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'*Avec Vous?*' Islamophobia and the Macron presidency[1]

Abstract

This article examines the entrenchment of Islamophobia during Emmanuel Macron's first term. It explores legislation to counter 'separatism', the radicalisation of laïcité, the restriction of Muslimness, and the political disqualification of Muslims. The deployment of laïcité *to distinguish those who are 'really' French and those who are not, is identified as part of an authoritarian neoliberal project seeking public participation in processes of scrutiny and "vigilance" that accentuate the stigmatisation of Muslims.*

Keywords: Islamophobia, France, Laïcité, Neoliberalism, Authoritarianism

Résume: 'Avec Vous?': Islamophobie et la présidence Macron

Cet article examine l'enracinement de l'islamophobie pendant le premier mandat d'Emmanuel Macron. Il analyse la législation pour contrer le 'séparatisme', la radicalisation de la laïcité, la restriction de la musulmanité, et la disqualification politique des musulmans. Le déploiement de la laïcité pour distinguer ceux qui sont « vraiment » français de ceux qui ne le sont pas, est identifié comme un élément d'un projet néolibéral autoritaire qui cherche à faire participer le public à des processus de contrôle et de « vigilance », accentuant ainsi la stigmatisation des musulmans.

Mots clés: Islamophobie, France, Laïcité, Néolibéralisme, Autoritarisme

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Introduction

The stance adopted by Emmanuel Macron, as his government drew up its *Charte des principes pour l'islam de France,* was bullish. Imams who refused to sign up were to be denied the right to preach. '*Il y aura ceux qui signeront et ceux qui ne signeront pas. On en tirera les enseignements. Soit vous êtes avec la République, soit vous n'êtes pas avec la République'* (Médiapart, 16 December 2020). The bullishness was not just rhetorical. During Macron's first term, Muslims were subjected to greater scrutiny and put under suspicion of 'separatism'. The policy framework whereby the French state defines the role and visibility of religion in society - *laïcité* - was set to an incantatory default mode, a wellspring of moral panics for state actors to manipulate. The government's extension of surveillance mechanisms involved the multiplication of anti-terror units nationwide and the establishment of 'Valeurs de la République' teams in schools so that fidelity to *laïcité* could be policed on the spot. Various strategies were developed to draw ordinary citizens into processes of observation and denunciation. Muslim spaces of sociability, from mosques to snack bars, were inspected in their thousands. Hundreds of them were shut down. Politically, efforts to develop a form of 'conspiratorial racialisation' (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2021, 85-113), measuring loyalty to the Republic via *laïcité* and spurious notions like separatism and Islamo-leftism, further blurred dividing lines between the government and the far right. The intensification and institutionalisation of these powerful dynamics of repression and exclusion during the first Macron presidency are indicative of the role played by Islamophobia in sustaining the authoritarian trajectory of the French state.

Sanctioned by state actors and trumpeted across the Twittersphere and rolling news stations, the scope of discrimination against Muslims in France has expanded. Their political

disqualification and disciplining under Macron has involved the dissolution of associations guilty of acknowledging the existence of Islamophobia and recording instances of it; the drawing up of a charter that obliges imams both to reject the idea that the French state bears any responsibility for anti-Muslim acts and to renounce as defamatory the very notion of '*racisme d'Etat*'; the blocking of contracts for private Muslim schools, turning them into objects of suspicion precisely because they are 'uncontracted' (Bourget, 2019, 156); the denigration by state actors of concepts like racialisation, whiteness and institutional racism as imported, dangerous, anti-French ideas that may lead to complicity with terrorism; and the threat of legal action by a minister of state against a SUD education trade union branch in Seine-Saint-Denis for discussing the concept of 'state racism'.

This article surveys the entrenchment and escalation of Islamophobia during the first Macron administration. It begins with a brief outline of some contested terms relevant to this discussion - Islamophobia, racialisation and *laïcité* - before examining four key aspects of the management of Islamophobic reaction under Macron:

i) the escalation of the threat level imputed to Muslims from 'communitarian' to 'separatist', justified by a form of 'conspiratorial racialisation' that presages further escalation;

ii) the ongoing radicalisation of France's tradition of *laïcité*, the means by which the state asserts its authority over what constitutes public space and sets limits on freedom of expression within it;

iii) the curtailment of 'Muslimness' via intrusions seeking not just invisibilisation or humiliation but political disqualification and the restriction of Muslim autonomy;

iv) the pivotal role of Islamophobia in the expansion of state control and surveillance mechanisms, underpinning a twin dynamic of racism and neoliberal authoritarianism.

Contested terms: Islamophobia, racialisation and *laïcité*

As Sayyid and Vakil have noted, Islamophobia 'can be direct and explicitly discriminatory, or indirect and seemingly positive, but always narrowing the range of acceptable forms of Muslimness, thus rendering Muslim citizenship conditional and precarious' (Sayyid and Vakil, 2018). This process has been unfolding in contemporary France over the past three decades, accelerating since the 2015 terrorist attacks. It has been accompanied by strenuous and rather effective efforts to deny the existence of Islamophobia, denials that assert the 'right to blaspheme' (Fourest, 2015) on the grounds that Islam is a religion not a race (Galonnier, 2019).

Meer and Modood argue that Islamophobia 'is not a pure "religious discrimination"'. Rather, it 'traffics in stereotypes about foreignness, phenotypes and culture'. In most Western societies, moreover, discrimination on religious grounds, 'does not usually proceed on the basis of belief but perceived membership of an ethno-religious group' (Meer and Modood, 2010, 83). In other words, Islamophobia develops via processes of racialisation. The argument that racism has nothing to do with hostility to Islam, since race and religion are separate, discrete phenomena, relies on an implicit understanding of race as something innate and unchanging. Historically, as Garner and Selod note, what is perceived as 'race' has been drawn from cultural as well as physical features. Prior to the development of 'body-fixated race theory' in the 19th century, faith-based groups like Muslims and Jews experienced racism that developed through reference to culture, from religion to aspects of their physical appearance like dress (Garner and Selod, 2015). The assumption that Muslims cannot be considered a 'race' therefore serves 'only to

reify race' since it relies on an 'implicit refutation of all that we know about the socially constructed nature of race' (Tyrer, 2010, 84). The novelist Ronan Bennett's response to the complicity of British liberals with Islamophobia put the matter succinctly: 'religion is not only about faith but also about identity, background and culture, and Muslims are overwhelmingly non-white' (cited in Meer and Modood, 2010, 80). 'Colour-blind' Republicans, who imagine the French state to be oblivious to race, in the same way as its *laïc* tradition of Republican state secularism claims to be indifferent to religion, appear impervious to such reasoning, stuck in a rigid conceptualisation of race that is fixated upon pigmentation. The fictions of state colour blindness or secular 'neutrality' help obscure the essentialisation that takes place when physical, linguistic, behavioural or cultural attributes are assigned to a group and considered inherent, characteristics that ultimately 'emerge as "racial"' (Garner and Selod, 2015). Racialisation is therefore a classification process capable of essentialising a group of people and labelling it a threat, making a phenomenon racial that wasn't before (Brun and Cosquer, 2022, 28).

France is no different to other western nations in constructing a racial hierarchy, locating the category of Muslim 'at the bottom', as Jean Beaman explains, and framing it as a counterpoint 'to whiteness and the idea of a "true France."' In this way, 'a racial common sense is created in a seemingly colorblind society' (Beaman, 2019, 553-555). The denial of racial categories is an important feature of the French Republican tradition, not least the denial of 'French' as a racialised identity, intrinsic to the construction of France's particular universalism (Delphy 2010). For Maurice Samuels, this universalism 'is not a fixed doctrine, with an ideologically coherent set of rules and practices, but rather a way of thinking about the state and its relation to minorities that is continually being negotiated' (Samuels, 2016, 9). This negotiation, however, does not take place on neutral terrain, where all minorities have the same capacity to

influence policy. In contemporary France, universalism is being invoked as an expression of Frenchness, with *laïcité* held up as evidence of French superiority, 'neutrality' and benevolence. In this sense, as Christopher Lizotte notes, *laïcité* forms an important element of France's complicity in the wider 'secularisation turn' of the post-9/11 global order. 'Like other cultural markers constructed as fundamental to societies of the Enlightenment west, laïcité has contributed towards framing a civilizational conflict' (Lizotte, 2020). Increasingly appended to the national motto of '*liberté, égalité, fraternité*', it has become 'a shibboleth for access to France' (Nilsson, 2015, 103). Although much debate on the question has focused on the emergence of a 'new' *laïcité* alleged to have betrayed or 'falsified' (Baubérot, 2014) its *true* meaning, such readings are themselves predicated on the quest for 'an imaginary pure and emancipatory core' (Nilsson, 2015, 101), one that is hard to reconcile with *laïcité*'s relationship to French colonial rule (Meziane, 2021) or role in sustaining gender inequality in France (Scott, 2017).

As Talal Asad argues, the most significant aspect of the French secular state's observance of the principle of *cuius regio eius religio* ('whose realm, their religion') is not which particular religion is banned or favoured but something else, 'the installation of a single absolute power - the sovereign state'. This body, representative and transcendent, is the incarnation of the abstract principle of sovereignty and reserves the right to determine the meaning of signs, and to reject those which challenge the state's 'inviolable personality' (Asad, 2006, 499-500).

In *Des Empires Sous la Terre*, Mohamed Amer Meziane outlines the emergence of the *République laïque* as a historic compromise between the Catholic church and post-Enlightenment anticlericalism (Meziane, 2021, 103). Meziane presents the *laïcisation* of European institutions and the deployment of Catholic missions in the colonies as two sides of

a single process of imperial unity, one which gave rise not to the imposition of *laïcité* across Africa but to the *laïcisation* of France itself (111). *Laïcité* should thus be seen as a modality emanating from the wider history of the relationship between secularisation and Empire. A crucial aspect of this was the fabrication of a '*culte musulman*' by the colonial state in Algeria (111), a racist state that systematically oppressed a subject defined as 'Muslim', counterposing it to '*un citoyen laïque dont l'appartenance religieuse peut dès lors être posée comme "indifférente"*' (115). In this way Muslims were racialised:

> *C'est en fonction de leur appartenance réelle ou supposée à ce que l'Occident n'a cessé de nommer leur "religion" que les indigènes sont alors racialisés. La sécularisation coloniale n'abolit ni ne neutralise la religion en diminuant son importance. Elle la fixe et la codifie au contraire; l'Empire déchiffrant l'islam que sa raison observe en tant que signe de la race* (123).

For all the emphasis on the liberal aspects of the 1905 Law of Separation of Church and State (Pfefferkorn, 2022, 38-49; Marlière, 2020), it did not mark a total break with this imperial system of public recognition and control of religion:

> *Ainsi la sécularité qui fut celle de l'État impérial et de ses déploiements coloniaux en Afrique n'a-t-elle jamais été abolie par le régime de laïcité établi après 1905. La laïcisation n'a donc jamais signifié l'absence d'intervention de l'État au sein des pratiques religieuses. Les pratiques d'exclusion des musulmans sont des visages de la sécularisation exposant son impérialité qui n'ont rien d'une simple exception au régime de laïcité tel qu'il est institué par l'État. Si l'État ne finance plus les religions, il les*

régule et les surveille par un ensemble de pratiques que le Titre V de la loi de 1905 reconnaît aujourd'hui encore comme la "police des cultes" (Meziane, 2021, 112-3).

The desire to reform or to domesticate Islam is part of the French state's longstanding function of producing secular religious subjects (Fernando, 2014, 20), a function which has always been more about the regulation of the public sphere than the confinement of religion to the private sphere. *Laïcité*, notes Meziane, introduces 'a separation between belief and practices' and between Islam and Muslims, providing a justification for the defence of 'free speech and public insult at all costs by positing with a puzzling certainty that one can insult Islam or the Prophet without insulting Muslims themselves' (Meziane, 2021a). For all the progressive aspects of the 1905 Law of Separation, *laïcité* remains a 'state doctrine', with 'no self-evident core to be saved' (Nilsson 2015, 101), a doctrine concerned with forging national unity, of binding secular citizens to a state culture, of maintaining 'universality' while representing and speaking to 'a particular essence', functions that, as we shall see below, do 'not fit well with a world of multiple belongings and porous boundaries' (Asad, 2006, 511).

Imputing a problem: from communitarianism to separatism

In the summer of 2016, prime minster Manuel Valls called for a ban on women wearing the hijab to university. The proposal was met with a firm response by economy minister Emmanuel Macron, addressing the first meeting of his new movement, En Marche!: '*Je ne crois pas pour ma part qu'il faille inventer de nouveaux textes, de nouvelles lois, de nouvelles normes, pour aller chasser le voile à l'université, pour aller traquer ceux qui lors des sorties scolaires peuvent avoir des signes religieux*' (*Le Figaro*, 12 July 2016). This was the Macron celebrated by liberal commentators worldwide after his 2017 election, a bulwark against populism who

appeared to offer a 'fresh answer to the popular discontent that has swept through Western democracies' (*The Economist,* 17 June 2017).

Five years later, his administration had indeed seen off amendments to its 24 August 2021 'separatism' Law (*La loi confortant le respect des principes de la République*) that would have banned wearing the hijab on school trips, in universities or in public if under the age of eighteen. But the legislation, in which Macron had made a heavy personal investment, nevertheless outlawed the wearing of 'conspicuous' religious symbols when working for outsourced companies delivering public services, and directed an array of control and surveillance measures at France's Muslim population. This in a country that already boasted some of the most restrictive secular legislation in the world. The advocacy organisation Cage went so far as to describe the administration as 'the most oppressive for French Muslims in recent history' (Cage, 2022, 45). Resentment directed at Muslims via *laïcité* found expression throughout the *quinquennat* in the emotional aftermath of a series of terrorist attacks but also in other arenas: sports shops, primary schools, swimming pools, toy shops, supermarkets, talent contests, hairdressers, school trips, changing rooms, snack bars, leisure centres, canteens and universities.

The normalisation of Islamophobic rhetoric and practice during Macron's first term appears at first glance to have followed a familiar pattern, with moral panics over breaches of secularism and calls for vigilance in the wake of terrorist attacks emerging in a context of rising social inequality and political volatility. Muslims continued to be linked with terror in mainstream political debate, located on a spectrum beginning in everyday life and ending with Islamist violence. They were also held responsible for a perceived assault on *laïcité*, via 'provocations' keenly felt by a section of the population disproportionately located among France's political

class. But an escalation also took place. The designation of an 'outsider' minority posing a nominal threat to the nation gave way to the more conspiratorial charge of separatism. It was no longer just a question of identifying and stigmatising an essentialised group accused of being unable or unwilling to conform to French society's norms and codes. The government was now warning about an existential menace posed by a separatist minority seeking to overthrow the Republic.

Communitarianism is a term that barely existed in France thirty years ago (Dhume-Sonzogni, 2016, 13; Taupin 2022, 27-8). It has since become a household word thanks to a political dynamic that has established it as a fixture in public debate. Republican secularism has proven a valuable means of laying down ground rules for this process of classification and exclusion. As Olivier Roy underlines, Muslims are being set up to fail: '*On reproche aux musulmans d'être communautarisés, mais on leur demande de réagir contre le terrorisme en tant que communauté. C'est ce qu'on appelle la double contrainte : soyez ce que je vous demande de ne pas être*' (*Le Monde*, 9 January 2015). The accusation of communitarianism effectively generates what it denounces, singling out particular groups and identifying them as outsiders. Dhume-Sonzogni describes this as a process of '*ethnicisation*' (2016, 52), as multiple and particular communities are negatively counterposed to the unitary French national community which transcends all the others (2016, 58). Accusations of communitarianism are an attempt to draw battle lines: 'Communautarisme *dénonce la provocation et annonce symboliquement un affrontement*' (2016, 74).

During Macron's first term, the government profiled an even greater danger. Separatism's goal is not simply isolation, but power. In every refusal to conform to secular Republican rules or values was a potential assault on the Republic. Interior minister Gérald Darmanin and junior

minister for citizenship Marlène Schiappa used the preamble to the August 2021 Law to outline the threat posed by this enemy within: '*Un entrisme communautariste, insidieux mais puissant, gangrène lentement les fondements de notre société dans certains territoires.*' Where did this 'entryism' come from?

> *Cet entrisme est pour l'essentiel d'inspiration islamiste. Il est la manifestation d'un projet politique conscient, théorisé, politico-religieux, dont l'ambition est de faire prévaloir des normes religieuses sur la loi commune que nous nous sommes librement donnée. Il enclenche une dynamique séparatiste qui vise à la division… la République n'a pas suffisamment de moyens d'agir contre ceux qui veulent la déstabiliser* (*Projet de loi nº 3649*).

Education minister Jean-Michel Blanquer had already warned that some towns, like Roubaix and nearby Maubeuge, were living under sharia law (Franceinfo, 21 February 2020). A series of measures had been introduced, covertly at first, to deal with the problem of separatism. Muslim places of worship and leisure, as well as associations, schools, cafés and restaurants, had been put under observation. From 2018, a number of units dedicated to combating '*l'islamisme et le repli communautaire*' were set up in selected *départements* before a total of 101 units were established nationwide in 2019 and given additional powers by the August 2021 Law. This ensured greater state control and scrutiny of the separatist practices alleged to be at the root of Islamist terror. Associations were obliged to sign a *contrat de respect des valeurs de la république*, stricter controls were introduced for independent religious schools, the training of imams was brought under the jurisdiction of the state, preachers were made to sign a lengthy oath of allegiance to the Republic, and thousands of premises were subjected to investigation under suspicion of separatist or Islamist leanings. By October 2020, over 200

drinking establishments had been shut down, along with 15 places of worship, four schools and 13 associations or cultural centres (Macron 2020). During the course of 2021, 2 623 prayer rooms and mosques were 'screened' on instruction from the interior ministry (*Le Monde*, 11 January 2022). The August 2021 Law accelerated these processes. By early 2022, nearly 25,000 premises had been put under investigation, with more than 700 closed and 46 million euros seized (Avec Vous, 2022).

On 3 October 2019 an attack on a police station by a psychologically unstable individual who had converted to Islam a decade earlier left four dead. Macron intervened a few days later, issuing a sombre warning about '*cet islamisme souterrain qui corrompt les enfants de France*' and calling for '*une société de vigilance*' to defeat '*l'hydre islamiste*'. The armed forces, along with civil servants and public sector employees, needed to lead the way. But the state was no longer able to face up to this threat alone. It needed the whole nation to help out: '*savoir repérer à l'école, au travail, dans les lieux de culte, près de chez soi les relâchements, les déviations, ces petits gestes qui signalent un éloignement avec les lois et les valeurs de la République. Une séparation*' (Macron, 2019).

Warming to the theme, interior minister Christophe Castaner alerted the public to potential indications of Islamist radicalisation. Citizens concerned about terrorism should beware of anyone strictly observing Ramadan, something that could apply to millions of French Muslims, or wearing a beard, something that applied to Castaner himself (Europe 1, 9 October 2019). Castaner's outburst was nothing new, similar stigmatisations having formed part of the '*Stop djihadisme*' campaign initiated under President Hollande. Such calls for participatory surveillance, as Vanessa Codaccioni argues, should be seen not so much as examples of Benthamite panopticon control, but of a '*synoptique discriminatoire*', a form of popular

surveillance directed from the highest level of the state on the basis of racial and ethnic profiling, subjecting a subordinated minority to surveillance by a vigilant majority (Codaccioni, 2021, 76).

This synoptic bears comparison with the Prevent agenda pursued by successive governments in Britain. Prevent's success in establishing a degree of institutionalisation and compliance with processes of Islamophobic monitoring and control, via legislation and the establishment of bodies or mechanisms that draw state functionaries and other employees into forms of complicity with racialised surveillance, has made it a model for organisations, like the Institut Montaigne (a think tank with close links to Macron), seeking to embed similar practices in French society. Advocates of Prevent have sometimes run into difficulty when asked to specify precisely what is meant by the 'British values' that need to be upheld against threats to 'our way of life'. In France, the sustained focus on *laïcité* as a means of making such distinctions has enabled state actors to draw lines of division at will in almost every conceivable area of everyday life, establishing the French state as a key protagonist in the development of Islamophobia (Palheta and Slaouti, 2022, 65-6).

Radicalising *laïcité*

In October 2019, education minister Blanquer drew attention to a trivial gesture that he found unacceptable in the Republican education system. Some little boys were apparently refusing to hold hands with little girls in school. He blamed this on pressure exerted in Muslim households on infant boys. Their refusal to hold hands in turn made them guilty of proselytism, as they were effectively putting pressure on others in public space. As Julien Suaudeau noted, what was striking about Blanquer's intervention was the one-dimensional assumption that the

religious beliefs of the child or his parents were to blame. The possibility that a Muslim boy may also be capable of being shy or introverted, in a bad mood or germophobic, was not even considered (Suaudeau, 2019).

Blanquer's ministry had a ready-made plan for such incidents. Teachers could consult the portentously named *Vade-Mecum de la Laïcité* drawn up by the Conseil des sages de la laïcité, a body established in 2018. The manual was designed to help decipher and correct behaviour through the prism of France's *laïc*/communitarian divide. It was, the sages were at pains to reassure, constantly updated with the latest information on the ground. Armed with this expert intelligence, the errant boy's teacher would discuss the situation with him, and then with his parents. If this did not produce the desired outcome then the ministry's *laïcité* teams would be called into action. Teachers could access an online form entitled '*Atteinte à la laïcité*' and log misdemeanours, with responses guaranteed within 24 hours. Concrete solutions would then be sought in liaison with a national network of Valeurs de la République teams, whose 600 representatives were poised to intervene in any institution where the need to uphold secular rules presented itself (Ministère de l'Éducation nationale, 2022a; Académie de Paris, 2022). In a promotional video for its *Vade-Mecum*, the Conseil's general secretary Alain Seksig gave some examples of the kind of breaches that he and his colleagues (such as Conseil President, Dominique Schnapper) were spending their time on. Pupils might refuse to enter a cathedral or ask to be provided with '*repas confessionels*' in the school canteen (Conseil des sages de la laïcité, 2020). Since 2018 around a thousand such breaches of *laïcité* have been flagged up every year, covering lapses ranging from '*suspicion de prosélytisme*' to the wearing of something signalling a religious affiliation, not wanting to read Harry Potter or *The Hobbit*, or refusing to take part in an activity such as swimming for reasons that contravene the new secular orthodoxy (Ministère de l'Éducation nationale, 2022; Vie Publique, 2020). One of Pap

Ndiaye's first acts as education minister in Macron's second term was to signal his commitment to the continued surveillance and denunciation of young people by announcing that reports on such breaches would become monthly rather than quarterly (*Le Monde,* 22 June 2022).

Anyone seeking out everyday affronts to *laïcité* could find them almost anywhere if they looked hard enough. Politicians had already flagged up the problem of supermarkets that didn't sell pork or alcohol (*Le Monde*, 10 December 2002). In October 2020 interior minister Gérald Darmanin drew attention to another, hitherto unperceived, slight against *laïcité* in French shops: '*des rayons communautaires*'. It was capitalism that bore responsibility here, according to Darmanin, since this was an attempt to make money by explicitly directing marketing at groups of people who liked the same food. '*Ça m'a toujours choqué de rentrer dans un hypermarché et de voir qu'il y avait un rayon de telle cuisine communautaire et de telle autre à côté,*' he confessed, adding, with his ministry's growing flair for deductive reasoning, '*C'est comme ça, que ça commence le communautarisme*' (Franceinfo, 21 October 2020).

In 2021 the problem of 'fake' doctors' notes being used to dispense school students of swimming lessons was considered sufficiently serious for two ministers of state, Blanquer and Schiappa, to issue a joint declaration demanding an inquiry into the extent of spurious allergies to chlorine (*Le Figaro*, 12 February 2021). The Conseil des sages de la laïcité duly produced a report entitled *Liberté d'expression, neutralité et laïcité dans le champ des activités sportives*. It ran to 67 pages. The sages dealt with such questions as the problem of proselytism in changing rooms or on the field of play, listing transgressions such as praying before games, the consumption of food that was exclusively halal, and the wearing of underwear in the showers. Citizens were also alerted to '*les leggings qui couvrent toutes les parties du corps*'. Further concerns were expressed about the increasing prevalence of the hijab on the sports field. The

sages cited from a 2017 Senate report that warned: '*aujourd'hui, la radicalisation n'a plus lieu dans les prisons, mais dans les halls d'immeuble et dans les milieux sportifs*' (Conseil des sages de la laïcité, 2022, 11). According to the sages' estimations, more than 11,000 people were undertaking sports training every day '*dans un environnement contraire aux valeurs de la République*' (2022, 10).

Alongside the problem of Muslim women absenting themselves from sporting activities, issues were also found with those who were participating in sport, but in the wrong garments. When the leisure chain Decathlon began stocking a sports hijab, uproar ensued. Among the 500 hostile tweets received on the morning the news broke were messages complaining that the store was promoting French women's subjugation to Islamism, or asking if suicide belts and female circumcision kits would also be sold (Decathlon, 2019). Government ministers and deputies intervened. Macron loyalist Aurore Bergé took to her phone with a tweet that inadvertently highlighted the porosity, analysed elsewhere by Mondon and Winter (2017), between liberal and illiberal Islamophobia:

> '*Le sport émancipe. Il ne soumet pas. Mon choix de femme et de citoyenne sera de ne plus faire confiance à une marque qui rompt avec nos valeurs. Ceux qui tolèrent les femmes dans l'espace public uniquement quand elles se cachent ne sont pas des amoureux de la liberté*' (26 February 2019).

The impact of this kind of scrutiny and harassment was expressed by a Muslim mother of six in Grenoble, where a longstanding campaign by women to be allowed to swim as they pleased, whether in a burkini or topless, was eventually defeated by a ruling from the Conseil d'Etat in 2022:

My struggle began long before the protests we are doing here at the pools in Grenoble. I've been turned away as a mother from my child's school trips on account of my headscarf, I've been refused entry to a private lake where ducks and fish are swimming, but I, a Muslim woman, can't! I once paid 200 euros with my family to visit a waterpark and was told once inside that I wasn't allowed to use any of the slides. They tried to throw me out like some kind of a criminal. I'm policed everywhere I go (François, 2021).

The escalation of Islamophobic reaction in contemporary France derives in part from the disarray of state actors caught up in a crisis of political representation. Some of the tools deployed to navigate this crisis are being reshaped in the process. First among these is *laïcité*. Ostensibly a modality, a mechanism for the arbitration of public life, its significance is increasingly emphasised as a *value*, appended to *liberté, égalité, fraternité* as a defining feature of Frenchness. The result has been a convergence of France's Republican model of citizenship, based around identification with political ideals, with what might appear to be a diametrically opposed ethno-culturalist outlook that sees shared affinities or heritage as fundamental to a harmonious society. The longstanding myth of *laïcité* as a neutral state modality has made it all the easier for it to be presented as a key component of a shared French cultural legacy, part of a set of values distinguishing those who are 'really' French from those who are not.

Curtailing Muslimness

The August 2021 'separatism' Law linked France's Muslim population explicitly to Islamist radicalisation, vindicating the surveillance and control of a *de facto* enemy within. Macron's

October 2020 speech at Les Mureaux provided a lengthy rationale for the initiative. '*L'islam*,' he informed his audience, '*est une religion qui vit une crise aujourd'hui, partout dans le monde*.' Radical Islamism posed a mortal threat to France. It was defined by,

> *une volonté revendiquée, affichée, une organisation méthodique pour contrevenir aux lois de la République et créer un ordre parallèle, ériger d'autres valeurs, développer une autre organisation de la société, séparatiste dans un premier temps, mais dont le but final est de prendre le contrôle, complet celui-ci* (Macron, 2020).

As Amnesty International noted, no definition was provided either of separatism or radical Islam, nor any explanation for the exclusive focus on these phenomena. The government therefore ran the risk of reinforcing stereotypes 'that conflate Muslims and terrorism'. The same fears had already been outlined by the United Nations' special rapporteur in 2018, who noted that by conflating terrorism with Islam, government policy singled Muslims out, alienated them from the state and created 'a form of political and social disenfranchisement that is inconsistent with the State's obligations under international human rights law' (Amnesty International Public Statement, 2021). This disenfranchisement appeared to be precisely the government's intention as the consequences of the 'separatism' legislation began to take effect.

The Collectif contre l'islamophobie en France (CCIF) collected data on Islamophobic acts as part of its efforts to contest discrimination. It was the only association to do so in France. Its closure, along with that of Baraka City, France's biggest Muslim charity, can be seen an act of censorship and political repression. It was justified by interior minister Darmanin on the grounds that the CCIF was an enemy of the Republic. How could he tell? The CCIF, he argued, '*touche des aides d'Etat, des déductions fiscales et dénonce l'islamophobie d'Etat*' (*Le Figaro*,

19 October 2020). The Conseil d'Etat's rationalisation of the dissolution claimed that by depicting France as a country hostile to Muslims, the CCIF was radicalising victims of alleged discrimination by inciting them to adopt discriminatory attitudes towards France (Sizaire, 2021). The government used the same circular reasoning when it closed down the Coordination contre le racisme et l'islamophobie (CRI) in Lyon. The organisation was cultivating '*le soupçon d'islamophobie au sein de la société française*' and would therefore have to be dissolved (Chekkat, 2022). For Darmanin, the CRI was also an enemy of the Republic, as were all those that refused to sign the government's *Charte des principes pour l'islam de France* (*Le Figaro*, 19 October 2020). This declared that while hostility towards Muslims was a reality, it was confined to an extremist minority and could not be attributed to the state or the population at large. Indeed, denunciations of a '*prétendu racisme d'Etat*', like other '*postures victimaires*', only fed '*la haine antimusulmane et la haine de la France*' (CFCM, 2021).

The political disqualification of Muslims has been an undercurrent to various Islamophobic flashpoints over the past three decades, most of them generated by reactions to the hijab. In this sense the Macron years have been no exception. '*Le voile n'est pas souhaitable dans notre société*,' was education minister Blanquer's position (*Le Monde*, 13 October 2019). In May 2018 Maryam Pougetoux, 19-year-old president of the Sorbonne branch of UNEF, France's largest student union, was interviewed on national television about a developing movement against government reform of higher education. The episode - an elected representative responding to questions while wearing a hijab - drew the attention of the late Laurent Bouvet, a man who devoted an inordinate amount of time to policing the garments, utterances and activities of Muslim women, relaying news of their alleged transgressions to a network of like-minded militant secularists known as the *Printemps Républicain*.

Bouvet's alarm call drew the attention of then interior minister Gérard Collomb, who took it upon himself to deconstruct this '*provocation*'. '*C'est du prosélytisme*,' he revealed. Pougetoux was attempting to differentiate herself from the rest of French society, he explained, musing in the same breath about the pull exerted on young people by ISIS as indicated in a poll commissioned by the Institut Montaigne (BFMTV, 18 May 2017). Valérie Toranian, editor of *Elle* magazine, writing in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, a longstanding publication radicalised along reactionary lines, warned that the garment worn by Pougetoux was not '*un foulard anodin*'. It was, she surmised, '*un hijab fermé, un voile islamique qui marque l'appartenance à un islam rigoriste, souvent proche de la mouvance des Frères musulmans*' (21 May 2018). Julien Dray, a founder member of both UNEF and SOS Racisme, declared that the UNEF leadership, by allowing a woman in a hijab to take up a position of responsibility, was 'defiling all the struggles we led in universities' (*The Guardian*, 28 May 2018).

When it emerged that UNEF had allowed 'non-mixed' meetings to take place, an uncontroversial practice in activist circles worldwide, the uproar became louder. UNEF was derided for its '*communautarisme*' and its '*racialisme*' and for provoking '*la haine raciale*'. There were calls for it to be banned (*Le Monde*, 22 March 2021). Blanquer compared its practices to fascism and vowed to outlaw non-mixed meetings (*Le Figaro*, 19 March 2021). In September 2020, Pougetoux attended a parliamentary commission on the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on young people. Anne-Christine Lang, one of Macron's La République en Marche deputies, joined a walkout by Les Républicains representatives in protest at Pougetoux's presence. Her feminist, Republican principles meant she could not share a room with a woman wearing a hijab in the national assembly, '*le cœur battant de la démocratie où règnent les valeurs fondatrices de la République, dont la laïcité*' (*Libération*, 17 September 2020). As Rokhaya Diallo noted when the controversy first broke, what was playing out here

was 'a hunt for presumed Muslims, who have the audacity to make themselves heard' (*The New Statesman,* 24 May 2018).

Efforts to disqualify Muslim political actors intensified following the 10 November 2019 march against Islamophobia in Paris and the Black Lives Matter protests of summer 2020, protests that raised all kinds of uncomfortable questions about France's colonial legacy, issues of police violence and racism, white privilege, intersectionality and the right to self-organisation by oppressed minorities. Macron's response to all this was characterised by firmness but also a degree of obtuseness, giving rise to comparisons with Manuel Valls: '*[L'anti-racisme] ce combat noble, est dévoyé lorsqu'il se transforme en communautarisme, en réécriture haineuse ou fausse du passé. Ce combat est inacceptable lorsqu'il est récupéré par les séparatistes*' (*Libération*, 23 June 2020).

Expressions of solidarity with victims of police brutality or racist attacks, or efforts to understand racism as a political and structural phenomenon, rather than just a moral or individual problem, were met with various degrees of outcry. The 10 November 2019 march against Islamophobia had taken place in the wake of an attack by an 84-year-old former FN member who shot and wounded two Muslims at a mosque in Bayonne. Showing solidarity with the victims led to accusations of marching with the Muslim Brotherhood (Bruckert and Mahler, 2021). There was particular concern at the prospect of the radical left making common cause with currents associated with '*l'anti-racisme politique*' and the autonomous organisation of racialised groups. 'Non-mixed' meetings were disparaged as foreign imports, alien to the colour-blind universalism of France where 'institutional' or 'systemic' racism only existed in the minds of those who wanted to undermine the nation. Education minister Blanquer had already threatened the SUD education union in the Seine-Saint-Denis area with a defamation

case for talking about the issue of 'state racism' in a workshop (*Libération*, 21 November 2017). As far as he was concerned, such ideas came from elsewhere, '*d'un modèle de société qui n'est pas le nôtre*'. French society had proven too permeable to ideological currents that were wreaking havoc, notably in universities and in organisations like l'UNEF and La France Insoumise (some of whose leading members were present on the 10 November 2019 march). These currents were guilty of '*complicités intellectuelles du terrorisme*'. To illustrate his point Blanquer gave the example of '*l'islamo-gauchisme*', a term reeking with fetid overtones of the 1930s label, '*judéo-bolchévisme*'. The young man who had murdered the teacher Samuel Paty, he went on, had been conditioned by others, '*des auteurs intellectuels de cet attentat*', people like the members of those organisations the government had now outlawed (Europe 1, 22 October 2020).

Such outbursts can be seen as part of a generalised 'anti-woke' agenda propagated by right-wing conservatives worldwide, although there is a particular irony that notions like racialisation, whose development owes so much to the input of French thinkers like Fanon and Sartre, should be decried as foreign imports (Brun and Cosquer, 2022, 28). This outlook is in keeping with the mystification, underlined by Sarah Mazouz, whereby '*la République a en effect, dans la seconde moitié du XXe siècle, considéré que le racial, c'était les autres et en particulier les Etats-Unis*' (Mazouz, 2020, 22). Behind the bullish authoritarianism of the government's stance, then, was a degree of ignorance that suggested its position may also be informed by weakness and fear.

Islamophobia and state authoritarianism

The escalation of France's Islamophobic spiral in the twenty-first century is characterised by Jeremy Ahearne as a 'self-reinforcing process of bid and overbid' (Ahearne, 2014, 31-2). The emphasis on separatism during Macron's first term, and its institutionalisation via the 24 August 2021 'separatism' Law, signal a step change in this process, particularly with regard to what Reza Zia-Ebrahimi terms a dynamic of 'conspiratorial racialisation' (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2021, 157-9; Chekkat, 2022): 'the essentialization of a large and arguably diverse population into a monolithic group animated by only one will, that of dominating Europe and ultimately obliterating western civilization' (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2018, 319). In this way Macron's stigmatisation of a separatist enemy within finds an affiliation with the Great Replacement theory, part of the common currency of the far right. Macron's contribution to this spiral cannot be characterised as simply 'a choice made from political expediency' (Traverso, 2021). Islamophobic reaction, as Ugo Palheta argues, has been central to the twin dynamics of racism and authoritarianism that dominate contemporary French politics (Palheta, 2018). From the conscious re-appropriation of Republican secularism by the centre right following Chirac's 2002 election in order to fashion a 'new secularism' (Ahearne, 2014, 10-36), to the reports produced by the neoliberal Institut Montaigne urging greater state involvement in both the development of a French Islam (Institut Montaigne, 2016) and the emulation of Britain's Prevent agenda (Institut Montaigne, 2018, 587), Islamophobia has been pivotal to an unpopular neoliberal agenda that requires continual reinforcement of the French state's functions of security, surveillance and discipline.

The Macron phenomenon itself is the product of a longstanding predicament affecting France's dominant mainstream parties. For several decades, both the post-Gaullist right and the Socialist Party have been committed to a neoliberal economic outlook. But there has been a constant disconnect between the aims of each party leadership and those of its electorate. François

Hollande resolved this by simply jettisoning his electoral platform once in power, pushing through reforms by decree, like those liberalising the world of work. As Bruno Amable puts it, Hollande compensated for the lack of 'stable social support for such a project… by relaxing the democratic constraint'. Neoliberal reforms were imposed on a 'reluctant population' not through 'social dialogue' but with a reliance 'on tear gas, truncheons, and plastic bullets' (Amable, 2017, 239–248).

At first, Macron's 'neither left nor right' alternative appeared to offer the chance of consolidating what Amable and Palombarini identify as the 'bloc bourgeois', a stable electoral social base in pursuit of a neoliberal agenda, centred on the imperatives of privatisation and a reduction in labour costs (Amable and Palombarini, 2021). But Macron's aim of making France a nation that 'thinks and moves like a startup' (Brown, 2018, 62) proved difficult to achieve. Rising inequalities meant that he was soon confronted by the *gilets jaunes* movement, initially sparked by rising fuel costs, determined to resist government policy on questions of equality, tax and democracy. Yet when Macron proposed a national debate at the height of this conflict, he chose to push his separatism agenda, presenting *laïcité* ('*bousculée et devant des modes de vie qui créent des barrières, de la distance*') and immigration as relevant issues, despite them generating almost no attention from the protesters (*Le Monde*, 10 December 2018).

Islamophobia provides an effective distraction from the political impact of widening inequalities and rising poverty levels but its usefulness is not confined to this. As Amable argues, Macron's electoral base relies on two elements, structural neoliberal reform and 'identity-based societal issues' (Amable, 2022). Since neoliberal reforms tend to elicit little positive affiliation outside the elite circles catered for by think tanks like the Institut Montaigne,

the dramatisation and multiplication of Islamophobic episodes constitute an important counterpoint to the government's economic programme, to the extent that they may be seen as a defining feature both of Macron's 'startup nation' and of political competition more generally. Those who have rallied to Macron, from former Socialists like Collomb and Castaner to former Républicains like Darminin and Jean Castex, share not just an identification with free-market ideology but also a commitment to the kind of Islamophobic rhetoric and policy initiatives that, were they not government ministers, would otherwise be identified as 'populist' (see Brown and Mondon 2020 on the shortcomings of this label's usage). Islamophobic reaction is therefore embedded in the neoliberal project pursued by mainstream parties, a product of French elites (Hajjat and Mohammed, 2013).

As we have seen, a defining feature of *laïcité* is its imbrication with the state, whose role and function has mutated since the turn to neoliberalism in the early 1980s under Mitterrand (Fourcade-Gourinchas and Babb, 2002; Masquelier, 2020). One important aspect of the 'separatism' Law, expressed in the extension of the ban on the hijab, was therefore its attempt to reconcile the notion of state neutrality with the increasing provision of public services by private sector actors. As state actors relinquish influence over areas of the economy, their intolerant interpretation of state secularism becomes more pervasive. In an era of political disaffection and record electoral abstention, where governments risk losing status and authority, they must find ways to assert themselves. Since the state's role is central to Republican ideology, how can its status be protected in an era of deregulation and privatisation? It is being asserted through various inflections of authoritarianism, from police violence to the radicalisation of *laïcité*. As Murat Akan observes, 'A republic of values and "civility" is empowered over a republic of rights, procedures, and socializations as the state

shrinks its infrastructure, and expands with values and security into associational life' (Akan, 2021).

Conclusion

Moral panics over infringements of *laïcité* like the ones detailed above are not really about communitarianism or separatism or terrorism. Amid perpetual controversies over the relationship of ordinary Muslims to Islamist terror groups, successive French governments have cultivated relations with regimes known to have sustained them. Saudi Arabian state funding of Islamic State, Al-Qaeda or Al-Nosra has not interrupted France's bilateral defence agreement with the regime, now into its fifth decade (Endeweld, 2022, 71-96). Concerns about the relationship between the Qatari state and the Taliban or affiliates of Al-Qaeda have likewise had little bearing on relations between France and Qatar. The shrill voices alleging separatism in France's *quartiers populaires* appear indifferent to the most segregated and closed-off communities in France, the 'ghettos of Gotha', gated communities of the super-rich, areas of unparalleled social and ethnic homogeneity whose sociability is defined by the pursuit of '*l'entre-soi*' (Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot, 2007). The citing of the Great Replacement conspiracy theory as an inspiration for terror attacks in Buffalo, New York and Christchurch, New Zealand, along with the 2011 Brevik murders in Norway and further atrocities from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to El Paso, Texas, has not incited any particular concern from mainstream politicians in France and has certainly not impacted on the media profile of France's most high-profile champion of the white supremacist fantasy, Eric Zemmour.

'New' *laïcité* is very like old *laïcité*, 'an attempt to reform, reorganize and control Islam by unveiling Muslim women and policing Muslim men' (Meziane, 2021a). The relationship

between state secularism and Islamophobic violence has a long history in France, Egypt, Algeria and north-western Africa, as Meziane underlines, rendering it 'the ideal-type of the way in which race and Islamophobia work hand in hand' (Meziane, 2021a). The politics of denial that typify official repudiations of analytical categories like racialisation, whiteness or institutional racism are not characteristic of a state at ease with itself. Nor are the incantatory recitations of Republican secular orthodoxy, the crude imposition of disciplinary measures in its name seeking the political disqualification of Muslims, or the brandishing of terms like 'Islamo-leftism' at the first sight of solidarity with them. The overwrought reaction by French state actors to a gathering of up to 30 000 people in Paris on a November afternoon in 2019 indicates that they are fully aware, and thus somewhat apprehensive, of the fact that Muslims in France retain the capacity to defend their rights and to make common cause with others in the face of racism, authoritarianism and inequality.

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