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The Principle of Secularity and the (Mis)Use of Ethnic Statistics in France

Working paper

Colloque inaugural MC3M – Migration et Citoyenneté : Mutations, Métissage, Multilinguisme
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The principle of secularity defines the traditional position of the French republic in the debate on multiculturalism. For now, we can briefly define this position as a position of critique (in principle based on the defence of equality of individual rights), which would ideally tend towards what some have described as a “politics of indifference” (Kukathas 2003, 15). We will first see how secularity has directed the policies and the general ideology of the French Republic towards immigration, and how, in spite of this traditional position, the current discourse on immigration, national identity and belonging makes use of statistics to promote the representation and the recognition of social groups for political purposes. The question of how these discourses benefit from the general political backlash (especially in the case of immigration) of multiculturalism is not addressed in this paper. Another question which is left out, and which would need to be addressed to better measure the onslaught on republican principles is the effects of colonialism on the categories and the questions related to the phenomenological multiculturalism of French society.

I say phenomenological here as multiculturalism is a loaded concept and can either be defined phenomenologically, i.e. the factual cultural diversity of a given society, or ideologically, referring thus to the politics of recognition rather than the politics of indifference. That means that French society is multicultural whereas France is not – at least not usually – associated with multicultural politics – this time in the ideological sense. And yet, there are policies addressing multicultural issues and they are founded, at least in part, on the republican

principle of secularity which emerged in political debates on the relation between Church and State and Church and society during the French revolution. But it is not before the third Republic and a series of acts that the secularity of the Republic will be institutionalised with the terminology we use today. The famous 1905 law on the separation of Church and State can be considered the conclusive act of a series which have rendered this institutionalisation effective (Levillain, 2005). What is important to note here is that on the long run, the debates on secularity have led to, across different states, a separation of power, between the temporal and the spiritual to use old fashioned categories, reducing in effect the political power of religious institutions and aiming at a form of autonomy for political, temporal institutions from the spiritual affairs. It is important to bear in mind that we are not talking about any state and any church. We are talking about the French Jacobin Republic with a strong current of anticlerical ideology and we are talking about the Roman Catholic Church. This institutionalisation of secularity can be considered, in this perspective, as the result of a philosophical and political struggle to change the hierarchy in society, placing religious beliefs in the private realm and stripping religious institutions of their central (cultural) traditional position. I'm going to leave out the genealogy or the history of this struggle which would take us back to the Reform and beyond to focus now on how this formation of the principle of secularity frames the current debates on immigration. What this sketchy overview brings out, is the importance of religion in the traditional debates on diversity which have traditionally been framed as questions of the pacification of religious struggles and the historical answers have taken the form of a secularisation of society, based on the ideas of toleration and the recognition of freedom of conscience and association (Song, 2010). The two logical conclusions which stem from these ideas are 1. the neutrality of the state in religious affairs and 2. the defence of individual rights to form and leave associations. The anticlerical and rational argument for the reason behind the French principle of secularity can be formulated as state protection for individuals against religious proselytism conceived as group pressure. As a follow-up, the politics of recognition – meaning group recognition -, appears as incompatible with these ideas. This provides us with a short explanation for the traditional opposition of French political thought to ideological multiculturalism.

Now how does this relate to statistics, and more particularly to ethnic statistics? In accordance with the set of principles presented above (and their derivatives), the state has to ensure an equality of treatment. The answer to ensure such equality of treatment is to be found in the politics of indifference, which, to avoid any form of discrimination, do not make use of

categories which would recognise any other belonging than that to the French republic. Thus, the official statistics do not include the so called “sensitive questions” (Simon, 2007) related to ethnicity, race and religion as these aspects are not part of the public sphere, at least *de jure*. We can note that this approach affects applications of policies of positive discrimination as well. So what are the categories used for gathering statistics of an “ethnic” nature in France? They are based on the distinction between nationals and foreigners, and take into account elements such as the place of birth and the different ways of obtaining nationality to refine the data. In this set of categories, an immigrant is not necessarily a foreigner and reversely, a foreigner is simply defined as a non-national, whereas, a national can be considered an immigrant (e.g. if born a non-national abroad and having obtained nationality later). These distinctions, however refined, are limited and do not allow, unless stretched, to associate the census data sets with socio-economic categories for instance.

This brings us to the recent debate and discourses on national identity and immigration in France. As a core political issue, this association has been brought by Nicolas Sarkozy during the 2007 presidential campaign. In the follow-up of his election as President of the Republic, Sarkozy created a ministry which short name was the ministry for immigration and national identity. The rationale behind this association, introduced a number of rather odd assumptions given the background I’ve sketched out above. These included statements that multiculturalism has failed, that the French integration system has failed, and that immigration is out of control and that the pressure of immigration is the reason behind the cultural and economic problems faced by the French society. The main reason behind this to be found, according to Sarkozy, in the lack of promotion of French national identity: “We have forgotten to speak about France” would he say during the campaign. Taking on this rationale, the first minister to the ministry for immigration and national identity, Brice Hortefeux, would certify this assessment adding a dash of statistics to the demonstration:

“First of all, let us be honest: the French integration system has failed. The proof is the much too high concentration of population of foreign origin in only three regions out of 22: 60% of foreigners live in Ile-de-France, Rhône-Alpes or in PACA, sometimes in real urban ghettos. Another proof is the average unemployment rate of foreigners, above 20%, which is more than twice the national average. In certain “banlieues”, this rate reaches to 40%. We have to say the truth to the French people: our integration system is not a model anymore. And to successfully integrate, one has first to control immigration.” (November 2007)

If we refer back to the definitions of the categories used in official statistics, it is not very clear what Hortefeux is saying as “population of foreign origin” can refer to a certain number of different situations, and it is unclear how living in one of the three main urban areas in a proof of a failure of the system. What we could learn from such statistics is that immigrant nationals tend to stay in urban areas, which is benign information and shouldn't come as a surprise. Now, if we turn to the second “proof”, we realise that the terminology has changed. We are now talking about foreigners and unemployment rates. In a report of the National institute of statistics and economic studies from 2009, we can indeed read that this figure is close to reality. To what extent this tells us that the integration system has failed is not clear again, as this could as easily be interpreted as a form of discrimination towards employment, and represent a failure of the economic integration of foreigners effectively preventing an ideal integration. The reference to the housing estates could not be verified, and one should wonder why such a stigmatisation? The theme of the banlieues has been a recurrent theme for defining the internal other for Sarkozy, as Interior minister and as President, and Hortefeux seems here to be simply picking up the trail of further marginalising already marginalised components of French society. What we observe in fact is that essentially, the statistics in this context are meaningless and appear to serve as pseudo-rational arguments, a sophistication to avoid argumentation, which aim at presenting the final statement on the necessity of changing immigration policies as self-evident. The result has been the institution of policies based on target figures, such as the number of expulsions.

The ministry was reformed in late 2010 and clouded in the same discourses; its prerogatives are now part of the ministry of the Interior. The current minister, Claude Guéant, has already shone as having misinterpreted official statistics for ideological reasons, when he would assert during an radio interview in May last year that 2/3 of the children failing in the educational system were children of immigrants. The statement was false to the point that the INSEE released a communiqué to correct the minister stating that an estimated 16% of children leaving the secondary education system without qualification are children of immigrants, which does not necessarily mean foreigners as we know, but means of parents born outside of France. In a speech dating from the 10 January this year, the minister gave a detailed account of how efficient has the policy of target figures been under his mandate. The sense of the politics of immigration is described as follows:

“The sense of our policy is a certain conception of France and of French society. We wish for France to remain faithful to its great republican principles, such as secularity and equality between men and women. We refuse communitarianisms, the secluded life of ethnic or religious communities which follow their own rules

which are not those of the Republic neither of France. In consequence, the foreigners we welcome have to integrate. It is they who have to integrate and not the other way round.”

The speech is riddled with detailed figures of expulsions, of the reduction of visas etc. It would take too long to explain here, but in sum, what we learn if we take the time to analyse the figures Guéant provides is that everything is set to meet the new target figure of expulsions in 2012 of 35,000 expulsions: the reduction of the number of visas and work permits, the reduction of naturalisations, the increase of the fees for obtaining a visa, etc.

We finally start rounding up to the principle of secularity... Here, as in many other occurrences, a government official stresses the importance of secularity and transgresses its bounds directly afterwards. If we realign the resurgence of religion on the political scene, the transgression of the neutrality of the state in such affairs has become a common feature in the secular republic of France. The cultural stigmatisation of foreigners and immigrant populations, the culturalist and religious definition of national identity and the politics of target figures have all come together and have for effect to undermine the principle of secularity of the French state. One could of course argue, with reason, that the traditional politics of indifference have failed to tackle the problems of economic integration and discrimination and would certainly need to be reassessed in the light of the actual diversity of French society. The development, in political discourse, of a restricted, traditionalist definition of national identity, coupled with a marginalisation of French citizens of foreign origin and of immigrants more generally, of Muslims in particular, points towards a weakening of the republican cultural and political institutions in France. Is this simply electoral politics playing with fire or the symptoms of a deeper cultural reaction?

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