

all these forms of loss are connected and mutually reinforcing. To take a closer look at Daesh is to rediscover a lack of democratic control over what is being produced and sold in the world, with the arms and oil trade as only the most obvious of many examples, to say nothing of the lack of any popular control over financial flows, whose opacity is as essential to multinational corporations as it is to criminal organizations. Even the very war now being waged against Daesh testifies to the imperial powers' own unwillingness to confront the networks that support Daesh among their own allies in the Gulf states, illustrating a lack of democratic control over international relations.

If the response to a loss of control is to result in anything other than an aspiration to another and deeper loss of control (for 'us' as much as for 'others'), it needs to be demonstrated that the problem is precisely this lack of control *in all its social and economic forms, without exception*. This requires, in other words, a return to the old project of democratic control, on all fronts. The naked exercise of power that has brought Greece to its knees may at least have made the stakes clearer in this respect, in debates about austerity and the EU. But a similar breakthrough has not yet happened in other areas, for example in French debates over how to address the legacies of racism and colonialism, and the way these continue to obstruct the democratic project in general.

Encouraging and direct, a powerful reversal of the feeling of powerlessness requires inventing new truly democratic responses to acts of violence and war. We need to politicize this feeling of powerlessness and the factors that give rise to it, against those who produce it and cultivate it. If we fail, it will continue to be politicized only by and for them. This feeling haunts us, and most of the time we live with it without thinking about it. But we know that the time has come to confront it when, as in the aftermath of 13 November in Paris, we suddenly experience it as intolerable.

Note

An earlier version of this text was published online as 'Guerre ou démocratie: politiser le sentiment d'impuissance', *Contretemps*, 30 November 2015, www.contretemps.eu.

An apology for French republicanism

Olivier Tonneau

When the attacks of 13 November in Paris are used by the French government to criminalize activists and protesters, when fear is pushing its population deeper into the arms of the Front National, and when the radical Left has almost disappeared from the political landscape, can one retain any hope that the country will find the necessary resources to be true to its ideals? The answer I receive from most of the Anglo-Saxon world is 'no'. Indeed, I hear, the ideals are themselves part of the problem: France's self-representation as the beacon of the Rights of Man has hidden for too long the true nature of its society.

In his *France since 1945*, for instance, Robert Gidea explains that the French Republic rests on four cardinal principles: a universal, secular, compulsory and free education; equality of all citizens before the law, whatever their class, race or gender; the indivisibility of the Republic, in which the laws are made by a single legislature, articulating the will of the sovereign people; and, finally, a contractual conception of the nation, as opposed to the German organicist conception of the nation as *Volk*. His examination of France's actual policies leads him, however, to dismiss these principles as 'the founding myths of the Republic [but] in fact they disguised, and were made to disguise, radical inequalities.'¹

Following the January 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* killings, this republican disguise was then ripped to shreds in a series of articles that meant to expose the real nature of France and, taken together, to compose its true history. The violent nature of French secularism was traced back to its origins, with the French Revolution leading to the Terror.² France's self-representation as the beacon of human rights later justified imperialism and colonialism as a 'civilizing mission'.³ Colonialism informed France's attitude towards its postcolonial immigration, which was subjected to a forced process of assimilation.⁴ Hence the tensions surrounding Muslims, whose piety goes against the aggressive secularism enshrined in the principle of *laïcité*. 'The French conception of the republic', writes Tariq Modood, 'has integral to it a certain radical secularism, *laïcité*, marking the political triumph over clericalism.... Islam, with its claim to regulate public as well as private life, is therefore seen as an ideological foe and the Muslim presence as alien and potentially both culturally and politically inassimilable.'⁵ The terrorist attacks suffered by France this year were thus largely perceived as a predictable consequence of religious tensions generated by French republicanism.

I cannot accept this analysis and will go so far as to make the reverse claim: not only do I refuse to give up on France's revolutionary heritage, I even count on French postcolonial citizens to preserve it from the steady ideological degradation of the overall population. I may be deluded by my attachment to the Revolution, but my hopes are not entirely without reason.

What leads young people to terrorism is a much debated question, but whatever the answer, I do not regard a handful of murderers as indicative of the state of French post-colonial citizens. Jihadists aim to divide society along confessional lines: by committing crimes in the name of Islam, they hope to marginalize people of Muslim origins and thus radicalize them. For all we know, they could just as well have been committed because such terrorists felt that Muslims were not angry enough – just as far-left terrorist groups such as Brigade Rosse, Action Directe or the Red Army Faction turned to terrorism in the 1970s because they were losing hope in the spontaneous rise of the proletariat. We must look elsewhere for indications on the state of mind of French Muslims.

In 2006 and 2009 respectively (after the ban on headscarves from schools in 2004 and the first cartoon or caricature affair in 2005), Pew and Gallup led two extensive studies of the relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in European countries. On all counts, France was, often by a considerable margin, the country in which these relations were most positive, and Muslims happiest.⁶

Many sociological studies belie the suggestion that Muslims are inherently alienated by republicanism. French Muslims tend to be 'sceptical about collective identities, conceiving them as essentializing and negative. This attitude corresponds to the classic republican differentiation between public and private spaces, which is dominant in the society in which they grew up. Their ethnicity ... plays out in the public space not in terms of a "right to difference", but of the enforcement of equality and fundamental liberties; they do not wish to acquire more rights, but to enforce the republican pact.'⁷ Such studies show that French Muslims are critical of the application of republican principles, but do not, however, reject the principles themselves. To understand the

persistence of the principles, we must envisage them from a different perspective to the one outlined above.

Such is the centrality of the French Revolution to any perception of France that this is where we must begin. John Bowen's *Why the French Don't Like Headscarves* opens with the presentation of 'two modes of thinking about religion that developed after 1789. One emphasized the importance of maintaining a national, public religion, whether as the Catholic Church or as the short-lived revolutionary cults of the goddesses Reason and Freedom. The second mode of thought emphasized the right of each individual to follow his own conscience.' The first mode led to the Terror, during which 'Robespierre's rule was accompanied by persecutions of all religions.' Therein lies the apparent root of France's aggressive anticlericalism: 'The Revolution, especially under Robespierre, had nourished and legitimated a strain of thinking that was strongly antireligious.'⁸

One could plausibly argue that all analyses of France are determined by views of Maximilien Robespierre. Although it is far beyond the remit of this article to engage with the extraordinarily powerful historiographical arsenal that has hegemonized his 'black legend', a few points must be made.⁹

First, the belief that the Jacobin Republic abolished religious freedom in favour of a state religion is erroneous. The decree declaring France's acknowledgement of a 'Supreme being' was actually meant to put an end to religious persecutions by protecting all religions under a common umbrella: freedom to adhere to any cult was reasserted in its eleventh article.¹⁰ It was not Robespierre and his circle who pursued an 'anti-religious' policy; radical and divisive de-Christianization was the policy of their Hébertiste rivals and critics. Second, the routine reduction of Jacobinism to Terror leads to overlooking other debates central to the revolutionary period, which remained central to France's republican self-perception: electoral suffrage, slavery, the economy and war. Against those who aimed to protect the rights of the propertied class by imposing an electoral franchise, justified slavery in the name of France's economic reliance on its colonies, and thought that the Revolution should be spread to Europe by force, Robespierre demanded universal (male) suffrage, the abolition of slavery, the subordination of freedom of commerce to welfare, and opposed wars of conquest. The reader might be of the opinion that the fate of France (or indeed the world) would have been significantly better had Robespierre never spread his subversive ideas;¹¹ what must be acknowledged, however, is that the distinction between the two modes of thinking originating in the Revolution cannot be construed as one between tolerance and intolerance. The Revolution also marked the origin of a tension between equalitarian universalism and nationalism. To dismiss the former as a mere cover-up for the latter leads to missing the beating heart of French republicanism.

At the dawn of the Third Republic, this tension pervaded debates on colonization: the principles demanded that it should end, but their application would jeopardize the nation's prosperity and power. Hence Jules Ferry's attempt to pass colonialism as consistent with the principles of the Revolution, which led to the invention of the myth of France's 'civilizing mission'. He faced opposition from Georges Clemenceau, who vehemently rejected the claim that races could be hierarchized.

Look at the history of the conquest of these people whom you call barbaric, and you will see violence, all crimes unleashed, oppression, rivers of blood flowing, weakness oppressed and tyrannised by the victors! Such is the history of your civilisation! ... And it is such a system that you are attempting to justify in the country of the Rights of Man!¹²

Jules Ferry prevailed, and the school system he designed then ensured the hegemony of the myth in the metropole.¹³

The late nineteenth century thus marked the high point of the nationalistic understanding of French republicanism. Its universalist version was, however, to be

reasserted by an unlikely voice: that of the founding father of Algerian nationalism. Messali Hadj had close ties with France: he had worked there and engaged with the French labour movement. When he called for the establishment of an Algerian parliament, in 1927, he cunningly implied that it was the only way for France to be true to the principles it had betrayed:

Only at that moment can we say that justice has been rendered to us; for in that way, we can effectively participate in the affairs of our country, and that day we will say that the democratic France of 1789, of 1848 ... will have accomplished a work of civilization in emancipating the Algerian people from exploitation, servitude, and injustice.¹⁴

Messali Hadj was addressing the Algerian Muslim Congress, which had been modelled on the 1789 Estates-General. References to the Revolution also abounded in the discourses of Ferhat Abbas, who would become the first president of the independent Republic of Algeria. There lies the origin of today's French Muslims' republicanism. The response of the Republic, however, was to deflect equalitarian claims by instrumentalizing religion.



France's colonial policies are often analysed on the basis of two famous texts: Jules Ferry's proclamation of France's duty to civilize inferior races in 1885, and Frantz Fanon's analysis of France's strategy to dismantle Algerian society by emancipating its women, which led to the forced unveilings committed by the French army in 1954 in Algiers.¹⁵ The correspondence between these texts is so obvious that it is easy to conclude that colonial France always aimed to eradicate Islam. This, however, obscures an important part of the story. After the colonization of Algeria, the July monarchy implemented state control over Islam, aiming at 'the progressive depletion of the Muslim religion'.¹⁶ Yet 'Orientalist' scholars convinced the Third Republic to eschew 'Islamophobic' policies (thus was the term invented)¹⁷ and instead promote religion so as to win over indigenous populations whilst keeping them under the control of carefully selected religious leaders. The most visible result of this new policy was the construction of the Parisian Mosque in 1918, as a token of gratitude to Muslims who had died during the war (the mosque was mocked by Hadj as a 'publicity mosque', *mosquée de réclame*. It is worth quoting from the inaugural speech, which contrasts strikingly with the Third Republic's reputation for aggressive anticlericalism: 'When the minaret that you are about to build will be erected, one more prayer will rise in the beautiful sky of Île de France, of which the Catholic towers of Notre-Dame will not be jealous.'¹⁸

The same strategies were applied when, after World War II, France endeavoured to reconstitute its decimated workforce with massive immigration from North Africa. Far from attempting to assimilate immigrants, the state parked them out of sight to prevent their integration into the 'dangerous classes', and was perfectly happy for them to take shelter from exploitation in religion. Such is the hold of the belief in assimilationist France that this strategy is easily overlooked by historians. Robert Gidea, for instance, makes France's intolerance towards minorities the guiding principle of his postwar history of France and writes that the practice of Islam demanded 'a constant struggle':

North Africans organized a rent strike in Sonacotra hostels in 1975 in order to obtain prayer rooms. They petitioned at Renault-Billancourt in 1976 and went on strike at Citroën-Aulnay-sous-Bois in 1982 to secure time for prayer during working shifts.¹⁹

What Gidea does not say is that companies were quick to grant the workers their wishes: cultural demands were cheaper to satisfy than others such as wages and safety. After the 1970s' strikes, the government of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, eager to placate class tensions by implementing an 'Islam of social peace', developed a far-reaching plan to facilitate the practice of Islam in workplaces. Companies hoped that religious leaders would pacify their followers, and they did not mind dormitories and factories becoming the preserve of the *tabligh* or the Muslim Brotherhood.²⁰

This strategy was theorized by Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy, before he rebranded himself as a rival of the Front National. A dedicated advocate of multiculturalism, he boasted in *La République, les religions, l'espérance* (2004) of having nominated France's first Muslim prefect, and insisted that 'the school teacher could never replace the priest'²¹ because only religion could fulfil people's deepest aspirations. Ultimately, all religions contained a convergent message of hope which enabled them to coexist harmoniously: during a visit to Riyadh, Sarkozy went so far as to claim that France and Saudi Arabia shared the common aim of 'fighting against the decay of moral and spiritual values, against materialism and the excesses of individualism'.²² These remarkable statements were the new garments of an Islam of social peace, and Sarkozy cynically recommended the promotion of religion in the *banlieues* as a means of turning disenfranchised youths away from criminality and drugs.²³ The failure of Sarkozy's strategy was exposed by the 2005 *banlieues* riots – or, rather, in the discourse of their actors, their 'revolt'. The revolt had nothing to do with religion: it was an explosion of anger at social, economic and geographical relegation²⁴ and had much to do with the spirit of the Revolution. Reminiscing on the revolt, Guy Achia explained:

Our parents are Africans. Africans are respectful. Our African parents are always on time, always polite – very, very, polite: 'yes sir, thank you ma'am'. But we are French ... French people are revolutionaries, we are never happy, we never agree, we always complain.²⁵

His fellow rapper Hardy Paul concurs: 'We're in France, it's a revolutionary country, it's in its history.' That the revolutionary spirit is alive and well among French postcolonial youth also appears from the testimonies of French Muslim girls impacted by the law banning headscarves from schools: when they were asked what message they wished to address to French society, many simply reasserted the Republic's slogan: *Liberté, égalité, fraternité*.²⁶ French Muslims have never appeared more French than when opposing the French government.

The debates on the headscarf were an opportunity for Muslims to reflect on the strategies that might help them fight prejudice. Many declared their will to get involved in politics, which, one girl argued, could create conditions that would trivialize the veil. She believed that if Muslims and non-Muslims got together on issues of general interest, it would induce indifference towards religious identities by shifting the focus on 'issues over territories, natural resources, or capitalism'. Non-Muslims would not be the sole beneficiaries of political socialization: Muslims, too, would learn to go beyond 'simplistic' beliefs such as 'there is a conspiracy against Islam' or 'Westerners dislike us because we are Muslims'.²⁷ One could hardly find a better application of France's self-representation as a nation founded upon a social contract and united by the search for the common good.

That young Muslims refer back to the spirit of 1789 suggests that, *pace* François Furet, the Revolution is far from over. According to Furet, the fact that all governments now paid homage to the Revolution was a sign that the body politic had finally reabsorbed this uncanny lump, with only a light scar remaining.²⁸ The Revolution, he claimed, had become 'cold history'. Furet mistakenly believed that the significance of the Revolution could be fixed once and for all. Its ideals are peculiar in that they simultaneously found the nation and forbid its closure. In Ernesto Laclau's

terminology, the hegemony of the revolutionary discourse is such that the state is forced to articulate its claim to legitimacy in its terms, yet as soon as opponents to the state integrate the principles, they acquire an ideological weapon that enables them to contest its legitimacy. Ultimately, French republicanism is neither really universal, nor merely nationalistic: it is dialectical and dynamic. The centrality of the Revolution in the French imaginary enables minorities, however small, to stand for France against the majority.

Coda

In 1946, Aimé Césaire, the newly elected Communist deputy from Martinique, told the National Assembly that ‘a great hope [had] arisen for colonized countries: the hope of seeing a more just world, in which their duties would be balanced with an equal share of rights, be born from their sufferings and sacrifices’. Yet he also warned that

on the day that these peoples have the sentiment that their hope is flouted one more time, and only on this day, will the situation become critical, because on that day, time and disillusion will have amassed, in the words of the famous Colonel Lawrence, ... ‘dried-up souls ready to catch fire’. To this wildfire, let us prefer the great light that shines from the brasier you yourselves lit in 1789, which has never stopped hovering over peoples’ horizons, because it brought all of them, regardless of their race and colour, ... the great message of fraternity.²⁹

Césaire’s warning was not headed. Souls are drying up indeed, and the greatest threat both to French minorities and to France as a whole is to be consumed by racial and ethnic conflicts.

Recent cultural events testify to the vitality of the Revolution as a ‘site of memory’. Joël Pommerat’s forum-theatre events at the Théâtre des Amandiers, titled *Ça Ira*, enact the democratic surge of 1789, and Denis Lachaud’s recent novel *Ah! Ça Ira!* anticipates a general uprising led by disenfranchised migrants, banlieusards and intellectuals in 2040. By participating in the rewriting of the Revolution, post-colonial citizens do not renounce their identity but reclaim their past: as a universal event, the French Revolution remains a work in progress to which the contributions of Sonthonax, Toussaint L’Ouverture, Messali Hadj and Aimé Césaire are second to none.

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