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‘Race’, Sexualities and the French Public Intellectual: an interview with Eric Fassin

Steve Garner and Eric Fassin

Introduction

‘What is sexual democracy ? Or rather, what is sexual democratisation ? In fact it’s certainly more accurate to think of it as a process. It is the extension of the democratic field, with the growing politicisation of the issues of gender and sexuality that the numerous current public controversies are revealing and encouraging. On one hand, far from being confined to the private sphere, sexual issues are increasingly being subjected to the same political demands as all the other social issues, whether it’s work or taxation, immigration or education. The norms of gender and sexuality are the objects of ever-increasing examination in the name of the values of freedom and equality (...)

On the other hand, since they have turned out to have political stakes, sexual issues now seem less and less natural, yet this is not the only content of the norms called into question in this process. The de-naturalisation of gender and sexuality that go hand in hand with democratisation are also altering the very status of norms, in other words, the way in which they are imposed on us. Far from retaining the status of evidence on which discussion is based, they are up for scrutiny’. Fassin (2006 : 125)

French sociologist Eric Fassin’s research and publications are in the fields of ‘race’, gender, and sexuality and their intersections in the USA and France. He is now based at the university of Paris 8-St. Denis, and the EHESS (Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Economie et Sciences Sociales), where he is a member of the IRIS research centre

(Interdisciplinary Research Institute on Social Issues), after many years at the Ecole Normale Supérieure. Fassin is also a contributing editor of American journal, *Public Culture*. His public intellectual work covers numerous speaking in contemporary issues, a blog (<http://blogs.mediapart.fr/blog/eric-fassin>), short articles in very popular outlets (such as television guides, etc.) publications. He is frequently interviewed or quoted in French print and radio media.

His work focuses on racialisation (especially, but not exclusively whiteness, and with a concentration on France and the USA), gender, sexuality, and the intersection of these ideas with nationalisms in today's Europe. That is, he views the multiple and overlapping sets of exclusions and inclusions based on sexuality, 'race', and gender as ways of understanding the new constructions of the nation. His published output includes: *L'inversion de la question homosexuelle* (2003) ; the collection *De la question sociale à la question raciale ? Représenter la société française* (2006)(co-edited with his brother, Didier); and 'La démocratie sexuelle et le conflit des civilisations' (2006), (from which the above quotation is drawn).

So what has his quote on the de-naturalisation of gender and sexualities, got to do with racialisation? What is the place for an interview with him in a special edition of a journal focused on the public sociology of 'race' and ethnicity? The thrust of Fassin's work is to tease out the distinctions between the natural and the social in terms of the political uses to which ideas are put. One of his principal claims is that the field of democracy –in which ideas and practices are in the social world and therefore capable of modification- is expanding at the expense of the “natural” world defined once and for all by nature, God, tradition, or even science. Thus, identities seen as previously in

the realm of the natural, such as ‘race’, gender, and sexuality (and by extension, nationality), are now in the spotlight of the social and political worlds. Those sets of ideas and people who wish to keep such identities totally or partially anchored in the natural world respond with hostility to the expansion of the democratic field.

At the same time, this democratic logic can be instrumentalised: the rhetoric of sexual democracy (equality between the sexes, sexual freedom) has been used recently to draw a line between “us” and “them” (Muslims, immigrants, etc.). The racialisation of European societies is thus justified in the name of a sexualised ‘clash of civilisations’.

From this perspective then, speaking explicitly about racialisation and whiteness, processes and statuses that can be historicised as ‘social’, rather than natural, elements of the social world that go-without-saying, is part of an agenda aimed at destabilising oppressive ideologies and sets of practices that assert an acceptance of the status quo.

In the French context, the promulgation of the dominant republican values of freedom, equality and brotherhood have in some ways stifled, or glossed over other discussions about social inequalities, and actually constructed the national conversations about immigration and citizenship in a unique way. Indeed, what the interview demonstrates is the enduring significance of national norms in terms of the ways that progressive discourse about oppressive systems and inequality is produced and countered: there is no universal template.

I first met Eric in 2009, when I was a Visiting Professor at Paris–Diderot University, and gave a seminar on his Masters module at the EHESS (Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales). When I returned to Paris in September 2010, I interviewed him, in

English specifically about his experiences of being a French intellectual working on 'race', gender and sexualities.

The interview format arose as more of a pragmatic, than reflexive methodological choice. I felt he had some things to say that the readership of a special issue on public sociology and 'race' would find interesting from an international comparative. Knowing that Eric was engaged on a number of projects however, it seemed unlikely that we would be able to write a joint article. So the interview became a one-off attempt to focus on his reflections about the overlapping roles of educator, translator of concepts, and publicly active intellectual in the context of discourse about national identity, 'race', gender, ethnicity and sexuality. France provides a different tradition from those of the US and the UK. Public opinion has been less sceptical of such interventions in France, and the media is more open to them. Moreover, published interviews with French intellectuals in a scholarly setting are an accepted format. Foucault for example, gave some between 1977 and 1984 that have appeared in collections and journals, while Baudrillard, Bourdieu and Badiou use or used them as means of presenting and commenting on their work and its relationship to contemporary events. It enables a focus on particular questions without the necessity of introducing topics via literature reviews, or the demand for the level of structure or coherence that a written article would require. These distinguishing features then are both the advantages and disadvantages of this type of interview.

Interview (18 September 2010)

What is a public intellectual?

SG I wonder if you could begin by telling me something about what being a public intellectual means in the French tradition—in the social sciences particularly.

EF Well, the first thing is that in French, people don't use the phrase 'public intellectual'. The word 'intellectuel' seems to include 'public'; I find this quite remarkable, particularly in contrast to the US. What it says is that the history of the intellectual has to do not just with the *profession* of intellectual, but also the *public role* of the intellectual. The term 'intellectual' of course goes back to the Dreyfus affair (1), and it was first used in a negative way, against the "dreyfusards," to dismiss those who used their academic legitimacy to speak out in the public sphere. Then the stigma was reversed by those who claimed to speak as public intellectuals and therefore as *intellectuels*. At the time, Durkheim himself actually wrote a text on this new figure.

That's the tradition, but there is a culturalist trap in this: we could think, because you're in France, then that's how it works for French academics. In fact, it's more complicated. Based on my experience, it is indeed possible to play on this legacy, both explicitly and implicitly. This tradition is available. But it doesn't mean that you can take it for granted: most academics are not *intellectuels*, and conversely, many *intellectuels* are not academics. Take Bernard-Henri Lévy as an archetypal figure: he is no academic. Even Elisabeth Badinter, or Alain Finkielkraut: despite their teaching positions, their books have no existence within French academia. These media figures do not rely on academic legitimacy: their public persona is primarily defined by the media (2).

However, it is not only because of the emergence of such media intellectuals that many French academics became very wary of the idea of the *intellectual*. Another reason is that many academics had already compromised their legitimacy, or so it was felt, by identifying with political causes, particularly during the Cold War. Once Marxism no fixed the intellectual horizon, many felt that politics had deprived them of their autonomy. Many academics, even (or perhaps especially) on the left, now felt that science was something that had to be preserved from this political contamination.

At the same time, while the generation that extends from Foucault to Derrida rejected the posture of the universal *intellectuel* (*à la Sartre*), they were still the heirs of a tradition. They tried to develop other ways to be an *intellectuel* (Foucault's version of the "specific intellectual", whose interventions are grounded in a specific professional competence, is a case in point). Think of Bourdieu's political interventions in the last decade of his life. I believe there is a feeling of responsibility that goes with that tradition.

I have been teaching at the *École normale supérieure* (where I had been trained in the 1980s) since 1994 (after teaching in the US for 7 years). This institution has a strong historical link with the tradition of the *intellectuel* – from Durkheim to Bourdieu, including Sartre, Foucault and Derrida (3). That certainly makes it easier to claim a role as a public intellectual, because of this historical imaginary – while trying to remain within the academic (rather than media) definition of the term, even when intervening in the media.

Different forms of engagement

SG While you can have academics and non-academics who can all be *intellectuels* in the French context, it seems to me that there is some kind of *de facto* hierarchy, in that some people can access mainstream media much more easily than others.

EF In addition to the distinction between academic intellectuals and media intellectuals, clearly, there is also a difference among academics. Not all play a role as intellectuals – far from it. Indeed, not all want to! This reluctance is sometimes fuelled by a perception that the media misrepresent or trivialize serious academic work. Conversely, many journalists feel that academics are generally unable to address a wider audience; they fear that they cannot speak or write as simply as their media requires – and thus tend to favour a few, the “usual suspects” of intellectual life. The level of public exposure does not reflect an academic hierarchy – nor does it reverse it. All kinds of social factors play a role (including residence: the privilege of Parisians is perhaps the most important!).

The place devoted to intellectuals in the media varies considerably: I feel that while it has receded on television, and while a left-of-centre mainstream magazine like *Le Nouvel Observateur* does not play the intellectual role it did in the 1970s, the importance of “op-ed” pages in *Libération* or *Le Monde* may have increased. A new media like *Mediapart*, the news website, created in 2008 is interesting in this respect (<http://www.mediapart.fr/>). It has been the key to opening up the Woerth-Bettencourt scandal (4), which is not exactly accidental: this media is funded exclusively through

subscriptions. At the same time, the journalists have tried to include many intellectuals – not just through interviews, but also by hosting blogs (including mine).

The flexibility of the internet has made it possible for *Mediapart* to work closely with intellectuals, for example in publicizing events and publishing oral or written interventions – for example, in reaction against Sarkozy’s policies against the Roma (see my own contribution: <http://www.mediapart.fr/club/blog/eric-fassin/120910/pourquoi-les-roms>, also available in English: <http://theoryculturesociety.blogspot.com/2010/10/eric-fassin-why-roma.html>). I think it’s significant that it should be an independent, and until recently, slightly marginal media that accords more importance to intellectuals in a more serious sense. Most mainstream media tend to prefer the kinds of intellectuals that most academics don’t read. Of course, I hope that’s not the whole truth – since I happen to have regular access to mainstream media...

SG In terms of your own experiences of trying to interact with audiences outside academia, what kind of ‘public’ is it that you actually encounter? And what is your assessment of how this actually works? Does it impact on anyone? How can we tell?

EF Do public interventions matter? Clearly, if I didn’t think so, I wouldn’t do it – it takes too much time and distracts too much energy to pursue if one feels it’s useless.

Now, while the media interventions may constitute the most visible part of my public engagement, it’s only one part! For example, my interventions in favour of the creation of the PaCS (Civil Unions for both same-sex and different-sex couples, introduced in

1999) were not limited to newspapers, radio, or television. They ranged from auditions in the National Assembly to talks for gay and lesbian associations in small towns, debates with Freemasons and Church officials, etc. In the same way, I have had a chance to discuss my analyses of racial issues, or immigration, beyond the media and political institutions, “on the ground”. I want to emphasize this, because there is a risk that we might conflate the public sphere with the media.

Before discussing the impact I hope to have, I want to discuss the impact this form of public intervention has on me. I don’t feel that I just pass on knowledge that exists prior to its expression in the media. I am not simply “vulgarising” my work. Many of my ideas are developed in this effort to explain and convince: formulating them transforms them. Addressing various audiences also means trying to understand what they have in mind, and adapting to these different settings. My public interventions are an integral part of my work. They don’t necessarily follow it. They change its course. For example, my academic work on immigration follows my political work.

Now, back to your question: do such public interventions have an impact – how, and on whom? It’s hard to tell – the risk is either to overestimate, or to underestimate this impact (or both!). Of course, I don’t think that interviews or op-eds change the world. However, I believe that they may provide a vocabulary for those who want to change it. I have seen this on all the issues I have engaged with as a public intellectual: people can appropriate what you say, the words you use, the arguments, the examples. Politics is about defining the terms of an issue. Public interventions help introduce new terms – new ways of thinking about this. When I write in *Libération* about “blanchité” (*whiteness*), I believe it helps disseminate this term which is new in French. The fact

that it's unfamiliar makes readers stop and think. We saw that with "race" after the publication of our collective volume on the "racial question": the word becomes a tool, a weapon that others can appropriate.

Now, there is always a risk of misunderstanding, which explains why many colleagues are reluctant to engage in public discussions. But perhaps it is best to address this risk through more interventions. And misunderstandings also happen within academia. For example, when sociologist Hugues Lagrange's essay on the "denial of cultures" was published in September 2010 (6), I was shocked that the press assumed a convergence between his argument about culture and the ones Didier and I had earlier developed about race. But I then realized that Lagrange himself referred to our book in the first pages of his own. Our critiques of his essay, in the press (*Libération*, *Le Monde*, *Mediapart*, etc.), thus helped correct the record before we had a chance to do so in academic journals.

The Specificities of 'Race' as a Public Topic in France: 1989

SG So moving on then specifically to talking about 'race' in the French context, I wonder if you could give me what you think are the most important elements of the history of 'race' as a public topic, and then some of your experiences as being an intellectual who talks about 'race' in public in France? I ask you that because it has a different history in Britain and America.

EF On the one hand, the rejection of the language of race after World War Two is not specific to France: Nazism had made race taboo. But at the same time, race was at

work, very explicitly, very crudely, in the Empire. We don't do race in France? This political fantasy was inseparable from the racialisation of the colonial world. Clearly, the idea that the Republic has always been colour-blind is just an illusion.

The 1980s is the period when this Republican mythology was restored. On the one hand, it was then erected against a declining Marxist vision of society: there are no classes, citizens are just abstract individuals. On the other hand, it was presented as the best protection against the return of racism, as the *Front national (FN)* rose to prominence: Republican universalism against a racialised France. In this logic, there were only two categories: not the working class and the bourgeoisie, nor Arabs and Whites – but French citizens, and foreigners.

This Republican version crystallized in 1989, in the first *affaire du foulard* (headscarf controversy). On the one hand, this polemic was a symptom of the racialisation of France: religion had already become a way to talk, not only about immigrants, but also about their descendants, and it concerned schools. On the other hand, the reaction was colour-blind universalism, with a liberal distinction between public and private spheres. Religion, just like gender, sexuality, or race, was to remain a private matter.

This Republican tradition that (allegedly) defined the French nation stood in stark contrast to “America”. This figure, in French public discourse, then functioned as a mirror: “America”, according to French Republicans, was a fragmented, ghettoized nation, torn apart by identity politics – whether in terms of gender, sexuality, or race. The controversy about “political correctness” was imported into France by people like anti-Marxist historian François Furet and other proponents of the republican model in order

to fuel French fears of the “tyranny of minorities” that Americanization allegedly entailed.

But this import changed the nature of the issue: while in the U.S., this polemic divided people into at least two groups, in France, it was nationalized – with “us” (French universalists) and “them” (American differentialists). As a consequence, it was apparently depoliticized: left-wing newspapers like *Libération* or magazines like *Le Nouvel Observateur* glorified neo-conservatives like Dinesh D’Souza or Allan Bloom for their critique of “p.c.”

To summarize this: 1989 is a turning point. Just as race was becoming a defining issue within French society, at the same time, it became unthinkable. The colonial and postcolonial issue of race was left out of the *Lieux de mémoire*, a seven-volume paean to the Republic elaborated by historian Pierre Nora (1984, 1987, 1992) ; it was considered a foreign notion – an American one. This is why it is not surprising that “race” should have returned, at least in academic circles, via scholars who have (also) worked on the US – such as Daniel Sabbagh (who has worked on affirmative action in American Supreme Court decisions), Pap Ndiaye (who was an Americanist before eventually writing his book on *La condition noire* (2008), or myself (7).

SG Yes you remind me of the LA riots, which took place at the time when I was living in France. One of the strongest responses to those riots in the French media seemed to be ‘look what happens when you talk about ‘race’ and identity politics – this is the apocalypse that we have to avert by avoiding talking about ‘race’.

EF This is an argument I was constantly confronted with at the time. I could write about race, as long as it was about the United States (see for example the dossier on “L’Amérique en noir et blanc”, in the journal *Esprit*, in March 1996). Any attempt to introduce race (and the same applied to gender) in the French context was immediately denounced as a form of Americanization, thus only reinforcing the legitimacy of the Republican rhetoric erected in opposition to “multiculturalism”. To raise the question of race, as a Frenchman, was thus to be exposed to a suspicion of national betrayal.

But we have to be careful not to get trapped in such culturalism. We should not mistake this rhetoric of the nation for its true logic. We must not assume that France is inherently “Republican,” which is what Republicans would like us to believe. Otherwise, things could not change – whereas they do. At the end of the 1990s, the Republican rhetoric was running out of steam, though at first not so much on racial, but rather on sexual issues – with the public debates on *PaCS* (and beyond, same-sex marriage and queer families) and, in parallel, on *parité* (a law on the equal participation of men and women in politics). Both controversies framed sexual politics in universalistic terms – equality. Thus, they proved that minority politics need not be identity politics. The alternative between “universalism” and “differentialism”, French Republicanism and American “communautarisme”, just fell apart. Of course, this was sexual politics; but it paved the way for the new racial politics of the 2000s.

The significance of 2005

In racial politics, 2005 was a turning point. No one could ignore the racial dimensions of the riots that lasted three weeks in November of that year. But in some ways, this event

made visible the fact that the ground had already shifted. The terms in which the urban violence was discussed were new: even the then-President Chirac talked, not of immigration and integration, but of discrimination, a discourse that had gained prominence precisely in the late 1990s.

Conversely, the riots shed a racial light on many things that happened that year – from the postcolonial politics of the February law aimed at imposing a “positive” reading of colonial history in schools, to the demonstration of the reality of racial discrimination through a series of fires whose victims were poor Blacks. At the same time, there were also new minority mobilizations, from the launch of the *Indigènes de la République* (“Natives of the Republic”, *i.e.* French citizens who refused to be treated as colonial subjects in today’s France), a few weeks before the law on colonisation, to the creation of the *CRAN* (Representative Council of Black Associations), precisely at the time of the riots (8).

This climate made it possible for someone like Didier, my brother, who had focused on issues of immigration, to shift to questions of race (*i.e.* not so much foreigners, but French citizens); and for myself, who had been working on race, but mostly in the context of the United States to apply these reflections to France: the unthinkable was becoming “good to think” (Fassin, 1999).

Just before the riots, we organized two conferences – the first on “races and racism” (at ENS, in February 2005), and the second on “racial discrimination and affirmative action” (at EHESS, in October 2005), under the general title “De la question sociale à la question raciale?” which became the title of our collective volume a year later. I am not trying to

suggest that we were prescient, but rather that the ground had already shifted – though it remained to be understood. And the other way around, the riots helped the reception of our book: many could feel that it was time to find ways to talk about race.

A personal memory: when Didier and I discussed the title, we ummed and aahed, and finally decided not to have scare quotes around the word racial; it was still a shocking, or at least a suspect term. At the time, it was not an easy decision; but when the book was published, it soon became obvious that it made more sense, precisely in the context of the question we were raising: “From social to racial issues?” Or: “From class to race?”

The vocabulary had changed: before 2005, it was difficult to talk about race without being accused of racism. It was not appropriate to talk about “Noirs”; the English word “Black” served as a euphemism, as it seemed to have only cultural connotations. All of a sudden, the Black movement meant that it became possible to talk about Blacks (“Noirs”), not from a racist, but from an antiracist point of view.

This new racial language had been prepared by discussions about so-called “visible minorities”. However, it is true that it focused on Blacks, rather than Maghrebins: this, I think, reveals the shift from the paradigm of immigration to the paradigm of race. But the collapse of “colour-blindness” is not just about Blacks. Whites also appear in 2005 – with a newspaper article, followed by a manifesto against “anti-White racism”! The new racial language helps confront this new reality – a France in black and white.

Anti-racisms

The emergence of this new racial paradigm was anything but consensual – even or especially among anti-racists. It actually revealed a major split between two versions of anti-racism. The first developed in the 1980s, against the background of a rising National Front. Among antiracists, the dividing line was then between multiculturalist recognition of difference, and Republican universalism.

But the rapid shift in the position of the association *SOS-Racisme* -from the former to the latter- also shows that this opposition relied on shared assumptions: the problem, for antiracists, was not race; it was racism, and fighting racism meant fighting racists. On the one hand, this implied that racism was primarily an ideology; on the other hand, it was just an illusion: get rid of racism, and there is no such thing as race.

Starting at the end of the 1990s, the terms of the discussion shift; the problem is not just racist ideas any longer; it is also racial discrimination. The problem is not just the National Front; it's French society. It is structural, rather than ideological; systemic, rather than individual. This has consequences not just on the representation of racism, but also of race. For anti-racists in the 1980s, the victims of racism were not supposed to be “different”, as race had no meaning – except for racists.

In the 2000s, race was rehabilitated by the new anti-racism. Think of the Black movement: for the CRAN, who is Black? Someone who is treated by society as a Black person. Blacks are not a group defined by a common culture, or a common origin. What Blacks have in common is the experience of racial discrimination as Blacks. It is not just a

political starting point: it defines an identity. Race is not *just* an illusion; systemic discrimination contributes to the definition of racialised subjects. Underneath, we're all the same. But we cannot pretend we all have the same experiences; and these experiences matter. They define our subjectivities.

This tension between two paradigms is, I think, what explains the intensity of the controversy among anti-racist concerning so-called "racial statistics" (9): establishing racial categories is seen as a racist gesture by those who adhere to the older paradigm (ie. that races do not exist), and as an anti-racist strategy by those who are sympathetic to the more recent paradigm (ie. subjects are already racialised).

Public Responses to Public Interventions

SG So when you go out, I'm particularly interested in public meetings for example, and you address these types of issues, what types of response do you get from the audience?

EF It depends! That's the easy but accurate answer. Simply put, it's certainly not impossible to talk about 'race' in France today, but it's not comfortable. And that may be a good thing after all: in the US, there is a risk that race may be taken for granted, and thus not questioned. It is safer that it should remain problematic: we have to think about this category as we use it. The French context may thus be helpful, in a paradoxical way. I expect *a priori* suspicion: is he a racist? Or at least is he fuelling racism? This prevents me from the peril of feeling comfortable when talking about race...

Making frequent public interventions has forced me to adapt, and take into account the reactions I have encountered. For example, Didier insisted on using the term ‘racialisation’ rather than ‘race’, and I’ve come to agree with him: it helps avoid certain misunderstandings: saying ‘racialisation’ helps people understand that it’s not a rehabilitation of race in a racist sense. For the same reason, I’m generally careful to insist on “whiteness”, rather than “Whites”. It is a way to avoid the risk of implying the existence of a substance behind the substantive. Language matters.

I do believe that if you’re careful, you can be heard – otherwise, of course, I would not try. For example, the distinction I have insisted on between “minorities”, defined by the experience of discrimination, and “communities”, defined by a common culture or origin, has been adopted by many – within academia, and outside as well. Again, part of our job is to provide concepts – *i.e.* a language with which to work – both for social scientists and for activists.

How do people feel when I talk about race (or racialisation)? There are age differences (younger generations are less reluctant); political differences (the most resistance generally comes from the left); but also... racial differences. To put it simply, Blacks are the most likely to embrace the language of race – much more easily than Maghrebins. Probably most Blacks feel that they cannot escape race, whereas Arabs or Berbers still hope to. And conversely, the former may think that they can use this language in a way that will benefit them, while the latter, based on their experience, do not believe it: hence perhaps the fact that there is no Maghrebin equivalent of the *CRAN*.

The most hostility I have encountered comes from Whites. My interpretation is simple: whereas non-Whites have always known that they were exposed to racism and racial discrimination, and thus have always known that they were racialised subjects, the privilege of whiteness is that you can ignore that racialisation is not just about “them” (racialised others), but also about “us”. This is why I insist on talking about whiteness. I hope to dispel the illusion that the rising significance of race in France only affects others.

Responses within the Academy

Within academia, there are at least two paradoxes. The first one is the resistance encountered on the left: when the heirs of Marxism converge with the neo-Republicans to oppose race talk, they forget their differences. Many argue that the new racial paradigm has developed at the expense of the older, class paradigm. Well, historically, that is simply not true. It’s the Republican paradigm that was developed in the 1980s in explicit opposition to Marxism. And in the late 1990s, the return of race is parallel to the return of class in public debate. Our 2006 volume did *not* argue that race replaced (or even less should replace) class: we concluded with a defence of complexity, that is of an approach that would pay attention to the articulations *between* class and race (and beyond that, gender and sexuality). There are no scare quotes in the title, but there is definitely a question mark!

The second paradox is that some of the most vocal opponents to this new race talk, especially during the polemic on racial statistics, have been specialists on Africa and the Caribbean. Now, these are societies in which people certainly don’t hesitate to talk

about Whites and Blacks, or even different shades of colour. How come these scholars were the most hostile to the very categories that they must hear and use constantly while conducting fieldwork? My hypothesis is precisely that they draw a sharp distinction between here and there – metropolitan France and the (post)colonial world, because they want to preserve this difference (race there, not here). It's one thing to be white when conducting fieldwork far from France; it's another to realize that you're still white when you return home.

This, I think, is important: the refusal to repatriate these racial categories can be understood as a sign of the personal costs involved in naming race, for all concerned – including, if not especially, Whites, who lose the luxury of ignoring their own position in a racialised society. I would add that there is another dimension specific to social scientists. As academics, it is tempting to entertain the illusion that we embody disembodied positions, that we are the voice of universal reason, and thus refuse the idea that knowledge is inevitably situated. This is true of academics, just as it is of *intellectuels*. We fancy ourselves, in Karl Mannheim's words, as “free-floating”, above the social world even as we study it. This privilege is what we lose when it is revealed as an illusion by discussions of race – and more generally of minority issues (including gender and sexuality). Renouncing colour-blindness means renouncing the blindness to one's own position in a racialised society.

‘Race’ and Sexualities: common and distinguishing features of public engagement

SG So do you think there are some common points with the work that you do on gender and sexuality? When you reflect on it, what are the differences and similarities in the ways that you address these as public issues?

EF Indeed, there are similarities. First, the chronology I just sketched about racial issues overlaps with that of sexual issues. 1989 is a turning point, not just for race, but also for sex: after all, the recurrent ‘veil controversies’ that started up have to do with the racialisation of immigrants through the prism of gender. Republican rhetoric relegates both sex and race to the private sphere, in order to define the political subject of citizenship, in universalistic terms, as an abstract individual. In this discursive regime, race was taboo – but gender was also presented as alien to our national culture, and thus untranslatable: the word remained in English (gender, not ‘genre’), to denounce it as an Americanism. Republicans feared that the politicization of race, gender, and sexuality, all contributed to a fragmentation of the nation.

The parallel continues in the late 1990s: the new politics of *PaCS* and *parité* helped introduce the new politics of race, sexual minorities leading the way for racial minorities. But parallels eventually crossed, or even clashed, as the arguments about national singularity, if not exceptionalism, dissolved, giving way to new ones about democracy: after 9/11, Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris (2003) argued that the “true clash of civilisations”, first announced a decade earlier by Samuel Huntington, was *sexual*.

The experience of the late 1990s first led me to formulate a concept that has become central in my work: sexual democracy. What I then had to take into account, in the 2000s, was the instrumentalization of sexual democracy in the rhetoric of the (sexual) “clash of civilisations”.

Sexual Democracy

SG Before you expand on this, could you just go into the work that you’re doing about homosexuality, and ‘sexual democracy’, a little bit more -for those who don’t know your work?

EF I was involved both politically and academically in the debates on PaCS, which were at least as much about same-sex marriage and queer families. I tried to understand the debates, and especially the virulent resistance the bill encountered. Many, including on the left, rose in opposition to these new rights. But in contrast to the US, the opponents insisted that they were not homophobic. So, why did they care? They felt that what they called the “anthropological structures” of society were at stake. Hence their defence of the “symbolic order” (a term borrowed from psychoanalysis) as a norm that transcends history and politics.

What did that mean? Everyone agreed then, regardless of the various positions on *PaCS* and gay marriage, that we live in democratic societies – meaning, not that liberty and equality prevail, of course, but that norms and laws are defined by ourselves, not by God, Nature, Tradition, or even Science. They are immanent, not transcendent. The only question that remains is: are there limits to this democratic logic? Should

everything be defined by ourselves, or should certain things – such as marriage and the family – be off limits? Is everything historical, political, democratic? Or are there exceptions? Is there a transcendent definition of gender and sexuality, or not? What are, if any, the boundaries of democracy?

We live in a regime of sexual democracy – again, not in the sense that liberty and equality are triumphant, but that the laws and norms of gender and sexuality are perceived as immanent, not transcendent; defined by us, not from above. It does not mean everyone agrees: for example, the Vatican obviously rejects this logic. But the Pope's pronouncements against gay marriage, or against the concept of gender, only confirm its prevalence: in order to protest, the Catholic Church has to enter the fray, and offer what inevitably appears as one argument among others. The Pope thus joins the democratic logic in order to denounce it.

Why should the Vatican care about this? And why do religions grant so much importance to sex today? My answer is: that's because sex has become the last resort for transcendence. It is on the sexual front that the last battles are being fought against this extension of the democratic logic. If even sex ceases to be perceived as natural, and it becomes historical, if it is no longer conceptualised as merely pre-political, but as fully political, then, nothing escapes the democratic logic of immanence. Everything is up for definition.

What is interesting is that the same type of argument is found in a secular context –among left-wing intellectuals in France also. The sacralisation of sex can thus be understood not only as a religious logic, but more importantly as a reaction against the logic of

democratization in the sense I have suggested. It is an attempt at preserving a natural foundation of society from the historicisation of norms.

The “Sexual Clash of Civilizations”

Now, let’s return to our last decade. After 9/11, things turn around. In France, you don’t hear the left opposing sexual democracy any longer. Now, even conservatives celebrate sexual democracy – sexual freedom and equality between the sexes! How come?

Take one example: when Nicolas Sarkozy ran for president in 2007, he announced the creation of a ministry of immigration and national identity in order to woo National Front voters. Not surprisingly, this caused an uproar: it reminded many, especially on the left, of Vichy! Sarkozy’s response was interesting: national identity, he argued, has nothing to do with race or ethnicity; it’s about values – Republican values. But he mentioned only one: “in France, women are free.” He even included the right to abortion among the values that define national identity – quite a reversal for conservatives!

This illustrates clearly what is at stake: sexual democracy is now instrumentalised to elaborate the distinction between “us” and “them.” As the recent debates on the *hijab* and the *niqab* demonstrate, far from rejecting sexual politics, as they did twenty years ago, conservative Republicans now make it the centrepiece of their anti-immigrant discourse. It is as if they had all become secular feminists!

This discursive shift has consequences in the real world: for example, in the “contracts” immigrants are required to sign with the French state, or when foreign Muslims (both men and women!) are denied French citizenship on account of their rejection of equality between the sexes. And while it is presented as a defining feature of national identity, this new discourse is not specific to France. It is to be found throughout Europe, especially in the Netherlands (after Pim Fortuyn, from Theo Van Gogh to Geert Wilders).

Sexual democracy has thus become a double-edged sword. My work now tries to disentangle this rhetoric from the logic of sexual democracy – *i.e.* to distinguish between a normative approach, and a critical one. It is this historical conjuncture that we need to understand, and overcome. There is no necessary opposition between racial and sexual politics. On the contrary, I believe (as Colette Guillaumin (1992) has shown in her work, and as Elsa Dorlin (2006) makes clear in her genealogy of the French nation) that the same logic of denaturalisation that applies to sex can also apply to race. That is why I situate my work in both fields in the same theoretical framework. Whether I talk about sex or race, it’s always about democracy.

Today, in France, and in much of Europe, gender sounds “modern”. What about race? Sarkozy first tried to play race as a modern card, when he tried to confuse the left by practicing a kind of triangulation. In 2004, he was a multiculturalist; he wanted to organize Islam in the *banlieues* (in order to control them), and advocated affirmative action in order to promote diversity. He progressively abandoned this pretence of modernity to go back to old-fashioned anti-immigrant rhetoric.

What is there that still distinguishes the French president from the extreme right? This claim of “sexual democracy” – at least until Marine Le Pen started imitating Dutch populists by defending women and gays (even Jews!) against immigrants and their children... The alibi of sexual democracy often works. Dutch sociologist Paul Schnabel insists that Geert Wilders cannot be classified on the extreme right, since he is neither homophobic nor sexist – not even anti-Semitic. And in France, while Hugues Lagrange can claim to break a taboo when he studies the correlation between crime and immigration, it becomes more difficult to denounce the racist implications of his culturalist argument when he presents himself as a defender of women’s rights combating polygamy.

Reflections on intervening in discourse on sexuality and ‘race’

SG So when you speak in public on the sociology of gay marriage for example, are your experiences particularly different from when you do so on ‘race’? Is there more or less hostility?

EF Well, there are ups and downs. In 1997, the level of hostility against gay marriage was incredible – and it has become difficult to remember, now that it’s no big deal. It *was* a big deal at the time. By comparison, race seemed easy. Still, ten years later, in 2007, the tensions were very high during the debate on racial statistics – but they have already somewhat abated.

There is another element that differentiates them, and it has to do with whom I am. Apparently, my sexual orientation does not show on my face. Obviously, race works differently – just like sex: it shows. I have dealt with it in symmetrical fashion: I never

give any indication about my sexual orientation in public; while I often manage to make one reference, however oblique, to my being white (and male). The logic may seem paradoxical: why “come out” as white, and male, given that it’s visible? I think that, in the French context, this does break a taboo. The fact that it shows makes it possible never to mention it. It’s precisely because color is visible that it’s usually not named – and thus made invisible.

These two opposite strategies converge: in both cases, I feel they are the best way to make people uncomfortable – because they don’t know who I am (in terms of sexual orientation), or because I say whom I am (in terms of race or gender). This discomfort is not just reserved to my audience; it also puts me in a rather uncomfortable spot. But I tend to think that these issues should never become comfortable for those who address them – at least when they are in my position.

SG And I guess, from my own experience, it enables you to address an audience in a particular way that you couldn’t if you were a person of colour.

EF Indeed. Working on minority issues, and not belonging to a minority, generally makes it easier to address “majority” audiences. I am not suspected of representing a particular group (and I have seldom felt that I was rejected as a race – or gender – traitor). As a White male, paradoxically, but logically, it is easier to be heard when you try to make an argument about minorities in universalistic terms. The privilege thus extends even to these issues. I find this true both when I talk about race, and when I talk about gender.

What about “minority” audiences? Allies from majority groups are rare enough that I have usually been welcomed, even more so, I feel, than if I had belonged to these groups. But while I used to marvel at its relative absence, the logic of identity politics has started gaining ground in the last few years. My sexual orientation, my gender, my colour have become occasional targets. Despite these occurrences, though, I would still argue that, contrary to what many think, on the whole, it is easier to work on minority issues when you don’t belong to a minority category. I’m aware that it’s not fair, but at least I wish to acknowledge it. My concern is not to feel guilty about it, but to use this privilege as best I can, in a productive way – both intellectually and politically.

* All translations and notes provided are the author’s

Notes

1 The Dreyfus Affair. Case of a French Jewish military officer, Alfred Dreyfus, who was falsely accused and imprisoned for espionage in 1894. The military discovered the true culprit but exonerated him and continued to punish Dreyfus. The case split French intellectuals into two camps (Dreyfusards and anti-dreyfusards). This was a turning point in French public intellectual culture, and was the moment when Emile Zola published his article ‘J’accuse’. Dreyfus was later cleared.

2 All of these are high-profile media figures. While all of them publish books, write for newspapers and make television appearances, Finkelkraut and Badinter also teach at the prestigious Ecole Polytechnique.

3 The Ecole Normale Supérieure is a prestigious *grande école* (the elite element of the French post-secondary education system), originally for teacher training. Alumni include Bergson, Sartre, Pasteur, Balibar, Althusser, Derrida and Foucault.

4 A 2010 political scandal to do with tax evasion and corruption involving the very wealthy Liliane Bettencourt and government minister Eric Woerth.

5 *Pacte Civil de Solidarité*: a French official document attesting that a given couple are partners. The PaCS is equally applicable to same-sex couples, and accords rights and responsibilities to both partners.

6 Hugues Lagrange, a researcher in the French state research corps, CNRS, published a book in September 2010 (*Le Déni des cultures*). It is a statistical study in which he attributes the educational failure of African-origin boys in France to the deficiency of family structures (including both single mothers and polygamy) and cultural factors. Lagrange, a specialist in youth culture and delinquency, also claims that political debate deliberately avoids tackling culture as an issue in educational success and failure. Well-known journalist Luc Bronner published a laudatory article on Lagrange's theory in the broadsheet *Le Monde* (14 September 2010), which is referred to by Eric later in this interview. Indeed, Eric later posted a blog directly critiquing Lagrange's study: <http://blogs.mediapart.fr/blog/eric-fassin/041010/polygamie-le-point-et-la-fabrication-sociologico-mediatique-d-une-paniq>

There is a collection of short responses to Lagrange's work from other French sociologists, in French, including Dider and Eric Fassin's article in *Le Monde* (published 30 September 2010) accessible through the website of sociologist Laurent Mucchielli: <http://www.laurent-mucchielli.org/index.php?post/2010/10/05/D%C3%A9ni-des-cultures-ou-retour-d-un-culturalisme-d%C3%A9suet> .

7 Daniel Sabbagh's, *L'Égalité par le droit : les paradoxes de la discrimination positive aux États-Unis* was published in English as *Equality and Transparency: A Strategic Perspective*

on *Affirmative Action in American Law*, New York, Palgrave (2007); Pap Ndiaye's *La condition noire* (2008) remains untranslated.

8 The Representative Council of Black Organisations is an umbrella group established in 2005 bringing together anti-racist NGOs in France. This is significant because in the French context, people from the French Caribbean and those of African migrant origin had not often shared the same organisational space, in part due to their clearly defined status as French citizens and foreign nationals respectively. Moreover, the CRAN is based on the NAACP in that it welcomes any person, regardless of religion, colour, etc., seeking to fight discrimination.

9 France does not collect official statistics on 'race' or ethnicity, only of country of birth and nationality. In 2005 the debate began about whether or not to include the kinds of ethnic / racial identity questions used in the USA, the UK, Canada, Australia, etc. Opponents claim that this type of state intervention significantly breaches the French republican model in which the nation is indivisible. Supporters of the collection of ethnic statistics argue that ethnic and racial distinctions are made in everyday life anyway, and that statistics can be used to monitor trends and help enforce equality legislation.

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