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Tebaldi, Catherine, "Au Gamin de Paris: undoing civilization in a Paris bar" (2015). *CHESS Student Research Reports*. 13.
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Catherine Tebaldi

EDUC 870

Education and Migration

Au Gamin de Paris: undoing civilization in a Paris bar

Le gamin sticks out like a sore, nationalist thumb in the quartier de la *Goutte d'or*, a historically North African neighborhood in the north of Paris now a mix of West and north African markets and small shops, churches, mosques, and cafes. The vintage lettering and painted windows show "le gamin", the boy from the Aveyron and his family, rosy cheeked maidens and men with jaunty scarves leaning on wine barrels.

This micro-ethnographic work explores where Frenchness and difference is constructed and contested, a wine bar in a traditionally Muslim neighborhood. Bar goers challenge an understanding of French nationality and Muslim difference, as they "construct and deconstruct the world" around a cup of coffee, a glass of wine. Research in language, education, and identity can learn from this challenging and provocative language, as speakers offer new ways to construct, but also to confront and subvert, discourses about culture, nation and civilization.

Reac-Publicans

Reac-publican, or reactionary republican, names a shift in French political discourse, from Universal Republican values as a means of inclusion, to republican values as arrogant nationalism. This happened first on the right, most notably when Foreign Minister Claude Gueant noted, “not all societies are equal with respect to our republican values” of equality, brotherhood, and freedom (Le Monde 9/12/12). Universal values aren’t universal because they are shared, but because everyone is judged by them.

Reac-publicans position themselves as guardians of enlightenment values, the “public intellectuals”. One Immortal example is Alain Finkelkraut. A professor and member of the *Academie Française*, his scholarly work is given great official value to define the French Language and culture. In *l’identite malheureuse* (2013) he declares that Islam is not compatible with our values, the values connected to the western history and the history of ideas he teaches. He further contrasts Islam and French modernity in “*nous autres, les modernes*” (2005). These attacks on Islam follow his previous work on fears of social decline, *malaise dans la democratie* (1988), confirming a link between insecurity about French identity and post-colonial critiques of modernity’s universal values, or between French Identity and Muslim immigration.

Other Reac-Publicans, Gilles Kepel, Michel Onfray, and Oliver Roy, and describe Islam and immigration more generally as a clash of civilizations (Huntington 1993) within France’s borders. Roy describes what he sees as “Euroislam”(2003) fundamentally in conflict with secularism and sees the generations descended from immigration as part of an “al Qaeda youth movement” (2008). Kepel, specialist in the *banlieue* discusses the increasing fundamentalism of young people in on France’s urban peripheries. Portraying their social exclusion as imminent jihad, he

sees Islam alternately as a battle for minds, or as one sign of minorities fundamentally different values and inability to integrate (2014, 2006, 2004).

Yet these changes are also echoed on the Left, and the Socialist party's rightward shift towards securitarian nationalism. "La Gauche qui se droitise", the left transforming itself into the right, as one of my bar friends put it. Recent work by Mayanthi Fernando (2010, 2014) points out recent examples of this "carceral feminism" (Fernando 2014), in laws against veiling, invoking the concerns of the left for right wing political aims. Well known centrist intellectuals such as Elizabeth Badinter, discuss Islam as inherently anti-feminist (lemonde 3/4/16), a discourse only amplified by and left wing politicians such as the Minister for Women's comments equating women who wear the veil with pro-slavery African Americans (bbc 3/30/16).

These discourses portray France and her values as the heritage of the Enlightenment., a beacon of secular reason and freedom in a dark world. Islam, by contrast, is portrayed as a nightmare, the Muslim world at once uncultured and too cultural. Left and Right reduce cultural complexity to simple oppositions; French women are free, and Muslim women are oppressed. Muslim men are sexists and terrorists, French men are lovers and politicians. As both right and left caricature Islam, French Muslims are increasingly erased from official discourse – but loudly express themselves in "le discours du comptoir" bar counter discourse.

In this study I spent 3 months getting to know a bit of the lives and language of people who contradicted and mocked these oppositions. Bearded Muslim men drinking in a bar, bartenders

who were highly observant in both senses of that word, and French-Algerian women who smoke, drink, and curse – but also respect religion. They spend time in the most French of institutions – the sidewalk café, and use this space to both praise and parody French identity, mock and articulate their difference.

Methods

The data for this paper were taken from a larger ethnographic study conducted from January to April 2016 in Paris. For this study, methods were adapted from Carspecken's (1996) stages of critical micro-ethnographic research: primary record, preliminary data analysis, dialogical data generations, and cross site comparisons, and connections to social theory. Following Payne and Rocco's adaptations (2009) of Carspecken, I focused mainly on the micro-ethnographic analysis. However, I rather than focusing on single participants it was rather the bar itself that was the central focus of my observation. The bar was visited several times in the three-month period. I also visited the bar at different times. At different hours of the day I would note the changing composition, writing field notes as I drank coffee, or small brown beers – which the bartender offered me, saying, "its not every day you see a brunette with blue eyes". Nonsense, but I took the beer.

Informal interviews were recorded in a notebook during participant observation, supported by more formal semi-structured interviews. Interlocutors were my neighbors, and I spent several afternoons with them. Member checking with three participants was employed over several

meetings, in order for validity and confirmation of these hypotheses. All participants have had the opportunity to see my notebooks and discuss my project, and several remain in contact.

Limitations for this were many. These included that I am not a native speaker of French and speak neither Berber nor more Arabic than *mektoub* and *choukroun*, writing and thank you. My own presentation as a white, non-religious, member of *the petite bourgeoisie (pseudo)intellectuelle* also influenced both my perceptions and the information participants felt comfortable sharing. Last, this is a partial glimpse at only one particular place in a heterogeneous and shifting landscape. However, I think that the bar also reflects many similar spaces and the conversational practices may possibly offer broader applications to understandings of citizenship and civic participation.

The bar

It is important also to note that the bar, like the culture, is not a homogenous space. In a French cafe the bar in the back offers considerably cheaper coffee and beer, up to half as expensive as the inner space. This means that even in quite well off areas, counters serve as working class areas that welcome local tradesmen, students, and retirees for the price of about \$1.25.

Distinguished by activity as well as money, counters are more social spaces, where strangers are more likely to engage in conversation, while tables might be taken for couples, dinners, or silent reading. So in general the counter in the back will be a more working class space, and a noisier, more sociable. I use the term sociable to reflect Paul Manning's distinction from *The semiotics of drink and drinking* (2010), between social and sociable. Thee social as modern, hierarchically

ordered and ritualized – a fancy banquet or a well organized general assembly, while the sociable is post-modern and fluid – a cocktail hour or a late night conversation about the world. But I also use sociable to mean friendly and relaxed. The bar place where you can talk politics, unlike the dining room.

The physical working of the bar also represents more fluid and flexible relation to official discourses. While you might read your own book at the table, you shared newspapers at the bar. Asking to borrow one of the *journaux* placed on the bar might make you part of conversations ranging from the sycophantic to the cynical, from conspiracy to critical theory. If you are American, watch out for the days when Trump is on the cover! The cheap coffees at the counter, the open sociability of bar space, and the circulating newspapers created the conditions for an unlikely set of encounters, exchanges, and convergences.

In the following sections, I will briefly outline some of the characteristics of bar discourse, and offer a closer look at one conversation held on the terrace of this café. First I will outline three parts of bar talk; profanity, provocation, and parody, and examine how bar talk functions in the context of official and media discourses. Then I will look more closely at one particular conversation, to explore how these function to contest and construct identities.

Counter discourse

One of my interlocutors taught me the term for bar speech as “le discours du comptoir”, or counter discourse. Counter discourse was not entirely serious, but it touched on serious topics.

It varied, of course, from bar to bar and time to time, but shared certain commonalities: profanity, provocation, and parody. Profanity, though simple to recognize, served varied and complex functions from flirtation to expressing the erasure of a political voice. Provocation, or “la provoc”, expressed tensions between difference and solidarity. While parody allowed for or critical engagement with newspapers and television. This language allowed participants to “make and unmake the world” around the bar of a café, conversation that were an alternation between bold statements, nuanced and often contradictory details, and friendly speech to maintain communication channels, maintain order -- and order drinks.

Profanity

“Excuse moi le terme, mais on s’est fait niquer” says Di as he curls his hat up over his ears to reveal a flashing diamond earring and an even brighter smile. “Excuse the term, but we’ve been fucked” he says, referring to the “rebeus” the Franco-Maghrebins of this neighborhood. He describes how political discourse doesn’t even put their concerns “sur le tapis” on the table (lit. carpet).

He cursed the discourse of “the republic of merit”, the language that promised equality and brotherhood, but were unequally applied, “deux poids de mesure”, a double standard in schools and in laws. Against norms of discourse that politely erased his community from the political map, Di offered a few choice words. “In 1789, they made liberty, equality and fraternity for everyone – now they are saying “SHIT” we didn’t know there would also be black people”.

With this profanity the sense of the discourse shifted from a repetition of republican values to a

challenge to their inclusivity, quickly followed by the parodic “we didn’t know there would be black people”.

Not exclusively political, often profanity was used to share relatively lewd things about women (and I would imagine even more when I was not around). However, even in a sexual context, were words like “niquer” (fuck) and “pute” (whore) and “baiser” (screw) not always used to marginalize women, but were often used to subvert dominant ideals of femininity. At the end of my interview a beautiful woman walked by our table. Two men were using *le Francais de Moliere* (literally), to flirt about her – and to offer a stereotyped view of women. They started saying, “a woman’s greatest desire is to be beautiful, no, to inspire love. It’s not me its Moliere” another man, who rarely uses profanity, responded to this , “un peu vieux... C’est pas une pute, c’est une femme” – it’s not a whore, it’s a woman.

Profanity was also frequently used by women, particularly noticeable was the use of profanity by Brittany an older French-Algerian woman expressing her independence. Describing why she loves France, and believes in the Republic she declares “On peut fumer, on peut baiser, on peut picoler”, Brittany declares in a loving speech to French values –never mind equality and fraternity, here she can smoke, screw, and drink.

Provocation

Perhaps the most surprising element of Parisian bar discourse is provocation. Named ‘la provoc’ by my interlocutors, it involves calling out clearly transgressive statements about other members such as the lines I heard: “hey, you have a face like a terrorist” (tete de terroriste), or “you will

have to commit jihad if you want to go to heaven after serving all this wine”. While the response might be to tease the other about his weight, drinking habits, or ugly wife. Here participants acknowledge cultural stereotypes in the dominant discourses that equate Muslims to terrorists, distancing themselves from overly politically correct avoidances of these topics, perhaps presumed to accompany even stronger unvoiced stereotypes. One participant, Mussa, described it as being rather a masculine, working class, practice. Yet he gave a nod of approval I responded to comments, by an older man with 80 proof breath, that I’d be prettier without my glasses “you’d be prettier if you brushed your teeth”.

Provoc’s sociable transgression of norms expresses both a kind of solidarity, the idea that people in the bar can take a joke, or are up for a discussion. Yet it also acknowledges difference, and fears about difference, something that can not be taken for granted in a culture some characterize by “arrogant assimilationism” (Keaton 2005). At best, provocation allows people to acknowledge difference and mock stereotypes of it. Unsuccessful acts can bring reactions that range from mock to serious offense, but from my observations successful uses of provocation often served to defuse tensions and build cross- group friendships – as then the bartender told the English (and proud) woman next to me “all you Americans are the same”. She mocked back but bought us all drinks.

Brittany, described self deprecating *provic* as a particularly North African characteristic, something developed in these spaces and seen to be widely admired. Self- derisory humor was something that seemed to be appreciated across groups, and across genders, similar to provoc but more easily accepted. This might include using similar racial or cultural stereotypes and

applying them to yourself, mocking your own group, or laughingly countering provocation with self mocking as when one participant countered a provocative claim that he looked like a terrorist with the line “I tried to strap a bomb to my dog, but he didn’t want to wear it”. The whole bar laughed. Only his shaggy terrier did not join in, but sniffed the floor for stray snack crackers.

Parody

Pulling himself up straighter, taller, and putting on a slower voice Dinero starts to speak with a very manicured accent. “On ne mélange pas les torchons et les serviettes”. he explains, “you don’t mix tea towels and napkins”, putting on his best butler language in order to explain that the wealthy don’t want to mix their children with his. This old fashioned saying suggests both cultural conservatism, while the discussion of multiple types of napkins better suggests a bourgeois life than similar phrases about “on ne mélange pas les haricots et les petits pois. (Also, torchon is masculine and serviette feminine, adding gender to the mix of meanings) He makes his point about segregation, while making us laugh by miming a butler folding towels. Parody allowed bar talkers another way to bring in and comment on media representations and official discourses while being entertaining – Di’s parody and media commentary were important ways in which he shared feelings about modern France to someone who didn’t share his experience. Recent television documentaries about the banlieue and social mixing, news stories and legal decisions became part of his funny, ironic discourse. Parody allowed him to voice what he felt these were “really saying”, as when he repeated that the framers of the French constitution were cursing themselves because they didn’t anticipate that people of color would want rights.

He also used parody to share an understanding of educational inequalities, and a sense of being marginalized by local educational discourses. Parody lit up his description of middle class parents, who were striking because their local school was being closed and their students sent to school in his neighborhood, *la goutte d'or*. He stated that were reasonable to be upset at the lower quality of the school, and how he was pleased to have parents with more pull. But he ironically voiced the bourgeois parents' description of this shift not as going to a less well funded school, but as "going from civilization to monkeys". Using parody he expressed the difference between their polite discourses of cultural diversity, and their anger at educational mixing. Putting on a good bourgeois-bohemain air he declared, "Je suis pas raciste je mange du couscous". I'm not racist, I eat couscous.

One typical conversation

In the following conversation between Jake, Mussa, and Brittany I highlight aspects of bar talk and explore how they are used to navigate French-Algerian identity in a group of bicultural interlocutors. Jake is tall and thin, a white man from the island La Reunion. With his wire rimmed glasses and black turtleneck, he looks like an imagined 60's intellectual. His family origins are Russian, but he considers himself completely French. Mussa, who grew up in a tent city outside Paris, is a carpenter whose face is appropriately chiseled. He was born in France, but has a strong Algerian identity and is literate in Arabic. Brittany a thin, petite woman in her late 40s but looks 10 years younger – and enjoys it. Her father is Algerian and her mother is French. She also identifies as French, but her feelings on this subject are more conflicted.

First, the friendly and, at times, provocative atmosphere allowed the conversation to address topics that I may not have been able to hear in a more formal social setting. The topics ranged from family histories, which were complicated and often interracial and interreligious, to intercultural differences and perceptions, to their understandings of language and cultural identity, religion and terrorism. Jake animated and sparked the early discussion, beginning with his recent trip to Algeria but quickly getting into certain rituals including provocative statements about Arabic language and culture.

The conversation began in earnest with Jake's provocative statement that Arabic is also a language of colonization: "l'arabe c'est aussi une langue de colonization". This is more or less agreed to by the room, which includes many speakers of Berber, and fails to provoke, so he continues " je trouve ...c'est interessant que le francais est toujours la langue des universities" I think it's interesting that French is still (ie after colonization). This does not fail to irritate Mussa, who has studied Arabic in multiple settings, but it provokes little more than an eye roll. Jake tries one last time, declaring that many arabs weren't arabs because they lacked the genetic marker, as he read on a website Amazir.

This lights up the table. Even Brittany, whose own discussion of her identity often combines a reference to physical characteristics for Arab identity and cultural ones for French, doesn't allow this. She begins with that most damning of French sayings, "c'est pas normal", which goes a bit beyond the English "that's not normal". Mussa replies with a verbal slap, "etre berber, c'est parler berber". To be berber, is to speak berber. Provocative statements are followed by

reaction and then more nuanced and personal statements, in this case a discussion of how culture is also about lived experience and social norms, and a discussion of how particular words like “menteur” or liar, are interpreted differently in Arabic or French.

In the particular commentary I witnessed, profanity was most used by Brittany. Brittany uses profanity to express both her liberty, saying, she can baisser plein de mecs (screw a lot of men), and her love of France. Most shockingly, she says that after the November 13 attacks, “la marseillaise m'a foutu des frissons” a very vulgar way of saying the national anthem gave her shivers. By this I think she meant that after the attacks she felt more nationalist, and more love for her country – but she couches this in very particular casual language and uses the very familiar, lefty, term “facho” for fascist. As in, “this might sound a bit fascist, but I love France”.

It seemed she used it to signal both affinity and disaffinity for Frenchness at the same time – so that she could express her happiness and love of her country but also distance herself from polite rhetoric of republicanism or patriotism. Her love of France seemed confirmed when after some consideration took me aside and said, “France is the best country in the world, that you can write down,” and then lit up a cigarette. After watching this conversation I was inclined to agree.

Parody was first a topic of conversation – given the recent reactions in support of Charlie Hebdo and the charges of hate speech against the Muslim comedian Dieudonné. One table debated whether all groups were mocked equally. Di stated categorially that Dieudonné’s treatment showed the double standard. Talking about parody became talking about which groups had the right to express their opinions, and for marginalized voices to take on harmful double standards and express themselves.

Parody was also used within the conversation, transforming meanings and connotations of phrases. Parody or joking repetition was a way to shift the meanings of contested phrases without causing social awkwardness or hurting feelings. When Brittany said “you can’t compare cultures” to mean France was incomparably good, her interlocutor, Mussa, replied in a flat tone “you can’t compare cultures” to indicate a relativistic stance. He contradicted, or even corrected her, but allowed her to save face.

Political parody was brought in at the end of the conversation in a particularly meaningful way. Mussa was describing colonial history and his ties to Algeria to Jake. He declares, *La colonization etait une bonne chose...* beginning a slogan jokingly attributed to Sarkozy (and not out of character) he continues on: *Les americans ont noté les bombardements, tous qui etait rasé.* Colonisation was a good thing, for the Americans wanting to learn new military techniques. Though at first it seemed serious, this comment was a parody of recent political discourses, borrowing Sarkozy’s statement that colonization taught a lot to the colonized country to critique both French and American militarism.

After this exchange, and the failed instance of joking with Jake, Mussa underlines one basic premise of the bar discourse, saying he is “fils du colonisé”, son of the colonized, and that he has nothing to do with Sarkozy and other politicians who “sortent des phrases”, who unroll polite phrases from their teleprompters. Mussa marks his cultural and historical difference from political elites, as a fils du colonisé, and underlines the importance of discursive difference.

Conclusions

In the bar, French citizens of Algerian heritage found ways to balance and play with both of these identities – discussing and affirming cultural identity as Algerian while participating in the emblematic French institution of the café. Bar spaces and jokes offered both banal and shocking, callous and deeply meaningful conversations. Sometimes in the same moment. Each participant used elements of bar talk to create rapport and distinction – Brittany used profanity to both create familiarity and express her gender difference as an independent and outspoken woman. Mussa used parody to express his isolation from political discourse, and to soften Brittany’s harsher speech. Jake used provocation rudely, but also kindly to help an ethnographer start a conversation.

As Mussa said, “identity is a variable geometry”, sometimes strategically essentialist and sometimes rudely essentializing, sometimes ascribed and sometimes mockingly laughed off. All three expressed varied and fluid identities, as Algerian and as French, as Jewish or as Kabyle. Identities were seen as practices, languages, cultural gestures. Both republican ideals and colonial were a large part of my interlocutors’ self understanding. But they also rejected simple multicultural labels that ignored the flexible, hybrid, and conflictual identities constructed by my participants. They were not just French, they were Beur, Arabo-musulman, Rebeus, Franco-Algerian, and French as well.

Mussa noted that everyone lives Islam differently. He also points out that Franco-French identity, despite growing nationalism and fear, is not monolithic. LeRenard, the owner of the

bar, makes free couscous for the patrons on Thursdays in a continuation of the traditions of the French-Algerian Workers' cafes – and it is apparently fantastic.

Implications

Studies in education might benefit from ethnography of bars or other spaces beyond schools to see not only the dominant discourses, and the ways in which they construct the nation and its other, but how people's daily lives fit in within these discourses.. We need to see what people are doing with these official and media discourses, how they experience the identities that are attributed and the options they construct. What expectations and desires do participants have in this situation, and what linguistic and social tools do they have or need to realize their identities, desires, and differences? To better teach children, we need to hear the concerns of adult community members and respect the ways in which they negotiate and advance them

Ethnographic approaches to the understanding of identity, citizenship, and culture can also offer insights into education. In particular, they can help us problematize the teaching of culture and values by showing the variety, detail, and conflicting ways in which people experience and construct culture. A close, messy, ethnographic view allows us to bring lived culture into classroom education, helping us show the actual ways in which people construct identity and understand their belonging – as well as offering a richer variety of linguistic practices than the dictionary and dictation.

Provocative ideas, and perhaps even profanity are not going to be easily incorporated into curricula. But humor and parody, along with media commentary, should be. Beyond the jokes

and swears, the “jeux de mots” and “gros mots”, bar discourse has much to offer a classroom. In closely observing the ways in which people successfully negotiate difference, within themselves, between themselves and others, their culture and others’, we can better understand the social and linguistic skills students need to participate not only in a bar conversation but the active negotiation of identity and the respect of difference.

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Liv

Complicating culture, colonization

Brittany explained that despite being named after the country, she had a hard time being accepted as French because of her dark coloring. Yet she also didn't feel Algerian.

In Algeria when asked for her Papers: Why are you called this? If you are Algerian, why are you having a French name. Being a foreigner. In France, also, contradiction between name and appearance and dual nationalities.

Yet at the same time she advanced propositions that were sometimes frankly racist as when she asserted that France was the best country in the world, or made sweeping generalizations about Algerians.

Un truc j'adore chez eux c'est l'autoderision

Ils sont tres fatalistes

Ils sont tres genereux, hyper solidaire

(One thing I love in them is self-mocking, they are fatalist, generous, community oriented)

Then after describing them as having a particular series of cultural ideals as generous and fatalist, ideals not negative but also not too far from colonialist stereotypes of the Algerians. After broader generalizations about culture she would offer further problematic descriptions of the people as not having any culture because they didn't clean up their coffee cups. Culture meant not only broad characteristics but local habits, a "Geste"

While on the contrary, being French often meant having French habits such as "fumer, picoler, baisser plein de mecs" (smoke, drink, screw lots of men). Though few were so literal, many

described their secularism or their Frenchness in terms of drinking, visiting cafes, or interracial dating. While Algerian identities were described in terms of language, knowing Berber or Arabic, and having visited the place.

Relations between cultures also had connections to colonial histories. This included a defense of Algerian culture as having “suffered” or suffered both colonialism and fundamentalist (described as “les barbus”), but also a description of Algeria itself as a product of colonization or “Petits tribus qui se sont mélangés pas un envahissement”, seeming to understand cultural identities as part of contingent historical processes and power struggles. Even individual people were described as having “colonized minds”, when they were too assimilationist or individualist.

In sum, colonialism was used to explain cultural differences and defend against hegemonic portraits, but also figured in the stereotyped depictions of these cultures. Yet it also served as a powerful and cutting way to discuss the openness of minds.

Repetition (move this to CA?)

The final aspect, repetition, was effective at transforming meanings and indexicalities of phrases. So for example if one person said “you look like a terrorist” his interlocutor might have replied with a different tone to throw it back, politely interrogate a serious comment, or mock it with childlike insouciance. In the conversation I observe below, repetition was a common way to shift the meanings of contested phrases without causing social awkwardness or hurting feelings. For example, when one woman said “you can’t compare cultures” to mean France was incomparably good, her interlocutor replied in a flat tone “you can’t compare cultures” to

indicate a relativistic stance. He contradicted, or even corrected her, but allowed her to save face.

Conclusions:

. F says no, they do, but then switches to a discussion of the differences between jews and algerians. Says there are great differences between the two communities in terms of work ethics and culture. French people came here, they were successful she says, algerians weren't. Then she turns directly to me and says "la france est le meilleur pays du monde, ca tu peux marquer" France is the best country ever,