

“Despite claims to the contrary . . . identity politics is easy to find in contemporary France.”

## France’s Identity Crisis

EMILE CHABAL

The impossibility of translation can be revealing of fundamental cultural differences. In many respects, today’s French political discourse appears entirely derivative of its Anglo-American counterpart. France, like the United States, has bitter culture wars involving concepts such as *l’intersectionnalité* (intersectionality), *le wokisme* (wokeness), and *la théorie du genre* (gender theory). And, like the British, the French have been urged by some sections of their political and intellectual elite not to succumb to postcolonial guilt: “Stop toppling statues, stop talking about reparations, stop apologizing for colonial violence!” With such a plethora of recognizable references, outside observers could be forgiven for thinking that contemporary French political debate involves little more than reheated Anglo-American—the French would say “Anglo-Saxon”—polemics.

But appearances can be deceptive. Not only do France’s culture wars have specifically French roots, but there are also curious gaps in this transatlantic political exchange. The most striking of these is a term that has become ubiquitous in Anglo-American political life: identity politics. There simply is no adequate translation of this notion in French.

In the strictly academic context, social scientists might recognize *la politique identitaire* as a literal translation of the English “identity politics.” But elsewhere, the word “identitaire” is primarily associated with the politics of the far right, while the more amorphous “identité” usually refers to national identity. There are cognate terms in French—such as *le communautarisme* (communitarianism) or *le séparatisme* (separatism)—but these are highly pejorative and denote principally

the consequences of identity politics. They do not have the broad analytical sweep of the term in English, which has come to mean any kind of political or cultural mobilization on the basis of individual or collective identities.

As is so often the case, the absence of translation points to a deeper divergence in meaning and context. If France does not have an equivalent for “identity politics,” it is because the notion of “identity” is itself problematic at both a theoretical and a practical level. In theory, the French state does not acknowledge “identity” as a political force or a legitimate basis for mobilization and claims-making on the part of citizens; in practice, few French people readily reach for the word “identité” to describe their political actions. Nor do they generally invoke their identity when introducing themselves. This is a stark contrast to the kind of positional introductory statement that has now become commonplace in progressive circles in the Anglo-American world (“as a person of color . . .”, “as a Jewish woman . . .”). Interviewing French activists today, one is still far more likely to learn about their ideological alignment than their origins.

This unwillingness to talk about identity has drawn plenty of criticism. It is often one of the first things that American students and journalists notice about France. This has led to fascinating scholarship on subjects such as the contradictions of French “color-blindness,” and a steady stream of articles in publications like the *New York Times* about how the French are “in denial” about race, gender, and other expressions of identity. The best of these manage to deconstruct some of France’s powerful political taboos, but many books and articles on the subject essentially amount to foreigners berating the French for “ignoring” identity.

It is worth pointing out that this reaction is not merely a product of foreign chauvinism. It reflects

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what many French activists and scholars feel, especially those who emigrate because they are dissatisfied with the status quo. Once abroad, these people find a receptive audience for their critique of France, and they become privileged interlocutors. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle, whereby journalists looking to write articles on France's "problem" with identity end up interviewing French people who already believe that this problem exists. The result is that France looks to the outside world like a country in the throes of an identity crisis.

## REPUBLICANISM AND DIFFERENCE

So what, if anything, is the problem with identity in France? A properly historical answer to this question must begin in the realm of ideas—and, above all, with the dominant political ideology of contemporary France, known as republicanism. This has become the primary way in which the French talk about their country, their past, and their society.

In the twenty-first century, France is not just a republic in a formal, technical sense; it is—or at least it tries to be—the embodiment of republican values. What exactly these values are has been the subject of ardent debate over the years, but a fairly uncontroversial list might include: an opposition to monarchy and a suspicion of executive authority; the embrace of representative government; a robust conception of citizenship and civic participation; a commitment to rationality and the rule of law; some form of secularism, often wrapped up in a strongly anti-clerical discourse; and an emphasis on the emancipatory power of the state.

These values provided a guiding thread for self-professed republicans in the nineteenth century, who wanted to defend republican rule in the face of an authoritarian backlash after the French Revolution. They also formed the justification for the state that was inaugurated as the Third Republic in 1870. The collapse of the Third Republic after the fall of France in 1940 led to the establishment of the explicitly anti-republican and collaborationist Vichy Regime, but since the liberation of France in 1944, and even more so since the start of the Fifth Republic in 1958, few have contested the republican foundations of the French state. Today, even the far right, which was a bastion of hostility to

republicanism in the nineteenth century and enthusiastically propped up the Vichy regime, loudly proclaims its republican credentials.

This long history has directly shaped contemporary discussions of identity in France. Since the French Revolution, the advocates of republicanism have made strong claims about how the state should handle difference. The French republican conception of citizenship posits a direct relationship between the individual citizen and the state. In this vision, any competing allegiance—whether to an organized religion, a trade union, a political party, or a collective identity such as a race—threatens this relationship. Whereas other forms of republicanism, most notably in the United States, acknowledge competing allegiances in the form of states' rights or immigrant identities, French republicanism was historically—and remains today—hostile to them.

The origins of this republican hostility to difference are complex. They lie, in part, in the experience of the French Revolution, when revolutionaries attempted to defend the unity and indi-

visibility of France against both its internal enemies and the massed ranks of reactionary European powers who sought its downfall. They also lie in the struggle to tame the influence of the Catholic Church in

nineteenth-century France, which required both a strict separation of church and state and the emancipation of religious minorities—especially Jews and Protestants—through secular citizenship. Because of these experiences, by the late nineteenth century many republicans were profoundly suspicious of any public expressions of difference.

This, in turn, had major consequences for the development of French politics. For instance, the belated recognition of working-class trade unions in the late nineteenth century and the chronic weakness of French political parties can both be attributed to a fear of intermediary bodies that might weaken citizens' allegiance to the state. Political scientists still remark on the speed with which French parties appear and disappear, in contrast with long-established parties in similar European democracies like the United Kingdom or Germany.

In a slightly different vein, the French variant of secularism (*laïcité*) was conceived as a way to

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*There has been a resurgence  
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in French politics.*

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eliminate expressions of religious difference in the public sphere. The main vehicle for this process was the state school system, which was designed to inculcate shared republican values. State schools have remained the preeminent site of struggle over what these values actually mean.

## IDENTITY IN POSTCOLONIAL FRANCE

Since the late 1980s, there has been a resurgence of republican discourse in French politics. In the preceding decades, few politicians, intellectuals, or activists referred to themselves as “republican”—to do so would have been merely to state the obvious. But the fall of the Berlin Wall and the bicentenary of the French Revolution in 1989, combined with a growing number of controversies surrounding Islamic dress in state schools, pushed republicanism back into the limelight. Intellectuals penned op-eds calling for the state to defend “republican secularism” against Islamic fundamentalism, while left-wing politicians invoked republican “values” as a way of refashioning their ideas in a postcommunist world. Suddenly, everyone on the left was calling themselves “republican” and defending the Republic against its enemies.

Soon, right-wing politicians hopped on the bandwagon. They drew on a more conservative republican discourse of order and stability to claim that they were the only ones able to fix France’s growing social problems—and they discovered that secularism could be a useful way of hardening an anti-immigrant agenda. In the 2010s, the new leader of the country’s main far-right party, Marine Le Pen, began to deploy republicanism as a weapon against France’s vast immigrant and ethnic minority population. In recent years, almost no mainstream or radical political movement has dared to deviate from a republican line, even if the left and right have different understandings of what republicanism means.

This coagulation of republican language, symbols, words, and rhetoric, which can sometimes seem rather detached from reality, has filtered down into everyday life. Republican values such as neutrality and secularism are upheld in local government offices, policed by teachers in schools, and widely invoked by public officials in commemorations, speeches, and national celebrations. Major social issues, such as the urban unrest of 2005 and 2023, and geopolitical events, including the wave of terrorist attacks that hit France starting in 2015, are framed by local and national

politicians in terms of threats to the Republic or as symptoms of a republican order coming unstuck.

As many people have pointed out, one of the main catalysts for the reemergence of republicanism has been France’s postcolonial predicament, namely the way the state has attempted (or not) to integrate the millions of immigrants and their children who arrived from France’s former colonies from the 1950s onward. These people carried with them memories, ideas, and values that were not always easy—and sometimes impossible—to reconcile with France’s dominant values. But whereas other European states in the 1990s embraced multiculturalism as a way of acknowledging such differences, the French state doubled down on a language of republican citizenship that downplayed or denied the specificity of the postcolonial experience.

The problem was that France’s substantial ethnic minority population was not as receptive to this project as the state had hoped. Many—probably the majority—did choose to prioritize their French identity, but a vocal minority refused to do so. They preferred instead to highlight their difference, and they began to express this through public adherence to a religion or a race.

The growing visibility of postcolonial difference—especially since the mid-2000s—has posed a direct challenge to both right- and left-wing forms of republicanism. For the right, postcolonial minorities are not French enough, even if they were born and brought up in France. For the left, expressions of racial or religious difference run counter to deeply secular and universalist traditions. Any discussion of what, in the Anglo-American world, would be called identity politics thus results in immediate deadlock. The more activists from postcolonial minority communities make claims based on their specific experiences, the more the French state denies the legitimacy of their claims.

## IDENTITY-BASED ACTIVISM

It would be easy to extrapolate from this analysis that France is in denial about identity. But the reality is more complex. In fact, there has been quite a lot of identity politics in France in the past few decades. The problem is that few people recognize it as such, and even fewer people call it by this name.

In the case of postcolonial immigrant communities, there have been obvious roadblocks to

identity-based organization. The French state prohibits the collection of any kind of ethnic statistics—another policy consequence of a republican attitude regarding difference—and there have been very few national-level attempts to identify and empower specific “community” groups or leaders. The American phenomenon of the hyphenated identity is nonexistent in France.

Yet activists from postcolonial immigrant communities have systematically found ways to circumvent these taboos. In the 1970s, immigrants broke away from established far-left parties and trade unions to form their own organizations, like the Movement of Arab Workers (MTA). The MTA was inspired by Marxism and Arab nationalism, and it became one of the main vehicles for anti-racist activism in France until its dissolution in the late 1970s.

A new generation of activists picked up the baton in the 1980s. Many were inspired by the cross-country March for Equality and Against Racism in late 1983. Some of the organizations that came out of this mobilization turned toward the mainstream—most famously SOS-Racisme—while others turned back toward local struggles, disillusioned with the lack of progress on the social, political, and representational causes for which they had campaigned.

The most recent wave of activism began in the mid-2000s, with the formation of political parties like the Indigènes de la République or pressure groups like the Representative Council of Black Organizations (CRAN). Unlike their predecessors, these groups have typically been much more comfortable with an Anglo-American language of identity, and they have openly attacked the French state for its hostility to expressions of difference. In the past five years, the link has become explicit, with activists branding their initiatives as “decolonial” and drawing inspiration from Black Lives Matter or Indigenous movements in the Americas.

## ALTERNATIVE IDENTITY POLITICS

Whether France’s political elites like it or not, identity politics is now a fixture in the activist landscape. But the intense media focus on what Americans would call “people of color” has obscured alternative forms of identity politics, many of which have been extremely influential.

Take, for example, the many decades of activism on the part of France’s *pied-noir* community. “Pieds-noirs” was the name given to Algeria’s large European settler population. As the Algerian War reached its peak in the early 1960s, many of them abandoned their homes, fearing for their lives. The overwhelming majority went to France. This resulted in one of the biggest migratory flows in postwar Europe, with almost a million people settling in France from 1961 to 1963.

Initially, the *pieds-noirs* were focused on their material security. Many had lost everything when they left Algeria, and the French state offered extensive financial support to help them get back on their feet. But soon they began to mobilize politically. They sought both compensation from the French state for their lost property and recognition of the beneficial role they believed they had played in the “development” of colonial Algeria.

This activism took the form of community mobilization, magazines, events, and political lobbying. In some towns and cities, especially in southern France, the community was large enough

to have an impact on local elections. *Pied-noir* organizations began to encourage their members to vote for specific candidates based on their alignment with the *pied-noir* cause. This influence

was exerted sometimes in favor of left-wing candidates, but more often in favor of right-wing or far-right candidates. By the 1980s, the *pieds-noirs* had become one of the far right’s most stable voting blocs.

There were also more symbolic gains. Just as Algerians and Moroccans were trying to obtain recognition for the violence they had endured at the hands of the French state, so, too, the *pieds-noirs* sought recognition for the violence their community had suffered during the Algerian War. This culminated in 2005 (the same year in which the CRAN was founded), when *pied-noir* lobbying helped to secure parliamentary passage of a bill that acknowledged their “contribution to the nation.” Hidden in the bill was a remarkable clause stipulating that the state school curriculum should include references to the “positive impact” of French colonialism overseas. No other postcolonial immigrant community in France had ever managed to insert its version of history into the school curriculum by government decree.

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*The French have long known how to create their own culture wars.*

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Unfortunately for pieds-noirs activists, there was such an outcry that the offending clause was promptly abrogated by President Jacques Chirac in 2006. But the controversy revealed the extent to which almost all minority communities had engaged in some form of identity politics in the preceding years. As with the pieds-noirs, much of this activity has involved seeking recognition from the state.

For example, members of France's Jewish community, which grew to become the world's third largest after the exodus of North African Jews in the 1950s and 1960s, have effectively lobbied since the 1980s for recognition of their historic persecution. This effort resulted in the 1990 Gayssot Law, which made Holocaust denial a crime, and Chirac's famous 1995 speech in which he recognized the French state's role in the deportation of almost 80,000 Jews during World War II.

More recently, the proliferation of Jewish identity politics, often in relation to definitions of anti-Semitism or support for Israel, has shifted the French Jewish community's attitude toward republicanism. Whereas French Jews were once staunchly committed to the values of a republican state that had granted them equal citizenship, many today believe that republicanism is an inadequate response to what they see as rising levels of anti-Semitism. A growing number of them are even emigrating to Israel, a previously unthinkable step for a community that has traditionally been deeply attached to France and Frenchness.

## MULTICULTURALISM À LA FRANÇAISE

Despite claims to the contrary, then, identity politics is easy to find in contemporary France. More surprising, perhaps, is that the state itself has often been complicit in making it happen. This is particularly true in the domain of multiculturalism.

On paper, the French state rejected multiculturalism as a way of managing an increasingly ethnically diverse society in the 1980s and 1990s. But whether it was urban segregation, inadequate provision of places of worship for Muslims, or the paucity of non-white faces in the media, the French state had to deal with issues that were no different than those faced by other former European colonial powers that did embrace multiculturalism, like the UK or the Netherlands.

In rare cases, the French state has chosen to adhere strictly to republican dogma—most famously on the issue of Islamic dress. In 2004, after more than 15 years of bitter polemic, the

government reaffirmed the principle of *laïcité* by banning all “religious clothing” in state schools. In 2010, another law was passed to ban “face covering” in all public spaces. These laws were framed in universal terms, but it was obvious that they were targeting the Islamic headscarf and the burqa, respectively. As if to make this point more emphatically, in early 2023 the Ministry of Education clarified that the 2004 law should be extended to include the abaya and the qamis.

The zeal with which French lawmakers have gone after Islamic dress has made international headlines, but it is not fully representative of the state's management of the Muslim community. In many cases, this approach has involved a much more liberal interpretation of *laïcité*. Local studies, for instance, have shown how French municipalities have gotten around the state's formal ban on funding places of worship by building “multipurpose halls” and then leasing them to Muslim community leaders. Such arrangements have repeatedly been challenged in the French courts on the grounds that they violate the principles of *laïcité*, but they have almost always been upheld.

In the realm of housing policy, too, the republican doctrine of color-blind equality has rarely prevailed. In an attempt to avoid over-concentration of specific immigrant communities in certain neighborhoods, local authorities in France have, since the 1970s, followed a principle of *mixité* (mixing), whereby only a certain proportion of social housing is allocated to immigrants. This has often been justified as a means of limiting the presence of “undesirable” immigrants and forcibly dispersing them across a larger area. Although this approach has generally ensured that racially segregated neighborhoods of the kind associated with American cities like Chicago and Baltimore do not exist in France, it has also given free rein to deep racial and civilizational prejudices. Immigrants and their children are routinely denied social housing on highly questionable grounds.

Another area where the state has played an active role in creating a uniquely French form of multicultural society is cultural policy. In the early 1980s, the Socialist government poured money into arts and culture, which led to the creation of an extraordinary range of cultural festivals and activities, some of which focused on music, art, dance, poetry, and literature from the Francophone world. Building on its long-standing reputation as an imperial and global cultural

crossroads, France played host to artists who brought immigrant cultures into the heart of the metropole. Musical styles like North African *rai* and Caribbean *zouk* became hugely successful in France and gave a voice to the country's varied postcolonial identities.

This phenomenon could not entirely compensate for the startling lack of diversity in the upper echelons of the media, business, and politics in the same period—a direct consequence of an official unwillingness to pursue affirmative action policies that supposedly threatened the republican principle of equality. But the proliferation of immigrant cultural products nevertheless transformed popular culture from below, bringing the words and sounds of France's immigrants into people's living rooms and cars.

### CRISIS, WHAT CRISIS?

Although it is tempting to cast France as entirely unique in its relationship to identity politics, in fact it is facing the same questions as other complex, stratified, and diverse democracies with large and well-established immigrant populations. The problem of managing cultural pluralism or religious revivalism is familiar to policymakers everywhere, and the rise of identity politics is now a global phenomenon. Still, there are some French specificities that deserve to be highlighted—and might accelerate the country's identity crisis in the coming years.

First and most obvious is the yawning gap between the lofty rhetoric of French republicanism and the messy realities of everyday life. Republicanism is too deeply embedded in French public life to expect that it will suddenly disappear, but the acute contradictions between principle and practice continue to strain the fabric of French society. Moreover, republicanism is not an answer

to everything. It cannot help the French state negotiate the new realities of globalized and financialized capitalism, nor does it provide much of a platform from which to build a response to the climate crisis.

Second is the unusual fusion of French and global culture wars. From the Dreyfus Affair in the late nineteenth century to the polemic over the “positive impact” of colonization in 2005, the French have long known how to create their own culture wars. But they are now part of a global context in which the “war on woke” and other English-language slogans have supercharged local controversies. This could make them altogether more potent and more dangerous.

Finally, France has drifted rightward. Here, too, the French were pioneers. Long before Trump, Brexit, or Bolsonaro, France's political class was agonizing about how to respond to an insurgent far right that repeatedly pushed the frontiers of what was thought to be electorally possible through the 1990s and 2000s. The so-called republican front that was supposed to keep the far right out of power has been crumbling since the early 2000s, but it has—until now—prevented the election of a far-right president.

Yet the backlash against identity politics in France might prove to be the tipping point. If it can be harnessed by the French far right, it could propel them to even greater electoral success. At the moment, skepticism toward identity politics in France can be attributed to the widely shared values of French republicanism, but the meaning of these values has been stretched to the breaking point. We already know from countries like Italy and the United States what happens when shared political value systems fall apart. No one should be surprised if France goes the same way. ■