Anti-Racist Policies in France.
From Ideological and Historical Schemes to Socio-Political Realities
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NOTA DI LAVORO 98.2003

NOVEMBER 2003

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ENGIME is financed by the European Commission, Fifth RTD Framework Programme, Key Action Improving Socio-Economic Knowledge Base, and it is co-ordinated by Fondazione Eni Enrico Mattei (FEEM).

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Anti-Racist Policies in France. From Ideological and Historical Schemes to Socio-Political Realities

Summary

In France, since the 1980s, imaginaries derived from decolonization have played a major role in the elaboration of anti-racist policies. Simultaneously, because of the universalistic conception of the French Republic, the use of ethnic categories has been taboo and systematically replaced, in political schemes, by socio-economic criteria. Multiculturalism, in the Anglo-Saxon meaning, has therefore not been a traditional political analysis framework. Nevertheless, since the 1990s, the French model of integration, which was based on the individual, has been more and more accused of giving way to inequalities and racism. For ten years, the rise of the concept of the «ethnicization» of cultural groups in public debate has thus inspired political demands that require concrete answers, notably against urban violence and education.

Keywords: Anti-racist policies, French model of integration, Multiculturalism, Ethnicization, Urban violence, Education

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Anti-racist policies in France.
From ideological and historical schemes
to socio-political realities.

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Multiculturalism has been a major issue in the European social sciences for twenty years. It is commonly assumed to be the template within which analysis of racism and of possible responses to it should be conducted. Racism, to phrase things in a very generic way, supposedly involves problematic relations to “otherness” embedded in hegemonic narratives of nationhood that deny diversity and difference. Multiculturalism, conversely, promotes openness to “the Other” by pluralizing the historical narratives and destabilizing the privilege of nationhood. Our proposal here is that this does not quite work, and furthermore that it is the awkward relationship between antiracism and multiculturalism that best reveals how and why.

Despite the theoretical and political significance multiculturalism has achieved, it often seems to lack sociological focus precisely to the extent that it presupposes a normative theory of culture, and in so far as it tends to be framed at a high level of generality, it tends to hinder comparability. Specifically, if various countries have adopted or failed to adopt multiculturalism regarded as a policy frame of reference and/or toolbox, it is hard to see how multiculturalism can simultaneously serve as an analytical reference for understanding responses in different national, regional and local contexts to post-migratory dynamics. The same difficulty follows if, as many critics have suggested, the whole theoretical vocabulary of multiculturalism is premised upon some kind of unanalysed essentialism. This is sometimes taken to imply that the category of culture – and, even more so, that of identity – are suspect. Yet, the fact that normative multiculturalism has an often weak sociological grounding does not mean that more sophisticated understandings of culture necessarily make the subject matter of multiculturalism disappear. Culture, understood in terms of the inherent limits of social actors’ reflexivity, occupies a crucial position in social science explanation, at the intersection of structural and actor-centred perspectives. “Cultural groups” are analytically defined by identity, and normatively by respect

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or recognition. As a consequence, the existence and actions of such groups depend strongly on the main orientations of national politics and public policies. In France, any mention of “ethnic” categories encounters deep suspicion, since both conceptualization and administrative codification embody, often in rather non-reflexive ways, the French universalistic conception of equality and the fear that the ethnicization of politics tends to favour xenophobia; as a result, the idea that the individual is the sole normative bearer of rights is granted profound normative significance.

One would expect multiculturalism and antiracism to be very closely related to each other. They have after all, at a superficial level, the same aims and the same enemies. Both demand a degree of self-consciousness about nationhood that is generally felt, by those required to achieve it, to be uncomfortable or even unpleasant. Yet, as anyone familiar with the political and ideological history of the UK or the US will have noted, multiculturalism and antiracism have tended, in practice, to be competitive or even antagonistic; and furthermore what is at stake goes to the very heart of the analysis of social inequality. French anti-racism is, broadly speaking, either hostile or indifferent to multiculturalism. How much of a paradox is this? Theoretically, not as surprising as one might think, but the practical distinction also proves strikingly unstable.

French public and academic debate is exemplary of the wholesale dismissal of even the forms of multiculturalism that would be fairly trivial in the English-speaking world – only since the mid-1990s, and only in a marginal, tentative and rather apologetic way, has a distinctively French approach to multiculturalism begun to emerge. Focusing on anti-racism public discourses and policies in France since the 1980s may help understand this situation. As a matter of fact, a series of rather simplistic assumptions about French conceptions of racism and anti-racism emerged in the late 1980s, in the context of the electoral rise of the Front National, the Commission on Nationality, and the Muslim “headscarves” affairs in some secondary schools. Such debates, and to a lesser extent policies, had contribute to the theoretical and ideological development of a “French model of integration” opposed to the so-called “model of minorities” (supposedly illustrated by Anglo-American, Dutch or Swedish multiculturalism). This “French model” is often taken at face value by the French themselves. Yet, quite apart from its rather simplistic character even at the time, there have been major and as yet imperfectly acknowledged shifts since the mid-1990s. New policy agendas – and to some extent practical policies – have emerged, and theories and the tone of public debate have begun to evolve, particularly with respect to
racism and antiracism. Moreover, comparative research used this perception of France and gave wide credence to it, especially perhaps when dismissing its “assimilationist” bias. The question thus arises: given the relation between the “French model of integration” and the situation of French theoretical debates and policies in the field of anti-racism, how are the emergence of multiculturalism à la française and the changes in anti-racism policies connected? They seem to derive from the same general climate – the breakdown of an ideologically hegemonic model –, while being in a sense opposite – at least if Anglo-American experience of the tensions between multiculturalism and antiracism can be taken as an indication. What might connect them in principle is the capacity of the symbolic violence and tangible inequalities of racism to give rise to an identity of victimhood which provides the basis for the formation of a reflexive social group. This was indeed the basis of what was called, in UK antiracist language in the 1970s and 80s, the “political conception of blackness” – in which to be Black was definitionally to be a victim of racism. It is true that identities of victimhood are perceptible, and indeed massive, in contemporary France. But “blackness” in this sense was understood, for very strong theoretical reasons, as necessarily a political achievement. In the absence of political consciousness, victimhood is a source of fragmentation: what is now called in French debate “ethnicization” – regarded now, unlike c. 1990, as something that concerns France and not just other countries. The language of “consciousness” is old-fashioned, and in many ways deservedly discredited. But the underlying sociology continues to make a mot of sense. The pragmatic tone of current French anti-racism policies, which adopt a reformist focus on socio-economic opportunities, makes them superficially compatible with ethnicization – although perhaps not indefinitely.

The uses of “ethnicization”, and the nature of the phenomena to which the phrase purports to refer, are in many respects the key to an improved comparative understanding of recent changes in French conceptions of racism and antiracism. “Ethnicization” is neither a synonym of multiculturalism, nor its opposite. Normative multiculturalism, which combines institutional practices and kinds of mobilization, is in one respect a positive theory of ethnicization; but ethnicization is simultaneously the sociological basis for multiculturalism as a set of practical political demands that require answers of some kind simply because of the scale of resources that they command. This circular relationship makes it very difficult to clarify the normative questions involved. As a matter of fact, since 1995, empirically, France has become less different from Anglo-American conceptions of “racial” relationships than in the previous period, because
public debate has taken the ethnicization of cultural groups more into account, reflecting changes both in tangible social dynamics and the collective “imaginary” of French politics. Ethnicization is among other things the name for a set of urgent practical problems, which have cried out for political solutions at least at the rhetorical level, given the failure of traditional urban policies and the growing sense of crisis, at least at the ideological level, in the French education system.

In this paper, after giving some general information on the history and perceptions of immigration and on immigration policies in France, we offer some views on French antiracist policies, which in recent years have, for the first time, stressed victimhood along with some aspects of what is, often with reluctance, called the “ethnicization” of social relationships. For illustration, we focus mainly on two examples: urban violence and education.

Since the beginning of the 1980s, French anti-racist policies have formulated “ethnic issues” in socio-economic rather than cultural terms, notably in the form of a search for a coherent and comprehensive “urban policy” (politique de la ville). The connection is that urban violence, which is a recurrent issue of both the media and political agenda, often hits underprivileged suburbs and is generally said to be attributable to children of immigrant parents. The specific conceptual and legal frameworks of contemporary France are inscribed within its distinctive history, which is linked to decolonisation, notably in North Africa, and especially in Algeria.²

**Caricatures of republicanism**

In considering the French “republican” model, the issue is not so much what “republicanism” properly understood might entail, but how the supposed description fits. In view of the prevailing caricature of France with respect to immigration vs. racism issues, one needs emphasize the fact that it suits many in France to subscribe to the often misleading perception of a hegemonic and uniform “assimilationist” Republican model. In France, where policy and politics have long been very closely intertwined, the initial policy framework sometimes addresses itself solely to immigration in the narrow sense (*i.e.* rules on entry and residence and mechanisms for their application) or to issues, such as urban decay, that are linked to immigration in political

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² The impact, in French urban areas, of President Chirac’s recent visit to Algeria shows how much the relationships between the two countries have remained very much linked to the situation of (former) North African immigrants in France, not to mention the fact that many Algerians expected Chirac to promote democratic values in Algeria – which, in a way, is a historical irony, Chirac being a neo-Gaullist.
discourse. Besides, in the sociology of racism, there are two major paradigms (which may be complementary but tend in practice to be contrasted): racism as prejudice, based on psychological and “pulsional” criteria; and racism as everyday discrimination, which is often violent, since racism is above all a concrete social practice. For instance, some groups are stigmatized by derogatory modes of designation or by spatial or socio-economic discrepancies. Contemporary racism is multifaceted and constantly changing. The evolution of the stereotypical “foreigner” shows the inter-penetration of racism and broader social phenomena. Over the past decade or so, suburban unrest (in most French cities, contrary to some other European countries, inner-city areas have a generally favourable socio-economic profile) has framed everyday racism in terms of a rejection of “otherness”, which is amplified by media sensationalism. In this respect, during the presidential and legislative campaigns of 2002, various events were highlighted by the media, and especially television, which contributed heavily to putting the issue of crime (in French: insécurité, which is both a vague term and a euphemism) at the top of the political agenda.3

Since racism is closely linked to the French colonial past and to the various waves of immigration, which have moulded the collective and racialized perception of immigrants, it is undoubtedly true – as shown by a wealth of empirical research – that prejudice plays a significant role in social relations. The collective burden of the colonial past has given rise to an adversarial relationship between the “French” and (some of) the “others”, who are considered socially and culturally inferior, who are to be dominated, and who cannot integrate easily. Historical research has shown, in particular, why and how Islam has become a central feature of racism in France. Yet an approach to racism exclusively focused on prejudice meads to some serious difficulties. Racial violence, in particular, is not solely a matter of perception of others – still less “otherness” or “the Other” (singular and capitalized: a common usage that carries more theoretical baggage than is often realized). Spatial segregation also makes some groups of people feel excluded. Immigrants who live in underprivileged suburbs are likely to have adversarial relationships with other members of society, and especially with the French – or, more precisely, the so-called “French natives” (Français de souche) –, who often perceive them as foreigners, because they

3 Crime has very often, but not always, been linked to underprivileged suburbs; although young people have burnt cars or fought with the police regularly in some suburbs for many years, it became last year the major theme of the campaign, at the expense of other major issues, such as unemployment or pensions. In the eyes of many observers, it could even partly explain the score of the radical right, the Front National and its leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen.
feel frustrated and insecure, and because they fear they cannot achieve high social status. Coexistence, and sometimes promiscuity, with the French can give rise to day-to-day conflicts, and even to sporadic violence. But should one talk about cross-cultural conflicts, as some researchers in Northern Europe do? The French state, as well as French academic researchers, are reluctant to do so, because the topic seems to be illegitimate within the ideological and legal parameters of the “one and indivisible” French Republic. As a consequence, observers, analysts and policy-makers prefer to talk about spatial segregation in its socio-economic context as providing in itself an adequate causal framework.

Moreover, the French approach to racial violence – as to discrimination more broadly – has long focused on racist intentions, to the detriment of victims. This is due to the influence of the legal approach to racism, and the emphasis on criminal law, since offences are defined by the intention of the alleged culprits, although victims do not always consider they have suffered from racism. There is no presumption that the status of the victim (in terms of skin colour, religion, “origin”, nationality, etc.) in itself creates a presumption of “racial” or “ethnic” violence. This is partly common sense, partly a reflection of the French ideological climate, which is hostile to “racial” or “ethnic” categorization. Indeed, even today, vulnerable groups are still inadequately taken into account. Nevertheless, the fact that racial discrimination has recently entered public debate and the academic agenda has made the traditional approach to racial violence change gradually. And a qualitative survey of victims is bound to improve the schemes that are designed to help them, for example when they need to be listened to, advised, or helped with legal proceedings.

In this respect, France now has a comprehensive legislative and legal framework against racism, but civil society is also a main actor, perhaps because anti-racism and anti-discrimination policies do not define “vulnerable groups” as an official administrative category. Academic research and press articles both confirm this sociological statement, insisting for example on the absence of official statistics on racial violence. In recent years, some organizations have developed actions to raise public awareness and to increase mobilization for the integration of “visible minorities”.

As a matter of fact, over the past dozen years, the bases, legitimacy and efficiency of antiracism and its strategies have been strongly questioned. This began with the crisis of antiracism in the 1980s, which was due to the decline – or perhaps more accurately the fragmentation – of the

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4 Although this naturally remains speculative. In the quite different cases of the US and the UK, mobilization remains central to the use of legal remedies against racism, even though categories are defined in such a way that it is not inherently impossible to appeal to the law on a purely individualistic basis.
identity claims of children of immigrant parents, most of whom came from North Africa (*le mouvement beur*). Subsequently, over the past ten years, the French perception of racism has gradually moved from a perpetrators/ideologies scheme to a victims/practices configuration – although the ideological conception of anti-racism has not completely disappeared. On the contrary, high-profile court cases, deriving from criminal prosecution of politicians such as Jean-Marie Le Pen, writers such as Michel Houellebecq, and personalities such as Brigitte Bardot, continue to reaffirm the principle that racism is first and foremost a matter of discourse, and antiracist organizations such as the MRAP, the LICRA and SOS-Racisme continue to devote considerable resources to such action. For what ideological reasons did this shift, which makes a lot of sense, theoretically and in terms of public policies, take place? The rhetorical and administrative construction of “racism” is something for policy to address and change. Policies and some actions of organizations, especially in the framework of the 114 help-line – a toll-free number for victims of discrimination implemented in 2000 – and the Departmental Commissions for Access to Citizenship (CODAC), that were created in 1999, have improved the description of racial violence and assistance to victims, notably when they wish to lodge complaints. Anti-racist organizations have also recently tried to improve awareness of discrimination in public opinion and to implement dynamic and attractive educational programmes that avoid classic forms of moralizing. Yet, French public policies had often been timid, focusing on cultural diversity rather than on racism or inequality. This has had unintended consequences since the celebration of diversity is suspected in France of giving rise to “multiculturalism”, “communitarianism”, of what the French media sometimes call “ghettos”, the United States being a negative mirror. On the one hand, the French republican conception of citizenship is still based on the individual and insists on secularism (in French, *laïcité*). On the other hand, as the debate on immigration entered the political sphere in the 1980s, and as the radical right party, the *Front National*, has had a larger and larger audience since the mid-1980s, racist speech, which is punished by the law, had systematically been replaced by commentaries on racism based on the origin, culture or religion of the victims. Thus, the French conception of racism had long been limited to intentional racism, and not to contextual, institutional or symbolic racism. Moreover, French public debate and academic research on racial and xenophobic violence have historically focused on ideologies, which have been expressed by several trends of the extreme right and traditionally been based on various arguments such as the pre-eminence of western civilisation, ethnocentrism, nationalism,
the supremacy of “White people” and so on.

True, collective perceptions are at stake; there are vulnerable groups, most of them composed of people who were born – or whose parents or grand-parents were born - in the former colonies or abroad, whether they are French or not. Africans and people from the West Indies suffer particularly from stereotypes about former French colonies. In other words, they suffer from anonymous symbolic violence. Besides, current international affairs may create xenophobic, racist or anti-Semitic attitudes in French society, insofar as they are directly aimed at some groups of people. This was particularly true in the contexts of the Gulf war, the massacres in Algeria, the rise of fundamentalism, especially in Europe and in France after the 1995 bomb attacks in Paris underground, and, more recently, the conflict in Israel and Palestine.

But punishment now tends to be less based on the analysis of the act itself than on the situation of the victim, and repression is a key concept. As a matter of fact, in the scope of decisions taken by the Council of the European Union, an anti-discrimination law was voted on November 16 2001 and a law on workers’ rights, which was voted on January 17 2002, introduced further profound changes. The French government gave priority to the fight against discrimination on the whole and particularly against racial discrimination, which entered the French public agenda rather recently. As there used to be many obstacles to integration, the former – left-wing – government took a series of measures against all kinds of discrimination, the fields of employment and housing being two priorities. Moreover, in 1998, the Human Rights Commission brought to light discrimination in the employment field in its annual report and the High Council for Integration invited authorities to carry on a policy which would guarantee foreigners their right to equality. The CODAC, which are also to help children of immigrant parents find work and a place in society, are supervised by departmental prefects and composed of representatives of the judicial system, of administrative departments of the state, of chambers of commerce and of civil services. Employees’ and employers’ trade unions, and representatives of anti-racist organizations are also partners of the CODAC.

The Study Group on Discrimination (GED), a Public Interest Group, was created in May 1999 and has provided France with a national observatory on racism and discrimination. It has also had the mandate to fight against discrimination since October 2 2000. Furthermore, the 114, an anti-discrimination toll-free number, was implemented in May 2000, in order to gather the complaints

\[5\] Socialist leader Lionel Jospin was French Prime Minister between 1997 and 2002.
and testimonies of people who experienced or witnessed discrimination. Descriptions are followed up, and sometimes give rise to complaints.

Finally, in the context of decentralization, most urban contracts insist on the fight against discrimination, in order to complete the action of public authorities at a departmental and local level. They have given way to a set of precise actions, which have notably improved the general public’s awareness of discrimination, trained people and encouraged mediation with firms, for example through youth support system.

Organizations fight against racism and discrimination, too. Historically, French civil society has put much effort into the protection of human rights, tolerance and the respect of human dignity. For instance, the MRAP (Movement Against Racism and for Friendship between Peoples) and SOS Racisme have high visibility and national coverage. They often organize debates, implement information campaigns and write brochures, which in France is called “good practices”. Organizations also lodge complaints after investigations in firms, night clubs and even real estate agencies which may have discriminatory attitudes or practices. Now, the increasing number of complaints is suspected to take precedence over educational programmes. Besides, some people wonder if culprits are really sentenced and if the judicial system is able to make racial violence decrease.6

Voluntary bodies play of course a great role in promoting new policy agendas. Indeed, they have strategic significance in the internal reconfiguration of policy frameworks. Furthermore, it is interesting to see that many anti-racism and anti-discrimination programmes are now local. The state, through national systems, defines and gives impetus to major initiatives; local authorities have to apply them according to local situations, which is often efficient. Nevertheless, public actions target groups of people that are not considered as vulnerable according to precise criteria. Most of the time, they fit in fixed administrative categories, which were defined in terms of social or economic integration. On the other hand, the objectives that are defined often have little operational content and take a short-term perspective, which cannot make social perceptions change durably. Finally, each programme has its own evaluation system: such a heterogeneity prevents public authorities from measuring the results of their actions and from adapting them

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6 Notably because institutional racism remains taboo. With the dominance of the republican model, civil servants do not take racial discrimination sufficiently into account. As a matter of fact, they too often consider that immigrants are simply not integrated enough, even when public services are explicitly said to be discriminatory.
whenever it is necessary. As a consequence, interventions are often compartmentalized into various fields.

_Urban violence and racism at school_

Violence and education are aspects of “ethnicization” understood both as an aspect of social phenomena that disprove the Republican caricature that France is “different”, and as something which contributes to the rise of new fears and stereotypes. New issues and actors demand recognition or/and solutions, not least because the climate of violence is in itself a political resource.

Urban violence seems to be a French specificity, insofar as, in France, the abstract and homogeneous form of “the city” is a key issue. But, practically, “the city” is the place where the imaginary perception of a united, homogeneous and individualized French community collapses. It corresponds in some respects to what is called elsewhere “youth violence”, and there is a widespread perception that current problems in France have something to do with a broader crisis of “the city” (_la ville_). Some researchers think that spatial and social exclusion is more striking than in other countries, because of architecture and town planning. Relations with the police also crystallize many aspects of violence in racialized contexts in French society, because of a range of social and economic factors. Conversely, the police are routinely accused of racism both in language and in practices, such as profiling. The adversarial relationships between young people, who often live in underprivileged suburbs, and the police thus seem to be at the heart of the issue of urban violence. Identity checks, police custody, and sometimes police misconduct tend to make young people think that French police are racist. The issue remains taboo, as it deals both with the ethics and practices of the police, although some people try to separate institutional culture from racism strictly speaking. Nevertheless, urban violence also refers to collective protests, and even to the destruction of goods which symbolize the consumer society (car burnings, for example) or the state (buses, public phones, not to speak about violence against firemen). The media and institutions talk about violent and _ad hoc_ reactions against youth stigmatization and exclusion. However, urban violence feeds debates which link criminality, immigration and juvenile delinquency together. In the end, one can notice that urban riots are studied as social phenomena which derive from spatial segregation and social exclusion. As compared to other European countries, they are never considered as “racial” conflicts between
representatives of the state or of civil society, and youths of foreign origin. One can then wonder if such statements do not tend to undermine anti-racist public policies.\(^7\)

In the educational field, violence is officially considered only as a symptom of hardened patterns of social inequality, as the classroom is said to be simply an extension of the street. Among other things, the territorial basis of the French school is in principle strictly defined by a compulsory catchment areas system (*la carte scolaire*). This obviously means that the school system tends to reproduce social segregation in so far as it exists.

In France, discrimination in education has traditionally received relatively less attention than, for example, discrimination in labour. Furthermore, where policy decisions and research have focused on education, the scope of their interest has been especially limited to primary and secondary public education, and has almost entirely excluded tertiary education (be it in university or technical training colleges), and education in the private sector (be it state-sponsored or not). This may in part be attributed to the ideological premises upon which National Education in France was founded – uniform (universal), equal and secular education for all children – and the denial or repression of any and all references to differential treatment. The law of 28 March 1882 defined schooling as compulsory “for children of both sexes, between the ages of 6 and 13” and entrenched the principle of equal treatment, thus defining the schooling system as the primary locus of integration for children, *i.e.* individuals.\(^8\)

The republican model of schooling as hierarchical inclusion (meritocracy) is thus in tension with a society within which horizontal exclusion seems to be of increasing significance. The new significance of diversity as educational issue must also be taken into account. As a matter of fact, contrary to the ideal of schools as havens of equality within an unequal society, far removed from

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\(^7\) In recent months, moreover, the media have highlighted the mobilization of female immigrants against violence, and particularly violence against women. Most of them are of North African origin and live in French suburbs. As a matter of fact, for several years, there have been many collective rapes, often committed by very young men – sometimes below 15 – against very young girls; and also discrimination against girls within the suburbs, which is said to be due to Muslim traditions. That is why some of the women who demonstrate to denounce such offences insist on the fact that racism is not the only problem in underprivileged suburbs: according to them, sexual discrimination and even misogyny have become major issues but have never been taken into account by public authorities, who have rather focused on discrimination in general, and against young men in particular. Some people also observe that public policies have especially aimed at fighting against hiring discrimination or discrimination in leisure activities (access to night clubs, for instance) against children of North African parents (*les beurs*), which, while aiming at neutrality, made them forget other serious kinds of discrimination.

\(^8\) As a matter of fact, the Republican definition of the school has acquired its value from the fact that it symbolizes a model that articulates access to citizenship and access to nationality.
the social, economic, political and “racist” tensions that traverse society, it is true that school has become increasingly permeable to these tensions. The school has become a place where pupils and teachers grapple with the complexity of broader social problems of inequality, social but also racial discrimination and violence, produced and re-produced in its midst.

Despite the official tendency to portray France as a country of immigration since the 19th century with a long history of dealing with the presence and schooling of immigrant children or the children of migrants within its National Education System, certain authors maintain that until the 1970s France “ignored itself as a country of immigration”. The question of schooling immigrant children only appeared in the sociological literature in France as late as the 1970s. In the 1960s, sociologists of education were primarily concerned with evaluating the effects of the then recent “democratisation” of the education system through the extension of compulsory schooling to the age of 16. At that time, because of the dominant Marxist paradigm in French social sciences, socially-entrenched economic inequalities constituted the overarching factor to which inequalities in education were attributed, and children of immigrants were subsumed within the larger working-class group. Once immigration was constructed as a “social problem”, in the context of the economic crisis which began in the 1970s, and later, the ideological and moral crisis heralded by the 1980s, the integration of migrant populations and their children and the role of school in this process were placed high on scientific and political agendas. At the same time, renewed debates concerning the definition of the French nation in the context of both globalization and European-Union building, the aggravation of the economic crisis and its exclusionary effects on vulnerable populations, and the increase in urban segregation and violence re-awakened public, political and scientific interest in the integrative role of the French Republican schooling system.

Thus, educational policies implemented within the public schooling system over the past 30 years have changed a lot. Since the 1970s, various national programmes have been implemented to enhance the disadvantaged educational position of children of so-called ethnic minority origin, in relation to the different waves of immigration to France. Since World War II, France has encouraged and relaxed its national borders at different times, primarily in response to its changing economic and demographic need. From 1945 to 1974, immigration was actively encouraged from Southern Europe, Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, guided by the necessity to provide inexpensive labour. Economic migration officially ended in 1974 and was replaced in the

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9 See Bourdieu, for example, as long ago as the 1960s and the 1970s.
1980’s with what is commonly referred to as “family immigration”. This term designates the immigration of migrant labourers’ next of kin for the purposes of reuniting families separated through economic migration.

The French schooling system is, in principle, indifferent to “difference”: pressure is placed on individuals to assimilate vertically into secular meritocratic society as individual citizens – defined in terms of differential qualification as much as (and inseparably from) equal status. This entails renouncing all external manifestations of religious or ‘cultural’ affiliation within the public sphere. This assimilationist policy has been criticised because the Republican model of integration is based on a clear distinction between public and private spheres, which implies both the refusal of proselytizing and respect for the diversity of personal convictions, be they religious or other. The role of the school system, viewed from the perspective of diversity, is to organize and facilitate the peaceful coexistence of differences within the public sphere of civil society. That is why, in recent years, the position of “ethnic” minorities in education has become a cause for increasing concern in most European countries. Their position has often been associated with low performance levels, absenteeism and truancy, drop-out and unqualified school-leaving, disciplinary problems and violence. The disadvantaged position of so-called ethnic minorities is compounded by the vulnerability of these groups to racism, racial discrimination, ethnicization, segregation, and marginalization. Some public measures thus aimed at taking cognizance of the specific schooling needs of these scholars. It was the beginning of the implementation of a system for the “ethnic management” of the schooling of children of immigrants. Initiation classes (Clin) were created in primary schools in 1975, and adaptation classes (Cla) were implemented in secondary schools, for the purpose of teaching French as a foreign-language to pupils who were simultaneously schooled in regular classes. The anthropological orientation of intercultural education at the time encouraged the belief that schooling these children required a non-judgmental understanding of their home cultures and of the issues at stake for their acculturation within the schooling system. But while such measures officially aimed at facilitating the integration of foreign scholars, these in fact sometimes reinforced the child’s affiliation to a country other than France, and formed part of an overall strategy aimed at facilitating their re-integration within their parents’ countries of origin.

10 For example, since a number of private schools are in fact affiliated to a religious body (dispensing secular and religious education), the lack of Muslim private schools, as compared to the historical presence of Catholic and
The 1980s saw a further shift in the orientation adopted within National Education, as it made the choice of a policy of positive discrimination in favour of priority areas, in order to reduce the impact of social inequality on educational achievement. Educational Priority Areas (ZEP) were created in 1981 for the benefit of all pupils – schooled in primary, junior high and senior (mainstream and vocational) high schools – living in socio-economically and culturally disadvantaged environments. Such schools have been allotted additional staff, teaching and financial resources. However, the Republican injunction regarding the provision for differential treatment on the basis of “ethnic” or other origins meant that the policy had to be formulated in general terms.  

Today, the polarisation of schooling publics, the politicisation of identities and the growing expression of “Islamophobia” in public discourse since September 11 2001 have re-kindled debates on the supposed “irreconcilability” of Muslim and secular Republican values within education in France. These debates highlight the urgent needs to go on addressing the causes and consequences of structural (segregation) and implicit (ethnicization) forms of discrimination in France and re-define the approach adopted in dealing with diversity in education. Although, in official education policy documents, the issue of discrimination is still not necessarily addressed directly, political realism made authorities take pragmatic measures, as social polarisation of schools is said to be mainly due to residential segregation, especially in urban agglomerations, and as some parents have adopted a consumerist-type behaviour, avoiding sending their children to the schools for which they are zoned.

The lack of official statistics about “minority” pupils in France mirrors the weak statistical basis for analysis of racial violence, and is replicated in other areas such as housing, employment and health. As one would expect, the principle that France recognizes only French nationals and foreigners is based on a combination of good and bad reasons. Among the good reasons are concerns about the arbitrary nature of ascriptive categories – even if purely statistical, and especially if used for administrative purposes –, and the suspicion to which, as a consequence, group processes that operate in terms of them are exposed. The question who is (say) a Corsican

Jewish schools (which are in part sponsored by the state) suggests that religious discrimination exists.  

A recent polemic was raised when a prestigious tertiary institution in Paris, Sciences-Po, implemented a positive discrimination policy in an endeavour to make the establishment accessible to school-leavers from Priority Education Areas. The official argument was based on socio-economic criteria.
– to take just one high-profile issue – is not a straightforward one that France perversely refuses to take into account, but on the contrary a hugely complex one that admits no simple sociological answer. Among the bad reasons, symmetrically, is the rather laughable, but surprisingly common, idea that ethnicization cannot emerge spontaneously – because social processes naturally tend towards mixing and assimilation – but must be traced to perverse policies or misguided forms of social mobilization. Such is the template for the familiar French opposition to “Anglo-American”, or as the French rather absurdly prefer to say “Anglo-Saxon”, multiculturalism.

Processes of ethnicization within French society may be inadequately studied, but their existence is clear enough, as is their close connection with forms of social exclusion (and, as always, self-exclusion) that combine spatial segregation, inequality of incomes, opportunities and institutional access (e.g. to education), self-destructive sub-cultures, and normative rejection of and by the mainstream models of social integration. The question is what to do about them – which involves both a research agenda, a set of feasible policy responses, and a general template for social mobilization. In France as elsewhere, multiculturalism constitutes a fairly natural answer, especially as it operates explicitly and *prima facie* coherently on all three levels. By putting its main emphasis on normative rejection (via consideration of issues of respect and recognition as embedded in the symbols and narratives of nationhood), it offers a view on how to understand identity politics (as a struggle against misrecognition), how policies should respond (by heightened sensitivity to the symbolics of inclusion), and how to mobilize for recognition (by putting the finger on the gaps and inconsistencies between official stories and the realities they skate over – by playing on liberal guilt, as one might more crudely phrase it). The trouble is that, as noted, many of the French criticisms of multiculturalism are correct, which is quite compatible with a critique of the limits of traditional French anti-racism. Social groups do not act, mobilize, formulate demands, receive apologies or grant forgiveness; these things are done, trivially, by those who speak and act on their behalf, and thereby, in a very real sense, create them. We recognize, correctly, the role of political entrepreneurship in nation-building; there is a curious reluctance to apply the same arguments to the political entrepreneurship of multiculturalism. The point is not to discredit community leaders because they contribute powerfully to shaping the community they speak for and the identity they claim to defend. Simply, their claims can no more be taken at face value than nationalistic claims about culture, homogeneity and continuity. Although it is commonly suggested that pluralism is a basic fact about the modern political
condition, it is worth underlining the point that diversity as a fact is devoid of normative significance, and that pluralism – like “-isms” in general – is inherently normative. Pluralism requires an independent normative grounding that is unattainable without a more sophisticated understanding of identities and group processes in contemporary societies.

It follows that there is much more to be said for antiracism as an alternative to multiculturalism than seems to be realized – not least in France, where a strong tradition of universalistic antiracism rooted in critique of socio-economic inequality is currently rather anaemic. As discussed in this paper, there are probably three main reasons for the current lack of dynamism. First, the pervasive use of psychological categories to analyze racism impedes consideration of its connection with power structures. This is partly a matter of paradigms – psychoanalysis has a degree of influence within French social science that is not really matched in the English-speaking world – and partly a reflection of a framework for antiracist policy that, as discussed earlier, tended until recently to circumscribe it to criminal punishment of public expressions of prejudice. Only with the new emergence of discrimination, which is naturally victim- rather than perpetrator-centred, as a policy priority has this paradigm started to change. Secondly, antiracism is no less dependent than multiculturalism on forms of statistical categorization that are still generally rejected in France. No doubt the categories are different, and no doubt they are explicitly as arbitrary as the racist categories they necessarily reflect (think, to return to an example discussed earlier, of the “political” usage of “blackness” in the UK). But they are nonetheless powerful, and there is ample evidence that victimhood can be the basis for stable and strongly articulated identities. The good and bad reasons for French officials and academics to be suspicious about such identities therefore operate here as well. Thirdly, in France as elsewhere, multiculturalism is a natural response to pervasive socio-economic inequalities that no longer fit within egalitarian perspectives of (social-democratic) inclusion or (revolutionary) emancipation. In the final analysis, multiculturalism and antiracism are inseparably and dynamically connected, ion so far as both are ultimately about welfare, the former stressing difference, the latter equality.
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Volume</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Authors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>77.2003</td>
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</tr>
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<td></td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>82.2003</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>91.2003</td>
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</tr>
</thead>
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<td><em>Corporate Sustainable Management</em></td>
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<tr>
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<td><em>Privatisation, Regulation, Antitrust</em></td>
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</tr>
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<td><em>Economic Theory and Applications</em></td>
<td>Carlo Carraro</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Editor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td><em>Natural Resources Management</em></td>
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<td><em>Knowledge, Technology, Human Capital</em></td>
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<td><em>Economic Theory and Applications</em></td>
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<td><em>Coalition Theory Network</em></td>
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