

A Witch Hunt In French Universities

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At a time when French universities are struggling to deal with the epidemic, when students' poverty should be a prime concern for the authorities, the French Minister of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, Frédérique Vidal, announced on a TV channel that she intends to set up an inquiry into "islamo-leftism" and postcolonialism in French universities. This reminds the attacks in the 1930s against the "judeo-masonic" lobby, attacks which ended up in the cleansing of universities when the Vichy Régime was established in 1940.

We already [chronicled](#) the first episode of this attack on this blog. Fortunately, the statutory attempt to reduce academic freedom was short-lived. The threat, however, seems now more serious than ever. After her TV announcement, the minister confirmed her plans to launch an inquiry before Parliament on 16th February. As the prominent French association *Qualité de la science française* [said](#): "Whatever one thinks of research inspired by militant commitments, to classify it all under the label of 'Islamo-leftism' is not only to use an intrinsically confused and polemical term: it is to practice unacceptable amalgamations, and to risk deleterious consequences, both in the academic institution and in public opinion." The group of the presidents of French universities ([CPU](#)) criticized the project as well, and more than 600 researchers, led by Thomas Piketty, called for the Minister's [resignation](#). The [president](#) articulated his disapproval of the minister and tried to close the debate, but she found support among the right-wingers in the government (the minister for education, Jean-Michel Blanquer, and the home affairs minister, Gérald Darmanin).

The concept of islamo-leftism is cryptic even for the French, so let's first try to understand what exactly is targeted against. The concept was first coined by French *intellectuel* [Pierre-André Taguieff](#) to designate an alliance between marxists and islamists in the UK and in France. Taguieff sees this connexion, for instance, in an essay, [The Prophet and the Proletariat](#), by Chris Harman, who argues that the traditional leftists movement should use the energies of radical islam to overturn capitalism. This concept was then completely distorted by French conservatives as a banner to group progressive movements and thinking and to discredit progressive thinking as being defensive of terrorists. It is here used to condemn research on gender, colonialism, intersectionality, race.

The attack on islamo-leftism in French universities is therefore an attack on research. In addition, these areas of research are further criticized for coming from North American campuses. Anti-americanism fuels the attacks against the so called islamo-leftists.

Attacks on gender studies are very common now, and France is only one example of this. [Hungary](#) withdrew accreditation for gender studies programs. Judith Butler was attacked when she arrived in [Brazil](#) for a conference. Trump tried to put an end to policies for [transexual students](#). The backlash was so strong that the American

Association of University Professors ([AAUP](#)) published a statement entitled: “The Assault on Gender and Gender Studies”. In Italy, at the University of Verona, a conference was also [canceled](#), because of protests saying “No gay refugees in Verona, stop gender dictatorship”. Attacks on gender studies are now very common in France, and so are attacks on race and colonial studies.

The movement behind the minister’s call is clearly diverse. It comprises both of academics who feel pushed to the margin by these studies or find themselves on the losing end of the process of internationalisation of research, and political groups against the emancipation of minorities and women. In addition, postcolonial research faces strong opposition from the right.

As far as research is concerned, these areas of research are today on the rise. They are becoming influential and powerful in sociology and political science. This is visible in a recent book by Stéphane Beaud and Gérard Noiriel ([Race and Social Sciences](#)) who argue, for very good scientific reasons this time, that class struggles should remain central. The publication of the book by the losing side of sociology (Beaud & Noiriel) is a mark of the success of gender and race studies. This shows that these research are attacked both on the right and the left by prominent scholars.

The fact that State ministers are using these scholarly fights to wage their war against equality at the expense of academic freedom is worrying. In the upcoming election period, the attacks against scholars will certainly become even worse.

Academic freedom

Could the Constitution be of use to protect academics from the witch hunt? The Constitutional Council held that the Constitution protected the independence of university professors (Decision n° [83-165 DC](#) of 20 January 1984):

“§19. Considering therefore that, by their very nature, the lecturing and research functions [inside universities] not only allow but also require (...) that the free expression and independence of the staff be guaranteed by law (...);

§20. Considering that, with regard to professors (...) the guarantee of independence is furthermore a constitutional principle (...).”

In a later [decision](#), the Court extended this protection to assistant professors (*maître de conférences*). Parliament enacted the necessary protections in the Education code: “Academics, lecturers and researchers shall enjoy full independence and freedom of expression in the exercise of their lecturing duties and research activities, subject to the reservations imposed on them, in accordance with academic traditions and the provisions of this Code, by the principles of tolerance and objectivity.” (Article L952-2).

Let’s, for one second, accept the idea that there are academics inside universities that support terrorists agendas. Could they be protected by the Constitution? The answer is obviously no. Negationism, calls to murder or hatred, racist speech are

criminally sanctioned and can lead to disciplinary proceedings. Academics have already been sanctioned for negationist speech (CE, sect., 19 mars 2008, Gollnisch, no 296984). Bruno Gollnisch was a university professor and also a member of the nationalist party. In his capacity as an MEP, he gave a speech casting doubt on the existence of gas chambers. The ECtHR decided not to admit Mr Gollnisch request, holding that “the likely contribution of his remarks to negationists ideas and the disorder it created (...) within the University of Lyon III and, more generally, the French university, was incompatible with the applicant’s duties and responsibilities as a lecturer”. The Court further noted that “the applicant exceeded the obligations of reserve and tolerance to which he was bound” (ECtHR, 5th sect., decis., 7 June 2011, Bruno Gollnisch v France, n° 48135/ 08). Similarly, academic freedom is not an excuse for abuse on students (Conseil d’Etat, 3 February 2003, n° 231952).

In other words, should the ghosts the minister is pursuing really exists, the courts could step in. This shows that the government is only trying to discredit important areas of research and undermining universities.

