

Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History, Series II

Volume 12

Article 9

2007

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Emory Lynch

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Recommended Citation

Lynch, Emory (2007) "The Denial of Difference: Assimilation Not Diversity in French Public Discourse," *Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History, Series II*: Vol. 12 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/historical-perspectives/vol12/iss1/9>

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The Denial of Difference: Assimilation Not Diversity in French Public Discourse

Emory Lynch

In 1989 in France, the historic unfolding of events now known as the *affaires de foulard* began, setting off an explosion that had been mounting since the Revolution.¹ The *affaires* pertain to the banning of Muslim headscarves and other ostentatious symbols of religious faith in public schools, but are representative of a much larger tension within French society. In attempts to unite the French under one national identity, the French government has systematically neglected to recognize differences in citizens based on religious affiliation, race, or sex. These attempts have ironically created much division within French society, as in the example of the *affaires de foulard*. As Joan Scott notes in her article Symptomatic Politics, the “controversy over the wearing of head scarves is symptomatic of a much larger problem...that is the problem of reconciling the fact of the growing diversity of the French population with a theory of citizenship and representation that defines the recognition of difference as antithetical to the unity of the nation.”² Because the French idea of republicanism denies any difference between individuals based on the color of their skin, place of origin, sex, or religion, minorities

¹ Joan W. Scott, “Symptomatic Politics: The Banning of Head Scarves in French Public Schools,” *Institute For Advanced Study, French Politics, Culture & Society*, Vol. 23, No.3 (2005):106.

² *Ibid.*, 109.

are more systematically oppressed because the challenges they face are not acknowledged by the state. In order to appreciate the difficulty of the contemporary situation of the head scarves, it is necessary to understand the historical perspective of not only the law banning this symbol of religious identity, but also the overall denial of difference in France. Multiculturalism, religious pluralism and feminism will be evaluated in this exploration to create a framework with which to make sense of France's modern environment of assimilationism.

Everything within contemporary French society must be understood in relation to the Revolution of the 1790s. This period was extremely pivotal not only for France, but also for the entire Western world, because the French Revolution replaced monarchy with a republic. Central to the ideals of the Republic were liberty, fraternity, and an equality that recognized the inherent rights of the individual. With this new government came a massive shift in power from the Roman Catholic Church to the secular state, which confiscated church property and abolished papal authority over the new state church. Religious freedom was granted to all citizens except Catholics who remained loyal to the pope, as the Catholic Church opposed the revolution and the republic.

Tensions arose over religious pluralism as early as 1790 when at the National Assembly, the Jews of Paris made their case for citizenship, insisting that "the Jews should be treated no differently from anyone

else.”³ The Jews asked that “all degrading distinctions” that they had suffered be abolished, and that they be declared citizens, not as a favor, but as an act of justice.⁴ They appealed to the ideals of the Revolution, arguing that France would benefit from their status as citizens, because rights would be extended to all without restriction, increasing the general religious and cultural tolerance in France. Jews, they argued, were not only worthy and competent, but had much to offer French society. Both legal barriers and popular prejudice caused the Jews to suffer from extreme marginalization. They could not join professions, were ineligible for all official positions, and had no legal right to acquire landed property. Consequently many were deprived of the means to live comfortably in society. Despite these powerful arguments placed before the National Assembly, full citizenship was not granted to Jews in France until September of 1791, fully two years after the National Assembly passed the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. When Jews were finally made citizens in 1791 they had to agree to abide by all the laws of France. It was guaranteed that anyone who would swear the civic oath and fulfill the duties that the Constitution imposed would have the rights that the Constitution assured, including freedom of religious worship, but not freedom to observe religious laws that differed from French laws. Despite these guarantees, questions over religious inclusion, especially in regards to Jews, would

³ “Petition of the Jews of Paris, Alsace, and Lorraine to the National Assembly,” January 28, 1790 in *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996) 93.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 94.

arise quite frequently over the course of France's history.

Women were especially affected by the secularization of the state in the late eighteenth century. Because the Church was so central to the lives of women, it was the place where they found their community base. As in the circumstances surrounding the scandal of the head scarves, women have often been most subject to oppression of all kinds, but especially religious oppression, because they have historically been the ones responsible for the upbringing of pious, moral citizens. This "republican motherhood" forced religious responsibility on women, leaving them the most vulnerable when religious change occurs. Furthermore, women "saw the opening created by the convocation of the Estates General and hoped to make their own claims for inclusion in the promised reforms" of the Republic.⁵ Like the Jews, women recognized the inconsistencies in the ideals of the Revolution, wherein all people were allegedly given equal rights, but women were still subjugated. Women were only made passive citizens, which meant that they could not vote, though they were considered important members of the nation. These blaring inconsistencies and the rise of feminism in France will be discussed later as more contemporary feminist approaches are critiqued.

In addition to a heightened awareness of discrimination based on religion and sex, racial categories and

⁵ "Petition of Women of the Third Estate to the King," January 1, 1789 in *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996) 60.

the inconsistencies of slavery were recognized within Republican ideals. Slavery had not been legally allowed in the French metropole since the seventeenth century, but much French wealth depended on the slave economy of French colonial holdings in the Caribbean. Even before the Revolution, some liberal thinkers had attacked the inhumanity of slavery. In 1788 French reformers established the Society of the Friends of Blacks to advocate for the abolition of slavery through a gradual process of emancipation.⁶ One pamphlet issued by this campaign called slavery "an infallible means of corrupting two men at the same time, the Master and the Slave."⁷ Like the Jews who fought for civilian status, this society implored that the government "remember the character of our Nation...and the wishes of the present Ministry for the eradication of every kind of abuse and its readiness to receive ideas for reform."⁸ The Revolution did eventually put an end to the practice of slavery, though in 1804 Napoleonic reenacted it. It was not until 1848 under the new Republic that slavery was abolished for good. Collectively, it was the arguments of the religious and racial minorities that eventually convinced the government of the need to maintain equality for all men, and to be consistent with Republican norms.

One of the effects of the Revolution on French identity was a heightened sense of national superiority

⁶ "Discourse on the Necessity of Establishing in Paris a Society for...the Abolition of the Slave Trade and of Negro Slavery," 1788 in *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History*, ed. Lynn Hunt, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996) 58.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁸ *Ibid.*

that would eventually translate into justification for imperial expansion. A lack of shared history consistently stimulated exhaustive efforts to form a homogeneous national identity, thus denying diversity where it existed in France. It is often said that France stumbled into empire, meaning that they did not ambitiously seek a colonial empire, but instead developed one unintentionally because of their sense of superiority. Their colonial expansion was not driven by capitalism, but by nationalism. For example, the conquest of Algeria after 1830, which was only complete by the 1850s, grew out of a sense of military honor and a civilizing mission—that is, a mission to make the rest of the world as sophisticated and cultured as France. When the Republic finally triumphed in the 1880s, the idea of a secular state was actualized and French nationalism intensified. France quickly became the second largest colonial empire in the world, and had to then discern a method for ruling subjugated peoples and lands.

This problem was not entirely new however. The challenge of ruling colonized peoples and lands first surfaced in imperialized regions during the Revolution. In one of these colonies, “the struggle over the meaning of ‘nation’ and citizenship that took place in the Caribbean...was a central part of the broad political transformation of the era.”⁹ In the Caribbean, massive slave revolts broke out in response to oppressive and racist conditions, leading white plantation owners to express anti-Republican rhetoric. In response, “racial

⁹ Laurent Dubois, “Republican Anti-Racism and Racism: A Caribbean Genealogy” in *Race in France*, eds. Herrick Chapman and Laura L. Frader (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004) 26.

integration was presented as the foundation for the preservation of colonies threatened by the royalist insurrection of white planters," and slavery was abolished "throughout the territory of the Republic; in consequence all men, without distinction of color [enjoyed] the rights of French citizens."¹⁰ This radical shift led to the erasure of any racial categorization, but did not necessarily eradicate racial prejudice or subjectification. However, the Republic did what it deemed necessary to combat racism and promote equality, though as is obvious in the treatment of Northern Africans in contemporary French society, racism was surely not entirely eliminated.

After the Revolution and the acceptance of Jews as citizens, the process of Jewish emancipation was accelerated by Napoleon's conquering of Europe, as he liberated Jews from their ghettos and established relative equality for them in the lands he conquered. Years later though, themes of Jewish nationality and anti-Semitism, which were confronted in the 1790s, recurred during the controversial period known as the Dreyfus Affair. Though brief, this period in the history of France continues to impact society as a whole, and religious life specifically, as the place of Jews in modern France is representative of the controversial religious attitudes of French government and society, and is thus a significant factor in understanding the *affaires de foulard*. A document that was produced on the eve of the Dreyfus scandal, "Jews in the Army," provides a telling insight into attitudes of most officers within the army, and many French civilians, towards Jews. In this document, the author makes the un-

¹⁰ Ibid., 28.

apologetic claim that "the semitic invasion is like the breeding of microbes," which makes clear that Jews were unwelcome members of the military, and of society as a whole.¹¹ Legally, the government pledged to accept and protect all citizens, regardless of race or religion, but in practice, anti-Semitic sentiments were undeniable. After a dozen years of praise as he moved up the military ranks, Captain Dreyfus was accused of high treason in 1894. Unable to convince the military tribunale that judged him that he was innocent, he stated, "my only crime is to have been born a Jew!"¹² Recognizable throughout his trial and conviction are blatant prejudices against Dreyfus for his religious affiliation. Anti-Jewish sentiments soared after his conviction, even escalating to violence against Jews. After Dreyfus was proved innocent and the affair was resolved, the religious privileges of all denominations were quickly revoked, and religion was distinctly separated from state in 1905. The Dreyfus affair had shown to France the dangers of organized religions and how they can meddle with state affairs. Consequently, France became extremely assimilationist, demanding that its citizens choose nation over religion.

Just as assimilation began to be the supreme value in French society, feminism emerged as a vehicle for women's rights. The challenge facing feminism in France, however, was in fact the very "equality" that women struggled under. A semblance of equality

¹¹ Michael Burns "Jews in the Army," *La Libre Parole*, May 23, 1892 in *France and the Dreyfus Affair* (Massachusetts: Mount Holyoke College Press, 1999) 11.

¹² Michael Burns, "Arrest and Interrogation," October 15, 1894 in *France and the Dreyfus Affair* (Massachusetts: Mount Holyoke College Press, 1999) 28.

between the sexes existed, as both were considered worthy of education, though each had their own separate spheres of influence. Each had power, which made them appear to be equals, as men were to influence the public sector, while women maintained control over civilizing in the private sector. Despite the separate but equal spheres present in the third Republic and the lengthy ideals of the Revolution, "from the liberation promised women a new servitude emerged."¹³ Women recognized inequality in their treatment by society, but in speaking out against this behavior of difference and advocating for their own rights, seemed to themselves acknowledge that some inherent difference between men and women existed. Some feminists strove for equality within this framework of difference, while others refused to accept that a distinction existed along gender lines. Feminists such as Madeline Pelletier advocated for fairness because of sameness, and urged women to reject femininity, adapting masculine tendencies in order to be considered equal. Feminine sexuality was considered a "demeaning mark of difference that was the source of women's subordination," and thus Pelletier was overjoyed when she could pass as a man in social settings.¹⁴ Her focus was on re-presenting women, intentionally defying social expectations in order to dissolve the category of women altogether, rather than to enhance their social status. Pelletier, then, was not

¹³ Mona Ozouf, "Women's Words: Essay on French Singularity," Trans. Jane Marie Todd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press) 244.

¹⁴ Joan W. Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996) 139.

only exemplary of the feminists who demanded equality under the law and in society because of the inherent sameness of all individuals, but also the assimilationist values of French society, which undoubtedly influenced her perspective. Pelletier died in 1939, but would have been delighted when upon receiving the right to vote in April of 1944, "all were declared the same, and their sameness lay in their membership to the nation."¹⁵

By the onset of the Second World War, France had colonies scattered throughout the Caribbean, Africa and Asia, and was beginning to confront the questions as to whether those colonial subjects had any claim to the fatherland. Immigration became a concern during this time, as many of these colonial subjects, especially North Africans, were simultaneously encouraged to migrate for labor purposes, yet were ostracized by the French public. According to an article by Clifford Rosenberg, "the same pragmatic, political considerations that marginalized the extreme forms of racism in France helped mold the largely ignored racial thoughts of these government officials who actually set immigration policy."¹⁶ During the interwar period France attracted more immigrants per capita than any other country in the world, leading much of the population to worry over this "invasion and the perils of racial mixing."¹⁷ From such a racially-charged statement, it is obvious that racism existed in France, whether the government recognized it in its policy or

¹⁵ Ibid., 163.

¹⁶ Clifford Rosenberg, "Albert Sarraut and Republican Racial Thought," in *Race in France*, eds. Herrick Chapman and Laura L. Frader (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004) 37.

¹⁷ Ibid., 36.

not. French society was one that saw French culture as supreme, and felt threatened by outside forces making any claim on the nation. Policymakers saw the need for white supremacy to go unchallenged, justifying it with the defense that "by taking care of [immigrants], we are protecting ourselves and our fellow citizens."¹⁸ Despite attempts to assimilate Algerians and other foreigners into French society, the society as a whole was still overwhelmingly racist and segregated. Racial tensions in the colonial city created a distinct divide, even to the point of ghettoization. Algerians, who were overwhelmingly Muslim, were made subordinate and had no access to citizenship, though they were integral to French life. Thus, the contradictory nature of France's racial attitudes is most evident in the fact that the nation implored Africans to migrate, as they needed them for cheap labor, but kept them clearly as subjects because of racist sentiments. Though the French Republic claimed equality for all, their policies and attitudes towards their colonized peoples and immigrants proved otherwise, leaving those people alienated and with conflicting identities.

During this same period of colonial expansion, France surrendered to Nazi Germany at the beginning of the Second World War, and the infamous Vichy regime took power over the country. Under Vichy, anti-Semitic practices again resurfaced in the regime of the far Right. They replicated the views of the anti-republican, anti-Dreyfussards in their treatment of the Jews. Similar to Nazi Germany, these practices quickly escalated and contributed to the great Holo-

¹⁸ Ibid., 45.

caust in Europe, with nearly a quarter of the French Jewish population and thousands of immigrant Jews perishing after being deported to death camps elsewhere in Europe. As depicted in *The Sorrow and the Pity*, many French people accepted and even supported the anti-Semitic measures under the German Occupation and the Vichy regime. Tyler Stovall asserts in *France Since the Second World War*, "wartime anti-Semitism was in fact deeply ingrained in the French people."¹⁹ Despite any gains in religious and racial tolerance made in the wake of the Dreyfus Affair, French society was still capable of slipping into racist attitudes when the opportunity presented itself. Consequently, many French Jews lacked any sense of real religious identity, as they so often had to assimilate in order to survive.

Like in post-Revolution France, the years after the Second World War saw complete social a transformation. Hopes for gender equality resurfaced as changes in social and sexual norms became increasingly accepted. As depicted in *God Created Woman*, sexuality created a paradox in postwar France, for on the one hand, sexuality was beginning to play heavily into middle class culture as young adults began to express themselves as individuals, while on the other, sexuality was adamantly repressed by the older generations. Amidst the ever-changing sexual attitudes in France, as well as the influences of international pop culture, women began to receive a voice in France. The rise of militant feminism was a result not only of the liberalization of France, but also of the self-realization of

¹⁹ Tyler Stovall, *France Since the Second World War* (New Jersey: Pearson Education, 2002) 90.

women that they were still suffering many of the same oppressive forces that they encountered at the time of the Revolution. The 1970s would be a time of pivotal change for women, with the legalization of abortion rights and other new possibilities offered to French women, though the struggle for gender equality was far from over.²⁰ Women, immigrants, religious and racial minorities would continue to be relegated to the margins of French society, as they are still today, which is obvious in the scandal of the ongoing *affaires de foulard*.

Immigrant workers were moved to the public housing projects during the 1960s, essentially ghettoizing huge sections of the population which were viewed with contempt. These housing projects quickly deteriorated into slums, but have never been repaired or remodeled in any manner that is noteworthy. Islam was on the rise during this period, as an influx of immigrants, mostly male, arrived from North Africa. More than any other group, these Muslim North Africans, especially Algerians, have "been targeted as the racial issue in contemporary France."²¹ In response to growing animosity towards these immigrants, a racist political movement on the Right began to emerge in the early 1970s. A new political party was formed, the National Front, which rejected any pretense of multiculturalism, and seized immigration as its primary issue.²² Surprisingly, this party, led by Maurice Le Pen, disapproves of the law banning Muslim women from wearing head scarves. They are

²⁰ Ibid., 37.

²¹ Ibid., 93.

²² Ibid., 94.

in support of women wearing head scarves, if for no other reason than for Muslim women to be easily identifiable and constantly suppressed.

The most outward justification for the *affaires de foulard* and the law banning women from wearing head scarves in public schools is that the obvious display of religious alignment contradicts secularism, one of the pillars of the Republic. The 1994 ban of "all 'ostentatious' signs of religious affiliation" was advocated by the Center Right Party, on the premise that certain religious symbols are "in themselves' transparent acts of proselytizing."²³ The fact that all religions are subject to this law thinly veils a direct attack on Islam. In 2003 when the issue resurfaced, the political Left was divided over the issue. Those on the political Left who were in favor of banning head scarves from schools "likened Islamic fundamentalists to Nazis and warned of the danger of totalitarianism," which reveals direct discrimination against Islam.²⁴ Those on the political Left who opposed the ban "saw the law as a continuation of French colonial policy," and an acceptance of racism.²⁵ Like the political Left, feminists were split on the issue, as those who favored the ban saw it as "a sign that France would not tolerate oppressive, patriarchal practices," while those who opposed the law "insisted that the expulsion of girls with head scarves would not emancipate them but drive them either to fundamentalist schools or into early marriages, losing forever the possibility of a

²³ Joan W. Scott, "Symptomatic Politics: The Banning of Head Scarves in French Public Schools," 107.

²⁴ Ibid., 108.

²⁵ Ibid.

different future.”²⁶ Fadela Amara, a Muslim feminist activist from the French ghetto is one of these women who believes that head scarves are much more than a religious matter, but also a “means of oppression, of alienation, of discrimination, an instrument of power over women used by men.”²⁷ The mere fact that there are so many divisions, even between interest groups, over this issue conveys the complexities of racial, religious, and gender conceptions in France.

As Joan Scott reaffirms, the controversy over the head scarves is not simply an issue of Islamic militancy, for as polls show, Muslims in France are becoming increasingly more secular and more integrated. Instead, the current drama has been produced by racist sentiments in France. The National Front, and Le pen particularly, think France should expel all immigrants because “they ‘breed like rabbits,’ take away jobs from ‘native’ French people, bring crime to the streets, and refuse to accept the rules of the society they’ve moved to, while devouring its resources.”²⁸ Clearly, racial tensions are still running high in France, despite attempts by the French government to be “color-blind.” In his essay “Anti-racism without Races,” Erik Bleich confronts the problem of fighting racism in France without acknowledging the concept of race. He claims that “France simply cannot think in terms of racial groups because of its Revolu-

²⁶ Ibid., 109.

²⁷ Fadela Amara, *Breaking the Silence: French Women’s Voices from the Ghetto* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006) 100.

²⁸ Joan W. Scott, “Symptomatic Politics: The Banning of Head Scarves in French Public Schools,” 110.

tionary and Republican principles.”²⁹ Whether it is only the principles of the Republic which disallow categorization, or if the desire to compensate for the shame of Vichy also has an influence, classification according to race is nevertheless forbidden in French politics. Bleich does affirm that “the color-blind model comes with costs,” as it is impossible to truly combat racism if it is not first acknowledged outwardly, which it cannot be if race is undefined.³⁰

Ultimately, the issues surrounding the *affaires de foulard*, are those of a French national identity. Since the Revolution, France has struggled to define itself, and has consistently combatted multiculturalism, religious pluralism, and feminism because all of these forces of categorization have been perceived as threats to a united national identity. In considering France’s extensive history of assimilationism, it is clear that the country holds homogeny as supreme, and has followed the ideal that in order to integrate, it must exclude. The acknowledgment of diversity in all its forms has been excluded from public discourse, though the societal consequences of it have not been avoided. Therefore, in light of such public controversies as the *affaires de foulard*, it might serve the French Republic well to begin to incorporate, rather than deny difference, for the ramifications of denial are heavy, and are not likely to better France, or actualize the ever-sought after ideals of the Revolution.

²⁹ Erik Bleich, “Anti-racism Without Races: Politic and Policy in a ‘Color-Blind’ State,” in *Race in France*, eds. Herrick Chapman and Laura L. Frader (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004) 167.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 181.