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# Laïcité as assimilation, laïcité as negotiation: Political geographies of secularism in the French public school

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## ABSTRACT

Laïcité, France's idiosyncratic form of secularism, is a complex concept that is dense with historical genealogy, practical contradictions and – crucially – political geographies. In particular, contemporary laïcité is characterized by a state-sponsored model of universal citizenship that regards French Muslims' identity claims with mistrust. This tension, always latent, was brought to the fore by a series of attacks perpetrated self-styled jihadists in January 2015, centered on the offices of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* notorious for its provocations against Islam. The attacks and their aftermath also highlighted a key space where conflicts over laïcité often play out: the French public school, the *école républicaine*. This institution was conceived in its modern form as a mechanism to assimilate through laïque pedagogy. Today it is a highly visible space where the optics of race and gender contribute to a narrative of Muslim *communautarisme*, a willful and defiant communalism that rejects the republican community of citizens.

Following a handful of incidents in which students refused to participate in a moment of silence for the victims of the January 2015 attacks, the Ministry of Education undertook an initiative involving disciplinary and pedagogical supports for laïcité in the schools, called the Great Mobilisation for the Republic's Values. Like other past interventions in this area, it operationalizes an assimilating vision of laïcité to bring recalcitrant peripheries into compliance with republican norms. At the same time, though, it reveals the agency of the peripheries to negotiate the terms of laïcité according to local knowledge and needs. On the basis of interviews with educators serving in schools where elements of the Grand Mobilisation were carried out, I show how they push back against the overarching narratives that characterize the initiative and in so doing construct localized and nuanced understandings of the laïque social pact.

## 1. Introduction

From January 7–9, 2015 a series of deadly attacks were carried out across the greater Paris region. The attacks claimed a diverse set of victims across several locations including a Kosher supermarket. Despite this, it was a group of eleven caricaturists at the notorious satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* whose deaths would dominate the subsequent mediatization and politicization of the events. *Charlie Hebdo* had built a reputation for itself as a provocateur, particularly through its crude and often deliberately insulting caricatures of Muhammed. In an already tense atmosphere in which French Muslims were viewed with suspicion spilling over at times into Islamophobia, the assassins' self-proclaimed jihadist motivations proved to be a spark in dry tinder. During a

moment of silence held in schools for the victims of the attacks, incidents of student non-compliance drove the promulgation of a crisis narrative: by questioning the need to pay respect to the *Charlie Hebdo* staff, students were seen to refuse wholesale the norms of the French Republic, particularly its principle of *laïcité*.

*Laïcité*, or France's version of secularism, is a curious term with no satisfactory English translation (and so will be preserved, unitalicized, in this text): a relative neologism in the French language, it is nevertheless dense with historical genealogy, practical contradictions and – crucially – political geographies that have accumulated during the centuries of a tumultuous process defining the relationship between the French state and organized religions. Although the meaning of laïcité is often presented as an eternal principle of the republican social pact, it has been,

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and remains, a constant object of political struggle (Bowen, 2012; Roy, 2005; Selby, 2011; Thomas, 2006).

The political struggle over *laïcité* is particularly salient within the larger securitization turn in Western Europe and North America following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States. Like other cultural markers constructed as fundamental to societies of the Enlightenment west, *laïcité* has contributed towards framing a civilizational conflict. It defines an ostensibly neutral public sphere in which parochial identity is suppressed in favor of republican universalism. This is contrasted with a backwards Islam that is supposed to be irreparably incapable of abiding by the terms of the *laïque* agreement, instead insisting on aggressing co-citizens with its demands to religious expression in public space (Hancock, 2008). What this discursive construction hides, and what the January 2015 attacks also demonstrate, is two contrasting spatialities of *laïcité* that are deeply embedded in its historical development and contemporary manifestations: first, attempts by the French state to extend central control over peripheral spaces by promoting a nationally uniform standard for expressing minority identities. Second, the agency of the peripheries in this process. Rather than being passive recipients, they have been instrumental in struggling over how *laïcité* is to be practiced across space and over time.

To be sure, these geographies do not operate on equal terms. Indeed, *laïcité* in its contemporary form rests on a “secular” culture based on tacit Catholic traditions, or what has been termed “catho-*laïcité*” (e.g. Balibar, 2004; Laborde, 2009). It has also been promoted through institutions which hold an outsize influence in daily life, first among which is the French public school, the *école républicaine*. In this article I focus on the January 2015 events, as they demonstrate both of these points. Although the Ministry of Education did not, and has not released the locations where the moment of silence incidents took place, anecdotal accounts and engrained geographic imaginations allowed the rest to be filled in: the student responses were, in the minds of many, the latest sign of an Islamic fundamentalism fed by migration from former French colonies and long-fermenting within France’s marginalized suburban neighborhoods, the *banlieues*.

As in response to similar incidents in the past, the *école républicaine* was identified as the mechanism by which to address such behavior. The Ministry of Education responded with a set of curricular, administrative, and disciplinary measures grouped under the heading of the *Grande mobilisation de l’École pour les valeurs de la République*, the “Great [Public] School Mobilisation for the Republic’s Values.” Alongside the usual trifecta of *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*, *laïcité* figured prominently as the primary value to be mobilized. As the measures of the *Grande mobilisation* were handed down, however, teachers and other educators adapted its directives to their needs and circumstances. Their flexibility in this regard, as with other mandates that have been fundamental to the French public education mission over time, demonstrates how the school has been an essential site in which the contrasting political geographies of *laïcité*, centralizing and localized, confront one another. This flexibility also suggests that state attempts to leverage schooling for ideological or geopolitical purposes is not a straightforward process and can be complicated by institutional structures and educator subjectivities (Lizotte, 2020; Lizotte & Nguyen, 2019).

The rest of this article elaborates the tensions between *laïcité*’s centralizing ambitions and the localized influences exerted against them. To make these claims empirically, I draw on historical and contemporary commentary about the *école républicaine* from a variety of sources, as well as interviews carried out in winter and spring 2016 with one district (*académie*)-level *laïcité* official, and six teachers and principals serving in Paris-area schools where aspects of the *Grande mobilisation* were implemented. My account also serves to bridge some of the gap between Anglophone and Francophone political geographies of *laïcité* (cf. Fall & Rosière, 2008). Excellent accounts of *laïcité* exist in English (e.g. Bowen, 2007; Hancock, 2008). However, some geographical approaches to the subject have been insufficiently attentive to the specifically French context of *laïcité*, assimilating it to frameworks such

as neoliberalism and multiculturalism more applicable in the English-speaking world than in France.

The next two sections briefly discuss the history of the *école républicaine* before situating the *Grande mobilisation* within a long tradition of state intervention in the educational arena. This intervention aims to define the terms of culturally neutral republican identity and bring recalcitrant Others into compliance. Today the height of the expectations placed upon the school to succeed in its assimilating mission is as high as ever. What has changed, though, is the target of this mission. While in the nineteenth century the school set out to civilize the rural provinces, today the focus has shifted to more imminent peripheries in the *banlieues* and a more racialized definition of potentially problematic Muslim-origin students in need of the lessons of *laïcité*.

I then consider in more detail the discursive construction of the peripheries, and the bodies that inhabit them, that *laïcité* is meant to bring under control. Here there are three key factors, all anchored by a pre-occupation with visible Islam: race, gender, and the largely untranslatable concept of *communautarisme*. *Communautarisme* is an even more recent neologism in French than *laïcité*. In common usage, it refers to a general distrust of allowing ethnic, cultural, or religious communities of origin to express their identities over and above republican universalism. It is often contrasted with a so-called “Anglo-Saxon” multiculturalism, which is assumed to encourage ghettoization and mutual antagonism. However, it is largely agreed that *communautarisme* is a stigmatizing term that creates the object of its own critique (Belorgey, Guénif-Souillamas, Simon, & Zappi, 2005; Dhume-Sonzogni, 2016; Taguieff, 2005, pp. 84–145). In effect, *communautarisme* aggregates individuals into homogenous groups pathologized for their conscious choice of cultural isolation over republican unity.

Following that, I discuss the transition from high-level policy to on-the-ground practice in the *école républicaine*. Here, tensions between *laïcité*’s homogenizing impulses and its geographies of local negotiation are revealed. Rather than a central state imposing its will over passive peripheries, the relationship is one of resistance and compromise over the terms of republican neutrality and religious identity. Educators operate in an environment where the assimilationist legacy of the *école républicaine* is always present, and in a larger social context where *communautariste* narratives and optics abound. Nevertheless, they are able to sometimes navigate these forces and arrive at solutions that rework what *laïcité* means, if temporarily and within only their own school or classroom. This also has wider implications for how national values and culture are transmitted through schooling, and how state attempts to leverage schooling for geopolitical purposes can be complicated by on-the-ground agents (Lizotte, 2020).

Finally, I conclude by revisiting the geographic narratives that drive interventions like the *Grande mobilisation*, and consider their wider implications. The collapsing of identity into geography is instrumental to the way in which Othered identities in general, and Muslim identity in particular, is ultimately constructed and acted upon by the French state. It also reaches beyond those borders to other migrant-receiving societies in which ethnocultural identity has recently driven electorally-successful nativist and nationalist political movements. At the same time, there is potential for educators to counter these narratives with their own, embedded knowledges of how identity and space interact.

## 2. The *école républicaine* from *hussards noirs* to the *Grande mobilisation*

The *école républicaine* as it is known today was codified through a series of laws passed in 1881–1882. These laws, known as the *lois Ferry* for their chief proponent, Minister of Public Instruction Jules Ferry, decisively removed the Catholic Church from public school provision. The debates over the extent to which public schooling would be secularized reveal that *laïcité* – then an unnamed concept – was contested even at the moment of the creation of the modern education system (Kheir, 2008). Eventually, partisans, led by Ferry, of a *laïcité* that

vacated religious principles from public schooling largely won out. Key among their accomplishments was the creation of *instruction morale*, moral instruction, without obvious basis in religious tradition. In a letter to schoolteachers at the beginning of the 1883 school year Ferry lays out the character of this moral instruction:

The law of 28 March is characterized by two dispositions that complete, without contradiction, each other: on the one hand, it removes the teaching of any particular dogma from the required curriculum; on the other, it places moral and civic instruction as a top priority ... Without a doubt, their first objective was to separate the school from the church, to guarantee freedom of conscience for all students, and to distinguish between two domains for too long confused, that of beliefs which are personal, and that of knowledge (*connaissances*) that is common and essential to everyone. (Ferry, 1883).<sup>1</sup>

Ferry's letter establishes a republican basis for common-sense morality that any good citizen should have intuitive access to, emphasizing that the school is competent in the realm of uncontested "knowledge" separate from the "beliefs" conveyed by the family and the church. As such it declares the public school as having universal moral authority over all citizens. That which is promoted by parochial faith and kin communities is, by contrast, partial and incomplete.

The school vigorously pursued its mission to make "peasants into Frenchmen," (Weber, 1976) and among its earliest agents were the first wave of young men who graduated from teacher training schools following the secularization of the national system. These were dubbed *hussards noirs* (Black Hussars) by writer Charles Péguy in a 1913 essay, in reference to a cavalry unit of the French Revolution. Péguy describes the instructors of his youth as "svelte, strict, wearing the straps [of their uniforms], serious and trembling a little bit from their precocity, their sudden omnipotence" (Péguy, 1913). These virile, authoritarian figures evoke for Péguy the fear they inspired in him as a child, filtered through an adult's admiration for their almost eroticized masculine presence. Dispatched to the far-flung corners of French territory, their mission was to instruct future citizens in the Parisian elite's cultural and social norms. Crucially, this involved stamping out the regional languages and mystical Catholic superstitions that might provide an alternative touchstone for identity than the republican pact (Vigier, 1979; Weber, 1976).

The homogenizing aspirations for the public school, and its curriculum of *éducation morale*, ran up against local political realities as the French Republic expanded and consolidated its territory. Two examples in particular demonstrate the compromises made to educational *laïcité* in the service of territorial governance: In Algeria, incorporated into metropolitan France as three *départements* from 1848 to 1962, Islamic *madrasas* were established as a concession to encourage the locals to accept French rule (Dimier, 2008). Alsace-Moselle (now part of the *Grand Est* administrative region) is still today subject to different laws governing religious education due to it being under German control at the time of the adoption of a foundational 1905 law on the separation of church and state. Rather than *éducation morale*, schools in this area teach obligatory "religious culture" (*culture religieuse, faits religieux*) courses (Direction de l'Information Légale et Administrative, 2017).

These exceptions to a strict *laïcité* belie contemporary defenders' attempts to claim an unwavering heritage for the term, and point instead to its function as a technology of more pragmatic governance: deployed where possible as a strict measure to civilize the peripheries in the image of metropolitan elites, but subject to compromise for the larger goal of ensuring long-term compliance among culturally or politically distant communities. Nevertheless, the concept of a universal civic morality based upon *laïcité* is one that continues to animate present-day thinking. This can be seen in a description of *Éducation morale et civique* (EMC), a

successor to *instruction morale* described in much the same terms as its predecessor:

The morals being taught [in EMC] are civic morals in as much as they are directly descended from citizenship values (knowledge of the Republic, acquisition of its values, respect for rules, for others, for [the Republic's] rights and its privileges. These morals are also secular (*laïque*) morals that are founded upon critical reason, respectful of religious beliefs and of differences of opinion, and that upholds freedom of conscience. As such, these secular morals become indistinguishable from civic morals (Ministère de l'éducation nationale, 2015)

Other measures, such as the "laïcité charter" (*charte de la laïcité*) posted in all schools, online resources on ministerial websites such as Éduscol, and the annual "Laïcité Day" held on December 9, the anniversary of the adoption of the 1905 law, promote a unified message about *laïcité*'s principles. To a somewhat lesser extent, they also provide more practical resources, such as lesson plans that ask students to evaluate specific situations against those principles. In line with the larger history of the school system, however, they largely treat *laïcité* as a matter of settled values that must be taught so that children can become good republican citizens. As the January 2015 attacks show, challenges to *laïcité* throw faith in that legacy into turmoil.

### 3. Protecting the sanctuary of the Republic through the *Grande mobilisation*

Against the tumult of the January 2015 attacks and the *Je suis Charlie* movement, rapt attention in France was quickly drawn to the *école républicaine*. During the moment of silence scheduled by the Ministry of Education to be held nationally in primary and secondary schools, it was reported that "about a hundred" (*une centaine*) students refused to participate. In the following days, a further hundred students were reported to have expressed antipathy, occasionally in violent terms, towards *Charlie Hebdo* and its staff. The media sphere began to buzz with student statements such as "I won't do [the moment of silence] ... they were blasphemous, they represented Muhammed," (Dusseaulx, 2015) or "no one can make me, they were asking for it!" (Hébert, 2015), as well as frightened and disgusted teachers' reactions to students' refusals to "be Charlie" (Verduzier & Beyer, 2015). One of these cases, in which an 8-year-old student in Nice allegedly declared "I'm not Charlie, I'm with the terrorists" resulted in the boy being interrogated by the police (Hojlo, 2015). Within this charged atmosphere, Minister of Education Najat Vallaud-Belkacem was quickly summoned before Parliament to explain her ministry's planned response:

"[After the attacks] teachers across France quickly understood that the school would be on the front line for reacting to these attacks, to explain to students the inexplicable, and to manage their emotions and reactions. In the wake [of the attacks] I had sent them a letter asking not only that they have students respect the minute of silence planned for the next day, but also that they create spaces of dialog and discussion. They did it, and for that I thank them. It did not always go well. There were incidents; numerous incidents, even. They are serious, and not a single one of them must be taken lightly. And not a single one of them will be taken lightly." (Assemblée nationale, Première séance du mercredi 14 janvier 2015)

The promise to not "take lightly" the student incidents resulted in the *Grande mobilisation de l'École pour les valeurs de la République*. Eleven principle measures were presented with the goal of being implemented swiftly and uncompromisingly, a top-down intervention in line with the prevailing wisdom that the *école républicaine* was out of control and needed to be taken in hand. The first three measures express the high-level aims of the initiative, falling under the heading "Place *laïcité* and the transmission of Republican values at the heart of the school's

<sup>1</sup> All translations from the original French done by the author.



mobilization:”

1. Reinforce the transmission of the Republic’s values
2. Reestablish the authority of teachers and of republican rituals
3. Create a new educational path from elementary education through the final year of high school: the ‘citizen’ curriculum ([Ministre de l’éducation nationale et de la jeunesse, 2015](#))

Both the moment of silence incidents and the *Grande mobilisation*, while momentous events, are in other ways not at all exceptional. Rather, they fit into two continuities: first, of incidents taking place in schools being taken as a bellwether of larger breakdowns in the laïque republican social pact; and second, using the French public school as a mechanism to target perceived deficiencies in students’ adherence to republican norms. In one notable instance that continues to have far-reaching effects, a panel of experts chaired by Bernard Stasi was commissioned in July 2003 to investigate “the application of the principle of laïcité in the Republic” ([Bowen, 2007](#)). The commission, its hearings and importantly its media coverage quickly focused almost exclusively on the question of girls wearing *hijabs* in public schools, and the result was a 2004 notorious “headscarf ban” law that prohibited students from wearing “conspicuous” (*ostensible*) garments indicating membership in a religious or cultural community.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, at several reprises in response to perceived crises of national pride and adherence to laïcité, the national anthem, *La Marseillaise*, is called upon to “return” to the school curriculum it has been a part of since 1879 ([Girard, 2018](#); [Jarraud, 2016](#)). An appeal from an *Assemblée nationale* deputy following the moment of silence incidents was typical of this trend:

**M. Rudy Salles:** The school must, in sum, be the sanctuary of laïcité, a laïcité that we must defend without hesitation faced with the threats that lie in wait for it, but a laïcité of goodwill, of reconciliation, and not a laïcité of defiance or a rejection of others. A laïcité that is at the same time a closed fist and an outreached hand. I propose as well that we raise the flag [*les couleurs*] in schools and teach *La Marseillaise* to children (*Assemblée nationale française*, January 14, 2015, first morning session).

This sort of rhetoric, calling on the French public school to be a “sanctuary of laïcité” and to reemphasize nationalist pedagogy, points to a deeply-rooted belief in its supposed capacities to foster a unified citizenry and society. This leads to a second aspect to the school-as-sanctuary metaphor. It is not only a sanctuary *for* students; it is also a sanctuary *from* the vulgar spaces of worldly conflicts. It is, literally, utopian – in “no-place,” in an untouchable realm of republican neutrality. Outside this imagined paradise, racialized Others concentrated in “communities” threaten the school with their particularistic beliefs and practices. [Vianès \(2004\)](#), writing on the headscarf issue at the time of the Stasi Commission’s hearings, neatly demonstrates both sides of this spatial imagination:

The [republican] *école* welcomes students. It is a sanctuary, that is to say, a space protected from strife. Society’s conflicts cannot penetrate it. It is unacceptable that the public, secular (*laïque*), and obligatory school should be polluted by the demands of “communities” (*communautés*) that would try to impose their beliefs, their habits, and their customs upon it (266).

Moments in which the sanctity of the *école républicaine* is challenged activate fears about its integrity at two geographic scales: the institution as an abstract national entity, and within individual schools. In the case

<sup>2</sup> The Stasi Commission produced twenty-six recommendations covering a wide range of issues of public religiosity, of which the religious symbol ban was the only to be given legislative form. See [Baubérot \(2004\)](#) for a Commission member’s perspective.

of the former, the conception of the school as a place that elevates students out of their communities of origin contains an inherent tension: on the one hand, it is based on a belief in the capacity of the *école* to bring students from diverse backgrounds together. On the other, however, those same diverse backgrounds represent a latent danger if they cannot be properly channeled into republican unity. For instance, referring to the goals of the *Grande mobilisation*, a *référént laïcité* – a district-level employee in charge of promoting and enforcing laïcité – spoke to me of having to bring students out of their parochial views to a greater mutual understanding:

What does it mean to construct for oneself a freedom of conscience that allows that person to become a citizen? A citizen that is capable of judging – for all citizens, not just from the point of view of some [cultural / religious] belonging (*appartenance*). So it’s necessary to remind [students] of all that. It’s in that sense that no incident will be left unaddressed, that the object is to not let students be closed off in reactionary attitudes, prejudiced attitudes, *opinions that in the end would make the school into some kind of place where the deaf speak to the deaf, in which there’d be on the one hand teaching that would completely ignore students’ concerns, and on the other hand dug-in attitudes of resistance, misunderstandings of the very meaning of the école républicaine* ... (author’s interview, June 24, 2016-a,<sup>3</sup> emphasis added)

Both the *référént* and Vianès argue – albeit in different terms – that the school as an institution cannot perform its intended function if students are allowed to remain within the worldview of their community of origin. Vianès in particular alludes to the looming presence of *communautés*, which will be taken up in the following section, and darkly warns of the threat of their “pollution.” This sort of rhetoric dovetails with anxieties expressed about threats to laïcité within individual schools. These are especially potent, as they represent a fear that one school so affected will eventually infect the entire system. Along this line of thinking, a French Senate ad-hoc commission founded soon after the January 2015 attacks produced a report titled *Return the Republic to Schools*. In sterile republican language, it evokes the specter of challenges to laïcité in the form of student refusals to participate in certain school activities on religious grounds. Notably, it emphasizes the lack of numerical and geographic information about these incidents:

The DGESCO [national education information service] is not able to quantify this phenomenon, “as the incidents [of non-respect for republican values] are communicated to us according to the broadest categories.” **The accounts gathered by the commission show that these challenges are, in certain schools, a regular, if not daily, occurrence.** ([Grosperin, 2015](#), Section I.B.3.b.3; emphasis in the original).

In this account, the inability to quantify the problem makes its extent simultaneously unknowable and also all-encompassing. The commission determines largely on the basis of anecdotal evidence from educators that incidents of refusal to participate in activities on religious grounds are widespread, even “systematic.” However, the narrative of “everywhere, anytime” challenges to laïcité is one that is nuanced by the educators who are working in its glare. This is especially true given the heavy mediatization of anything related to identity, schooling, and issues around laïcité. One educator shared her sense of fatigue in this area regarding a recent incident at her school:

There had been no problems concerning laïcité between students and teachers in the school until recently, when a non-event came up. This issue, which was blown out of proportion by journalists, came up

<sup>3</sup> Three of the interviews quoted in this article were conducted on the same day; they are marked a, b, c to differentiate them.

months after we'd taken the decision to undertake one-on-one work around laïcité. (Email to author, June 17, 2016)

This teacher's irritation at the media coverage of the incident was attributed to the fact that it obscured the work in her establishment already occurring on the topics of laïcité and social equity. Like other incidents, this one also involved an article of clothing thought to have religious significance and therefore banned under the 2004 law – the so-called “long skirt” (*jupe longue*). Although the matter had been dealt with quietly, it was still presented as a major breach of republican norms in the media. Indeed, the highly visible nature of the *école républicaine* makes it a constant source of scrutiny, especially for observers who are convinced that there is an incorrigible source of bad influence – read as visible Muslim identity – within.

The securitized gaze that is applied to the *école républicaine* in matters of conflicts over laïcité brings the institution's history as a tool for homogenizing social differences crashing into the imagined geographies of the spaces in which it operates. This is always present, but especially apparent in the face of major incidents. Just as with the perception of a mass mobilisation of headscarf-wearing girls in schools in 2003–2004, the student responses to the moment of silence fueled a similar perception of a massive Muslim youth restiveness waiting to explode. In such an atmosphere, descriptions like Vianès's or the Senate report's provide a constant drumbeat of concern about the fragility of the *école*. Evidence of these pending disasters is the visibility of Othered identities, here euphemized as refusals to conform to laïque norms.

In essence, laïcité functions within the French public school as a focusing device that collapses identity into geography. The institution has constructed from that centralizing point of view the identities of the spaces in which it operates, its agents that carry out its pedagogy, and the students which walk into its doors. In order to understand this dynamic, it is instructive to consider the construction of the spaces that the school was meant to instruct, and how that construction contributes to the pathologization of “communities” in the French context.

#### 4. Communautarisme, race and gender in the école républicaine

The *école républicaine* was created and developed as an institution from which to incorporate culturally and ethnically distant spaces of the French Republic through laïcité. This process has had the effect of constructing the territories where it was to operate, labeling those places and peoples who resisted its efforts as problematic in one way or another. To be sure, the school and its laïque pedagogy has never been the only factor in stigmatizing the peripheries of the Republic; rather, they have intersected with and, in some cases, amplified already-existing political and cultural conflicts to construct moments of antagonism through the lens of laïcité. This history, and its evolution over time, has led the school to be treated as a highly visible microcosm of the health of French society more broadly. In it, identarian conflicts are taken as symptoms of a serious disease.

Acting in parallel to laïcité in this regard has been the concept of *communautarisme*. Like laïcité, *communautarisme* is a concept that has a long pedigree in French society. The term's English translation, “communalism,” carries practically none of the politically charged meaning of its French counterpart. The concept, if not the term, began developing in its modern form following the 1789 Revolution as the new government abolished many of the institutions of civil society that might divide citizens and preclude a common sphere of political interaction (Bowen, 2007). Although in practice the French government has allowed and even cultivated intermediary organizations representing cultural, ethnic, or religious communities, a suspicion of such organizations remains latent in French society. This is especially true of religious groups and other communities like the Masons, which not only compete with the state for the loyalty of their members but also claim a higher authority for their communal norms (Bowen, 2007, p. 162).

Also like laïcité, *communautarisme* is widely used even as its meaning

remains contested. As Taguieff (2005, pp. 84–145) notes: “*communautarisme* is, first of all, a word that for the past fifteen years has operated in French political discourse as a generally accepted marker of illegitimacy” (95). The illegitimacy of *communautariste* behavior is often further underlined by pairing it with the *repli identitaire*, an identarian “folding-in,” signifying a literal withdrawal from the space of the French republic. Dhume-Sonzogni (2016) shows in particular how the use of the word has increased steeply over time since the early 2000s. Its appearance in media and political discourse reflects an especially self-referential tendency: as the word is applied to more and more situations and phenomena, more situations and phenomena are judged *communautariste*. And in practical application, *communautarisme* is disproportionately used to describe Muslim activities (Belorgey et al., 2005).<sup>4</sup> *Communautarisme* is, essentially, a term that demobilizes Muslim demands for the right to demonstrate visible religious belonging (Seniguer, 2017).

It is the visible aspect of *communautarisme* at two geographic scales that is essential to its functioning. First, it marries Muslim identity to a powerful imagined geography of entire neighborhoods ostensibly “subtracted from the Republic” (Baubérot, 2012, p. 14). This narrative was initially established during the 1960s and 1970s during which repatriated Algerians and a largely North African contingent of guest workers established a substantial presence within the urban peripheries of France's major cities, the *banlieues*. At the same time, shifts in the global economy were beginning to shutter French manufacturing centers, facilitating the rise of the populist right that blamed Muslim immigrants for the cultural and economic shifts coming to the country. Segregation and discrimination kept subsequent generations of French Muslims confined to the *banlieues*, which were beginning to decay from their previous status as relatively healthy industrial working-class enclaves (Kepel, 1987). The result has been a suburban landscape which has become synonymous in the popular imagination with Muslim fundamentalism on the one hand, and the subject of increasingly authoritarian policing and policy on the other (Dikeç, 2007; Jobard, 2005; Ossman & Terrio, 2006).

The second scale at which *communautarisme* sets its gaze on visible difference is the scale of the individual. The presence of bodies – especially female bodies – and garments with a possible religious meaning in public space sets off alarms of *communautarisme*. This can be traced in part to the occupation of Algeria, where the practice of veiling proved to be especially vexing for its French rulers. General Thomas-Robert Beauregard, who was one of Algeria's conquerors as well as its first governor, noted that “the Arabs escape us because they hide their women from our gaze.” (Clancy-Smith, 2006). In this description, the veiled body forms an important element of the cultural and racial difference that was marked as threatening and potentially subversive. Parallels to this perspective be readily found today, as well. Following a massive terrorist attack in Nice on Bastille Day 2016 (July 14), towns along the Côte d'Azur began banning the “burkini,” a woman's swimming outfit with an integrated head covering. Amidst the public debate, then-Prime Minister Manuel Valls defended the bans in a *Huffington Post* op-ed, arguing “[the burkini] is not an insignificant bathing suit. It is a provocation of radical Islam, which is emerging and wants to impose itself in public space!” (Valls, 2016).

*Communautarisme* is a construct that collapses global Islam, French Muslims, and visible signs of religious expression into a series of icons – *banlieues* and burkinis, for instance – that intensely focus anxieties about French identity, republican integration, and violence. Two markers of identity that feed into the overall *communautariste* narrative, race and gender, are especially potently shaped by their framing within the *école républicaine*.

<sup>4</sup> Some other groups are denigrated as *communautariste* as well, particularly LGBTQ advocates.

#### 4.1. The ethnic question and racial optics

Some of the most longstanding anxieties in the *école républicaine* have been over its role in resolving conflicts of ethnocultural difference. As Durpaire (2016) points out, the ethnic “question,” revived again in the wake of the January 2015 attacks, has a long history within the *école républicaine*, which was “already being posed in the school of the Third Republic [1870–1940]. At that time ‘ethnicity’ meant Breton or Basque, and after that Italian or Polish ... The republican project aimed at the reduction of the other to sameness; the feeling of belonging needed to transcend cultural communities in metropolitan France (*l’hexagone*) as well as in the colonies” (31).

The ethnic difference that the *école* is directed at has shifted over time. Thanks in part to the ubiquity of the *communautariste* narrative, “ethnic” largely means “Muslim,” usually of North African or sub-Saharan African origin. The school provides an especially telling setting in which French state aspirations to neutrality run up against a more banal awareness of the ethnic composition of particular schools and particular spaces. On the one hand, it is illegal to collect statistics based on race or religious affiliation in France, with “national origin” serving as a proxy in many cases for both (Bleich, 2001). Priority zones for directing additional education funding are established largely on the basis of socioeconomic status. On the other hand, though, public discourse is saturated with an awareness of the ethnocultural segregation amongst individual schools. Debates over school policy related to school attendance zones (*la carte scolaire*), the Stasi hearings, and the January 2015 moment of silence incidents represent just a few of the many instances in which the public school is discussed through a vocabulary of visible difference. This process is also devolved from the institution as a whole to individual schools. In effect, as Lorcerie (2009) notes, schools take on a reputation based on their surrounding socio-ethnic profiles (real or imagined), and they produce their own “ethnified representations” (66) based on the perceptions of the educators who work within.

This baseline public awareness of ethnic and racial difference in the school lingers in practically every discussion about education in France. At times, however, identity and geography are brutally collided for reactionary political ends. In September 2016 the far-right *Front national*<sup>5</sup> mayor of Béziers Robert Ménard tweeted “#back to school (#rentrée): the most shocking proof of the #great replacement in progress. You only have to look at old class photos ...” Ménard’s reference was to a common far-right refrain, the *grand remplacement*. Like other population replacement conspiracy theories around the world, it claims that the “native” French population is deliberately being displaced by policies favoring non-European populations. Despite releasing a storm of controversy and eventually being fined € 2000 for “incitement of hatred” under France’s stringent anti-hate speech laws, Ménard produced a flurry of additional tweets. A particularly notorious one declared “In a city center classroom where I live, 91% Muslim children. Obviously it’s a problem. There are limits to tolerance” (La France Info editorial board, 2016). A similar incident occurred in January 2018. The *Front national* mayor Julien Sanchez of Beaucaire, in southeast France, banned alternatives to pork on school menus, claiming that he was upholding principles of *laïcité* in doing so (McAuley, 2018). In particular, he claimed that he refused to “assist in the *grand remplacement* of pork in the cafeteria” (d’Ornellas, 2018, my emphasis).

The slippage between ethnocultural identity and religiosity in these narratives is a testament to the way in which bodies, even children’s bodies, are “saturated by Muslimness” (Davidson, 2012). Having one visible characteristic that *could* be associated with Muslim identity marks an individual as *completely* Muslim. This functions within an alternative logic to empirical reality, such as Ménard’s claim of “91%

Muslim students.” Such a figure is either illegally obtained, given French law, or based on students “looking” Muslim, which is sufficiently convincing to those who subscribe to such logic. The female body, of course, is potentially even more “obviously” Muslim in this regard, given the politics of clothing and religious expression.

#### 4.2. Unveiling girls to save them?

Feminist geopolitics has offered incisive insight into how micro-geographies of intimate relationship, fear and risk, and emotion connect to the macro-scale of statecraft (Hyndman, 2004; Williams & Boyce, 2013). Crucially, the attribution of fear and anxiety to particular bodies that disrupt accepted spatial arrangements is both highly territorial and generated not just from the state, but at a variety of scales by actors in everyday encounters. Smith (2012) sums this up by stating, “bodies not only *are* territory but also *make* territory” (1511, emphasis in the original).

Indeed, Muslim women’s bodies are framed as important signifiers of cultural Otherness that mark off colonized space in contrast to the civilized metropole (Gökarksel, 2009; Said, 1978). In this way, the Western woman and her ability to wear revealing clothing is contrasted with the Muslim woman imprisoned in her multiple layers of concealing fabric, representing a highly visible border between ostensible liberation and oppression (Hancock, 2015). In these narratives, the Muslim woman who chooses not to veil or wear other religiously-prescribed clothing is presented as having emancipated herself from oppressive Muslim men and their sexual deviance, if not outright violence (Fernando, 2013). Farris (2017) describes this kind of civilizational politics that pathologizes Islam and especially Muslim men, ostensibly in the service of women’s rights, as “femonationalist.”

The *école républicaine* is an important geopolitical site where the femonationalist gaze is directed. By portraying the Muslim female as simultaneously victim and victimizer, the schoolgirl’s body is constructed as a terrain of struggle between the French state’s efforts to liberate her, and the regressive efforts of Muslim men and boys to indelibly mark that same body as the property of Islam (Delphy, 2006; Hancock, 2015). In essence, the female Muslim body is a key node in what Hyndman (2007) calls the “securitization of fear” in French discourse. It also serves as a synecdoche for a dizzying array of fears ranging from poverty to human rights, national security to the functioning of the school itself (Bowen, 2007). In 1989 an incident that is often regarded as inaugurating a series of “headscarf affairs” unfolded when three girls were suspended from a school in Creil, a small city north of Paris, for refusing to remove their *hijabs*. The 2004 law banning religious symbols is considered a watershed moment in an ongoing struggle over the meaning of the headscarf or *foulard*, and incidents are reported at regular intervals – although, as my correspondent cited above suggests, the degree of conflict contained in these incidents is sometimes exaggerated.

A curious phenomenon when it comes to events having to do with students’ veiling practices, their impact on *girls*, as opposed to adult women, is less often discussed (for exceptions see, e.g. Hamzeh, 2011; Enright, 2011). The scope of my own research did not include data from students themselves, but did reveal an interesting perspective from a principal who provided her own take on the visibility and intentionality of veiling:

Once everyone understands the rule [regarding religious symbols] ... but a cross, my little thing, I don’t go around with a cross, and I don’t go around with a headdress [*coiffe*] – for the [school] personnel, it’s clearly not allowed, that something be visible. But when it comes to children, and then you have something small, but something insignificant – if I’m dealing with a little scarf [*foulard*] on a [student’s] head, I can say that it’s to make her look pretty. It’s not necessarily “visible” (author’s interview, June 24, 2016-b).

<sup>5</sup> The *Front national* (National Front) changed its name on June 1, 2018 to *Rassemblement national* (National Rally).



To be sure, work on children's political agency and sense of identity (Kallio & Häkli, 2011), as well as girls' direct accounts of their own headscarf-wearing behavior (e.g. Hamzeh, 2011; Walseth, 2015), suggest a complicated politics of intentionality in this regard. However, from the perspective of someone in a position of authority, it is a powerful statement to take the position of sidestepping, if not outright rejecting, the preponderance of discourse about veils and what they "must" mean in the space of the classroom.

#### 4.3. Fighting for the Republic's territories

*Communautarisme* channels issues of race and gender into a logic of voluntary withdrawal from republican norms. Within this logic, visible raced and gendered belonging to a "community of origin" means Muslim identity, and therefore a rejection of republican *laïcité*. With the already superheated optics of the *école républicaine*, this has been an especially intense narrative in recent years. In 2002, historian Georges Bensoussan sensationalized the spread of *communautarisme* within the *banlieues* in his book *The Lost Territories of the Republic (Les Territoires perdus de la République)*.<sup>6</sup> The book, written under the pseudonym Emmanuel Brenner, collected eyewitness accounts from French primary and secondary school teachers that provided evidence of a supposed "Islamization" of the nation's youth. Although the book's initial sales were unimpressive, its geographic imagery – that of entire neighborhoods and communities under the thrall of an ascendant radical Islam – quickly seeped into public consciousness. Indeed, then-President Jacques Chirac's decision to convene the Stasi Commission carried a strong element of the book's influence, which had been brought to his attention by aides (Bacqué, 2017).

The *école républicaine* has played a decisive role in legitimizing the *communautariste* narrative through official channels: indeed, one of the first uses of *communautarisme* in government communication was in a 2003 press release jointly issued by then-Minister of Youth, Education, and Research Luc Ferry<sup>7</sup> and then-Deputy Minister of Academic Instruction Xavier Darcos, which signaled the government's intention to tackle a purported increase in racially-motivated (particularly anti-Semitic) harassment in schools (Dhume-Sonzogni, 2007, p. 41).

That we must, in the name of *laïcité*, respect the diversity of religious beliefs is nowadays self-evident ... But the idea that we must, however, allow our students to isolate themselves in pseudo-"communities of origin" comes from a whole other logic that the [public] school must react against with the greatest firmness. Yet we must admit that from this point of view, the past several years represent an unmistakable regression. In the name of good intentions and a flawed idea of "respect for others," we have more or less abandoned the fundamental principles of our republican school in such a way that today our ability to teach in peace is more and more upset by the negative effects of certain *communautariste* conflicts (Ferry, 2003).

The Ferry-Darcos press release defines *laïcité* as allowing some measure of religious faith, largely for pedagogical purposes, into the school. At the same time, it warns in much the same language as Vianès that allowing students' communities of origin to penetrate the school's walls will have a deleterious impact. Indulging the demands of these communities, in effect, subdivides what should be a unified republican

space. However, there is a limit to the extent with which *communautariste* predictions penetrate into the everyday working of the *école républicaine*. Educators working on the ground take a somewhat bemused perspective on the discourses that operate outside of the school's walls. A principal, in response to my questions about the presence of *communautarisme* in her institution, told me:

A: I'm not in a neighborhood with only whites, it's very mixed (*mélangé*). But there's no *communautarisme*! Where I am, I have a little of everything in the district, I've got – let's start with me! I could claim other origins, but we can see right off the bat that it's not a problem for the school's functioning, it's my seventh year here. I've got everything in my schoolyard – blacks, blonds, Arabs ...

Chris: So you think that the social diversity (*mixité*) that exists already, that creates ...

A: It didn't, it doesn't create *communautarisme* that could create pressure – yeah? – sometimes, something that creates pressure, something that leads to a situation where conflict is born. I don't have those kinds of conflicts at all. (Author's interview, June 24, 2016-b).

The principal here freely indexes the visible difference of her students, but for the purpose of touting its potential for resilience rather than its *communautariste* risks. As will be discussed in the following section, such a reinterpretation serves as part of the daily work of educators. They balance the realities of their work against the weight of discourses on religious and ethnic identity to produce a perspective that reflects their unique position both as professionals and within a particular location in space.

#### 5. Aspirations and realities of *laïcité* within the *école républicaine*

As I have discussed, *laïcité* has anchored the homogenizing functions of the *école républicaine* over its history, identifying peripheral spaces and populations to be integrated into French republican society. These spaces and populations have been recently increasingly marked by the racialized and gendered logics of *communautarisme* that construct Muslim identity and *laïcité* as inherently antagonistic. The school is particularly scrutinized for the presence of *communautariste* influences that pose a threat to its *laïque* nature. Initiatives such as the *Grande mobilisation* then attempt to resolve perceived identitarian conflicts by imposing homogenizing administrative and pedagogical measures from the central administration. However, as many of my interview correspondents cited above suggest, this narrative of a central authority taming recalcitrant Others is not the whole story. Educators bring their own understandings and narratives to their work, and in doing so help define localized operationalizations of *laïcité*.

Like previous events indicating a crisis of confidence in the *école's* integrating capacities, the January 2015 attacks and the moment of silence incidents re-centered the tension between state aspirations for promoting *laïcité* and the realities of teachers' everyday experience in carrying out *laïque* pedagogy. These tensions are long-standing: Lorcerie (2010) has described the situation facing many French educators on the ground as "normative confusion" (see also Lorcerie, 2012). Tasked with implementing a nationally uniform set of guidelines for regulating students' compliance with republican norms, they find themselves instead "improvising alone," trying to strike a balance between ministerial directives, their professional judgement, and the realities of their day-to-day circumstances. Such an approach has also been documented by Vivarelli (2014), who notes an uneven landscape of *laïcité* enforcement in the greater Strasbourg area, but with a preponderance of recourse to informal, ad-hoc arrangements that seek compromise rather than prohibition. This behavior especially reflects the specific circumstances of Alsace-Moselle, governed under negotiated terms granting

<sup>6</sup> Bensoussan is a controversial French public figure; notably, during a 2015 appearance on the radio program *Répliques* (itself produced by another controversial well-known public scholar, Alain Finkielkraut), he stated "it's shameful that we keep up this taboo, knowing that in Arab families in France – and everybody knows it but no one wants to say it – babies suckle Antisemitism from their mothers' milk," misattributing it to the Algerian sociologist Smâin Laacher. Bensoussan was sued under French hate speech laws and acquitted in 2017. Following an appeal of that ruling, he was again acquitted in May 2018.

<sup>7</sup> No relation to Jules Ferry.



exceptions to *laïcité*.

Contributing to the “normative confusion” of republican pedagogy is the relative lack of formal training that teachers receive in this area. As part of the *Grande mobilisation*, *laïcité* has been increasingly integrated into the material taught by France’s teacher training schools, the *Écoles supérieures du professorat et de l’éducation* (Espé). However, despite Ministry-level support for reinforcing teacher education in *laïcité*, in practice such material remains rather marginal in terms of time and attention among the subjects that teachers-in-training are expected to learn. As a result, new teachers report anxiety about answering students’ questions around tricky questions of *laïcité* and religious expression (Dautresme, 2016).

At the same time, teachers are under pressure to provide evidence of student’ infractions against republican values. Again as part of the *Grande mobilisation*, efforts to more thoroughly document such behavior have been deployed. These are complicated by an absence of national statistics detailing specific challenges to *laïcité* within schools, as well as educator resistance to the idea of collecting such data in the first place. In one notable instance, the Senate committee that produced the *Return the Republic to the School* report was stymied in its work at the lycée Paul Eduard in Saint-Denis, in Paris’s northern *banlieue*. Teachers there refused to be interviewed for fear that their testimony would be used to stigmatize their school and students, and instead delivered a defiant message to the delegation in front of the steps of the school (Zappi, 2015).

Confronted by such pressures from the state – to say nothing of that from parents and students themselves – educators return to their on-the-ground experience accumulated within particular places and through their interactions with particular groups of students.

### 5.1. Seeing beyond stereotypes

The capacity of educators to construct their own ethnicized representations of their students is, of course, a process that has unpredictable outcomes. At times, these can result in stereotyped or prejudiced approaches (Lorcerie, 2009), or be appropriated to political ends as in the examples from Beaucaire and Béziers. But they can also form a source of expert knowledge that is at odds with dominant narratives about certain places and the identities located there. Indeed, a sense of frustration among educators are engrained perceptions of their schools and neighborhoods, which they often see as impairing their work. For instance, at one school south of Paris in a priority education zone, two teachers described the pervasive incorrectness of parents’ preconceived notions.

There’s a lot of [socioeconomic] statistics, they’re done at the request of each school, [but] parents won’t see them. It’s all about word of mouth. Which creates, for example, here we have a super modern school, it’s extraordinarily modern ... They don’t want to know, all that they want to know is that at [another local school] there are kids who are rich, come from privileged backgrounds, and they want their own kids to go there because they think that because the other kids are rich and privileged, their own kids will succeed. It’s totally crazy! It’s totally crazy (author’s interview, May 11, 2016).

Given the ease with which socioeconomic, ethnocultural, and religious identity are conflated with one another in the school setting, perceptions have consequences for educators: under- or over-enrollment, increased ministerial scrutiny, and political pressure. Nevertheless, there is the potential for more flexible and creative responses to arise from educators’ experiences. This is reflected by a description from the Ministry of Education *réfèrent laïcité* I interviewed. As we talked we looked at a large map of the Paris metro region, and she indicated the notorious *département* of Seine-Saint-Denis, often referred to by its postal code prefix, “the nine-three” (*le neuf-trois*):

Anyway, in the nine-three, you have this whole area of Saint-Denis, which is, to be sure, a bit well-known for having problems, but paradoxically, the nine-three has such a culture, such a tradition of social issues and of integrating foreign populations that things actually harmonize pretty well, because as much as there’s a very serious problem of social mixing, as much as there’s a serious problem of poverty, there’s a real culture within the in the schools, of nuanced work, of integration, of taking into account [students’] social issues – they’re actually pretty good. They’re able to do fairly extraordinary things (author’s interview, June 24, 2016a).

Such an assessment is, of course, a generalization. But it nevertheless directly contradicts existing stereotypes about the same area – that it is irreparably crippled by *communautarisme*, that there are entire neighborhoods where *laïcité* is openly flouted by displays of Muslim fundamentalism.

### 5.2. Adjusting the material to the audience

In certain cases, the desire to ensure the smooth functioning of the school on a day-to-day basis leads to efforts to reframe the terms of the matter at hand so as to avoid the most sensitive issues. Given the charged rhetoric around *laïcité*, certain educators are especially eager to avoid explicitly dealing with it in their efforts, which presents a paradox: while recognizing the potential of the concept as a unifying value, educators were nevertheless aware that it must be dealt with delicately to avoid undermining that unity in the first place. Indeed, one principal’s view went so far as to judge that the term itself was so controversial that bringing it up in the absence of a compelling reason could create conflict:

I don’t know what my colleagues do. They do things. They don’t necessarily tell me what. But I don’t think that they do much in the case of *laïcité*. It’s a sensitive topic. What I did isn’t about *laïcité*. I worked with the Republic’s values, and not on *laïcité*. Because *laïcité* includes a lot of things, and it’s a difficult area. (author’s interview, June 24, 2016-b).

She continued, emphasizing the existing consensus on *laïcité* that in her view precluded any substantive conflicts on the topic:

I don’t have aggressive acts [agressions] in the community, I don’t have – we can have a student who says something unfortunate, afterwards, we calm them down and then move on to something else ... I don’t think that people are doing a lot. I don’t think so. *Not about laïcité, because if the rules are clear, they’re established, everyone gets that that’s the rule.* If there’s a problem, someone who uses pressure and stereotypes to try to change others’ opinions, then maybe we talk with the parents, but it’s done pretty well. (Author’s interview, June 24, 2016-b; emphasis added)

Similarly, one teacher in a high school east of Paris where *Grande mobilisation* interventions were carried out described the progression of devising such a project that had passed from an explicit discussion of religious discrimination to a more general consideration of harmonious living amidst diversity:

And so, at a certain moment the staff told me, we can’t do a debate on Islamophobia and anti-Semitism, we’d have to present it in another way. So they asked me, why not organize a debate on “Living together better,” or “How do we use *laïcité* to live together better?” (author’s interview, June 24, 2016-c).

Such a description might be seized upon by partisans of strict *laïcité* as an instance of teachers bowing to *communautariste* pressures. However, educators’ “improvisations” in the area of instruction in *laïcité* are not necessarily “alone,” nor born of desperate needs. They can also reflect an understanding of the existing knowledges, interests and

identities of student populations and informed decisions about how to engage those. The same teacher above told me of her and her colleagues' efforts to resolve the potentially sensitive nature of *laïcité* by bringing in a local chapter of a European anti-discrimination youth organization:

There were certain students ... in fact they personalize *laïcité* like something, like a straitjacket, and absolute prohibition, well ... so that repels them a bit. So, because of that I thought it was really interesting that they could have the point of view of Mme. Fumet [a Ministry of Education representative], who brought them her view, and then, the whole association. Why the whole association? Because what I noticed during this discussion, was that exchanging among peers, among youth, that works really, really well. So in fact, to see these people from an association that represents – because the association's representatives, who each represent their religion – they really felt a bit among peers. Whereas Mme. Fumet, that's really "the" *laïcité*. A certain, well, a representation of the institution, in fact. So there, they learned things, but it wasn't at all the same message – for [the students]. Well, for me it was exactly the same. It's exactly the same message that the association gave. It's "living together." (Author's interview, June 24, 2016-c)

In this case, the means of delivering the message matters less than its content. Striking a contrast to the *hussards noirs* and their authoritarian methods of instruction, the teacher and her colleagues were happy to meet their students's pedagogical needs where they were. And in doing so, they pushed back on the dominant, centralizing narrative of *laïcité* by defining a workable version for their school and community.

## 6. Conclusion

In this article I have shown how *laïcité*, France's idiosyncratic form of secularism, functions within the institutional history of that country's public school to shape two contrasting political geographies: one of centralized state control being exerted to assimilate its peripheries, and another of those peripheries pushing back on the homogenizing narrative they are subject to. To be sure, the former has had an advantage in this process over time, but it has not been fully dominant. Especially in the context of the intensifying use of the *école républicaine* to address anxieties over Muslim identity, educators have been able to present in certain cases alternatives to the securitized version of *laïcité* that is prescribed by national policymakers. While these cases do not overturn *laïcité*'s assimilationist geographies, they suggest that ground-level workers can "make space" in which their locally-formed professional competences operationalize a different sort of *laïcité*. This suggests that similar tensions can be found across other educational contexts, with other overarching directives being reinterpreted at the local scale.

A limitation of the present article is that my interviews were only carried out with professional educators, and do not include the views of students or their families concerning *laïcité* in the *école républicaine*. This is an acknowledged shortcoming that I hope to address in future work, especially given the more general relative underrepresentation of student voices in work on this topic.

The overarching narrative of *laïcité* as an assimilating force remains potent in discussions of the *école républicaine*. A year following the establishment of the *Grande mobilisation*, an interview with Minister of Education Najat Vallaud-Belkacem on the French TV news network LCI highlighted that many of the measures deployed by the *Grande mobilisation* had been only partially implemented. Towards the end of the interview, both Vallaud-Belkacem and her interviewer evoked the term "the Republic's lost territories" in direct reference to Bensoussan's book (Vallaud-Belkacem, 2016). Such a narrative was meaningful, given then-recent events. Following a deadly wave of terrorist attacks in November 2015 with apparent Islamist motivations in Paris and Saint-Denis, the *école républicaine* once again became an object of scrutiny, and once again the optics of visible Muslim identity within it were

politicized as threats to French security.

The "lost territories" analogy, already emblematic of fears of the public school's failures, resonated with wider anxieties about migration and anxiety throughout North America and Europe. The same collapsing of identity into geography that allows schools and neighborhoods to be saturated with Muslimness in France also allowed the perpetrators of the November 2015 attacks – all born in France or Belgium – to be conflated with fears of violence being conveyed along the then-current wave of migrants from the Levant and Africa to Europe. Playing on these fears, nativist and populist political actors in North America and Europe have been highly successful in generating electoral support by portraying visible Muslim identity as an existential threat to mythologized White Christian cultures. This phenomenon is not likely to abate in the near future, and it is vital for geographers to understand the variegated landscape across the world of popular mobilizations based on the optics of identity (cf. Lizotte, 2019).

Looking ahead, the educational arena may serve as an important resource for those combatting these racist and nativist logics. Amidst the spike in securitized rhetoric that followed the November 2015 attacks, educators confronted these overarching narratives from the basis of their experience in spaces like the *Aggiornamento Histoire-Géographie*, a blog for teachers of history and geography. One post especially summed up the resilience and determination of the educational community at this time. Referencing the January 2015 moment of silence and its inadequacy as a substantive measure to resolve society's conflicts, the writer encouraged colleagues to continue to carry out their mission as educators, using the tools of their vocation:

Teachers, we will have to listen, reassure, explain, wonder. Democracy is also a pedagogy, but a long-term pedagogy, day after day, not limited to a moment of silence. (Capdepu, 2015)

## Declaration of competing interest

None.

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## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2019.102121>.

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