery of pork does not appear to be an example of intolerance of the religion alone but is a means of abusing the Muslims as a people by using their faith against them. This attitude is further exemplified in the letter comparing muslims to cockroaches; that is to say, a different species, a bug, vermin to be dealt with. Further letters reported by the Association and publicised by Liberation (2013) accused Islam of being “criminogenic” and wishing good luck to the new Front National mayor in “cleaning up the Muslim race”. Such racist attacks have not occurred in the 12 year existence of the mosque. This is highly ironic when it was France itself that invited the Muslim population into its borders several decades ago.

It is not only areas influenced by the Front National that wish to reduce Islamic expression. The state banned the wearing of religious symbols in public schools in 2004. One 15 year old girl, Cennet, had wore a headscarf to school for years but due to the ban, wore a cap in September 2004 (Meiers 2007). She was told to remove the cap and was then isolated for refusing to do so. However, she claimed that other students regularly wore hats and bandanas without reprisal. In this case, Cennet was singled out as her choice to cover her hair was known to be for religious reasons. The secularisation of the school environment in France was seconded by Belgium, whose Senator, Alain Destexhe, proposed a similar bill to ensure that religious conflicts in the world were not brought into the classroom (Facing History and Ourselves Foundation, 2008). He also noted that many women are forced to wear the headscarf by others and thus this measure would be one of care and the restoration of freedom. On the contrary, for many, wearing a headscarf and/or a veil is a means of expressing freedom; freedom of religion and freedom of patriarchy through the male-gaze. It is important to note that despite the criticism against France’s policies of secularism, it is attempting to encourage neutrality and freedom through cultural integration—that is, the integration into the mythical French identity. Though muslims seem to be a targeted group due to many muslim women wearing a headscarf, all religious symbols are banned in public schools, including the Jewish skullcaps, Sikh turbans and large Christian crucifixes (Brugger et al, 2007). However, it is important to note that the veil, a Muslim garment covering the face, is the only religious symbol banned in public in France. According to Brugger et al (2007), some think that the ban of religious symbols in schools is an attempt to combat Muslim fundamentalism. The general secularisation of France, especially in its educational establishments would in itself go so far to prevent any religious fundamentalism, yet it seems more likely that a fundamentalist would be enrolled in a private school associated with the individual’s religion, yet France continues to let them exist and thus the accused motive is nullified. That is not to say that Muslims are in no way targeted by such laws. With Christians occasionally wearing a crucifix pendant that is non-obtrusive, Jews wearing skullcaps but being of a discriminated minority in France, it is Muslims that are the largest majority and Muslim women that are often wearing a religious head garment. A ban on wearing a veil in the public sphere forces an increased level of secular assimilation or renders those who refuse to remove their veil housebound. The ban on all religious symbols in public schools means that Muslims cannot wear even the more modest headscarf and in the aforementioned case of Cennet, any profane garment that would replace it. To claim that this law increases neutrality and freedom is far from true. Students could conceal a cross or other religious symbol for the necessary period of time without conflicting with their religious beliefs. If a woman does not wish to display her hair for religious reasons, forcing her to reveal it due to the prohibition of the garment concealing it is most definitely an example of how such a law is targeted at Muslims. Of course one could say the same for Sikhs wearing a turban, yet they are not the largest minority religion in France.

Conclusion

The national motto of France is *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*; this is aimed at the French people, yet by analysing the response of France to the Muslims, Roma and Jews, it is clear that there is not the same *liberté* or freedom for Muslims with respect to religious expression; there is no *égalité* or equality in social support for the Roma; there is little notion of *fraternité* or brotherhood towards the Jews. To be a part of French society, one must engage with French culture. However, the notion of French culture is not entirely clear or distinct. It involves participation in its labour force and legal acquisition of property but should a group be financially incapable of finding a job due to a lack of legal accommodation, then one cannot wish to acquire legal accommodation. France, therefore, leaves no other option for the Roma than to live in squats and create new ones when displaced.

Secularism is a significant part of French culture, yet the French also pride themselves on freedom of religion by funding religious private schools and permitting places of worship; their police even protect Jews from harm at synagogues. They permit religious garments and symbols in public places except those that cover the face and forbid all religious symbols in public schools. However, such laws have little affect on those that conform to the idealised French secular identity and the largest religion of Catholicism. Despite its development of acceptance of Jews and its large population of Muslims, France has racialised said groups; the former from at least the Second World War and the latter mainly from when they migrated from Algeria in the 1960s. France's response is to force these 'races' to give up a large part of their identity in the school at a young age, to be assimilated into the secular way of living and push the religious elements of their life into the private sphere.

For such people as the Front National, the aim is to play on the supposed significant differences between these groups and what I called the *French race*. By doing so, they can legitimate stripping immigrants and religious groups of their culture and identity, restrict their freedoms or even oust them from the community. France is rich with diversity due to immigration and it is unlikely that immigration will cease, especially due to the freedom of movement amongst all member states of the EU. With different lifestyles, practices, religious persuasions, ethnical backgrounds and histories, French citizens are far from uniform. Moving minority groups from here to there, preventing children in public schools from displaying their religion and demonising them all on a basis that they were not born in France or do not conform to a secular or traditional religion will not rid France of its immigrants that have been settled for decades nor unify them under one lifestyle. The French identity as a homogenous culture does not exist and only when France accepts this will the conditions for the minorities considered here improve.

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