

Secularization and its Other: The French Problem

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Does secularist rhetoric secretly lend itself to a discourse on social order and the exclusion of formerly colonized peoples? François Dubet argues that it is important to recognize French secularism's rigid and conservative turn. But he also believes that we must qualify this claim if we are to find alternative secularities.

Reviewed: Béatrice Mabilon-Bonfils, Geneviève Zoïa, *La laïcité au risque de l'Autre*, Editions de l'Aube, 2014, 205 p.

The authors of *La laïcité au risque de l'Autre* (roughly, *Secularism at the Risk of the Other*), which was published several months prior to the terrorist attacks of January 2015, probably did not imagine that their book would be thrust so brutally to the forefront of current events, at a time when many political leaders are openly and vigorously calling for a reaffirmation of secularism¹ and the central role of the republican school in French civic life. In the wake of the attacks and the incidents that disrupted the moments of silence observed in a number of schools, the organic bond between the school and secularism once again presents itself as both a problem and—in particular—a solution. As Vincent Peillon² remarked when opening the national consultations on “Rebuilding Schools” (*Refondation de l'École*) in 2012, one must “rebuild republican schools to rebuild the republic through the schools.” In France, schools are always being summoned to save the Republic, the nation, and democracy, as it seems self-evident that it is the republican school that has implanted in each student's mind a sense of citizenship, nationality, and a taste for freedom of conscience—a value that secularism protects.

Resisting Secular Idealization

Béatrice Mabilon-Bonfils and Geneviève Zoïa want to resist secular and republican idealization. They take sides by curtly stating that secularism has become a “dark and defensive narrative” (p. 7) and that “contemporary secular morality represents an increasingly rigid attitude in the face of such problems as insecurity, authority, and ethnic identification” (p. 57). In the schools themselves, secularism, they suggest, is a way of seeking protection from the children of immigrants, particularly Muslims, and the social problems with which the Republic's schools are overrun when they become mechanisms of classification and exclusion rather than institutions that integrate newcomers and function as vehicles for emancipation. This thesis is sufficiently radical and contrary to the prevailing mood that it deserves to be considered closely, particularly at a time when an especially intransigent form of secularism is being used to mobilize, on the left as well as the right, France's most

¹ For clarity's sake, “*laïcité*” has been translated as “secularism.” The reader should, however, keep in mind that this term should, throughout the text, be understood in the historically distinct sense that only the term “*laïcité*” fully conveys.

² Vincent Peillon was France's Minister for National Education from 2012 to 2014. He is also a philosopher who has written several books on French secularism and republicanism.

conservative and nationalist constituencies in opposition to threats to national unity and the eclipse of authority.

The secularism of Ferdinand Buisson and Jules Ferry was associated with an emancipatory project that separated church and state, promoted equality between all citizens (at least between French men; equality extended far less to women and colonized peoples), and protected individual liberties. Now, however, secularism seems to be invoked for the sole purpose of protecting the French from the peoples of the Global South, rejecting Islam (even though it adapts so well to secularized Christianity), and providing protection from the working-class *banlieues* (or suburbs) that continue to be associated with delinquency, over-reliance on welfare, cultural archaism, and familial anomie. This doubling down on secularism, as evidenced in the 2004 law banning headscarves from schools, would seem all the more defensive and hostile in light of the fact that schools are no longer able to guarantee social mobility in exchange for acceptance of the republican system of morality and education. On the contrary, in neighborhoods where the question of secularism is posed most frequently, schools are experiencing massive dropouts and ultimately relegate to the same fallback institutions young men of “immigrant origin” sharing the same colonial history, the same beliefs, and the same rage. While a minority of good students are still offered the route of republican elitism, others become the “internal excluded,” facing lives marked by unemployment and precariousness. In this context, secularism has become little more than an ideology, a form of domination that invalidates the culture and identity of those to whom society has no place to offer. Though secular neutrality asks students of different immigrant backgrounds to abandon their culture and identity at the school’s door, the tastes and choices of middle-class students are, to the contrary, valorized by a secular education system that mirrors their identity.

Is the use of secular rhetoric in the service of order and the exclusion of formerly colonized peoples and their descendants an inversion of secularism, the transformation of an emancipatory project into a defensive ideology, or, alternatively, is it the fruition of secularism *à la française*, as well as of the republican idea launched at the Third Republic’s inception?

Does Secularism Serve a Social and Racial Order?

The authors’ answer leaves no room for doubt: secularism’s current difficulties are far more than a perversion of the original project. Rather, in their eyes, Jules Ferry’s secularized school system was part of a moral project aimed at socializing individuals in accordance to a new political and national order, and making students conform to the roles and functions they were called upon to fill. Even when this project released them from the burdens of their parishes, traditions, and communities, it first and foremost established a new national and moral order. Eradicating *patois* and regional culture, secularism arose out of nationalist and colonialist policies that ranked cultures and identities hierarchically and reified an evolutionary conception of progress. The French nation thus conflated the singularities of its national culture with the universal values of Reason, progress, and civilization. In this spirit, Durkheim wrote: “To attack Reason is to attack French national culture” (quoted on p. 95).

Yesterday no more than today, this conflation of the secular nation with the secular republic did nothing to prevent both xenophobia towards European immigrants deemed unassimilable, and racism towards colonized people who were believed to be stuck at a “primitive” (and inferior) stage of development. The rigid secularism of our own time simply reproduces, they argue, this original narrative, as when Islamophobia is wielded in

secularism's name in the postcolonial urban enclaves that many *banlieue* neighborhoods have become. The only change—and it is not a minor one—is that secularism has lost its progressive aura and magical quality. Now that France has ceased to be the “great nation” of the Revolution, secular morality is giving way to individualism, and the authority of educational culture is struggling to resist the utilitarianism of students and their families, as well as the influence that the media and the internet exercise over young minds. Secularism, it is said, has become nothing more than a way of defending the identity of “French natives” who feel threatened, and restoring the authority of teachers, adults, and institutions. The heirs of the “Republic’s hussars” do not embody a new faith; they seek in secularism only a form of protection against the ordeals of an increasingly difficult profession, in an institution that has been deprived of its sacred quality. Where it was once triumphant, secularism, we are told, has now come to express the “moral panic” of a national community that has grown fragile as it has lost its homogeneous and naturally hegemonic character.

If secularism has become nothing more than a form of self-defense against citizens of “immigrant origin” (as they continue to be referred to, well into the third generation) and if it is often, the authors maintain, simply a variety of Islamophobia, it is because we have entered into a “second modernity,” a world of pluralistic societies and fluid and mobile identities. One must thus “deconstruct” discourses of identity and the nation and show how perceptions of oneself and the other are defensive constructions that reify identities the better to preserve cultural hierarchies and relationships of domination. Once we understand that the nation is built on myths and “narratives”, and that cultural identities are shifting and unstable *bricolages* [contrivances] even as traditions continue to be invented, it becomes clear that “[s]ecularism is identity’s hidden passenger” (p. 92).

Yet, as Charles Taylor and several other figures associated with communitarianism in the English-speaking world argue, all these identities and cultures are essential resources for shaping the self and subjectivity, which need to breathe something more than the rarefied air of principles. The risk faced by this kind of secularism is not simply that it might overlook or show contempt for cultural identities that deviate from the majority’s, but also that it might make education impossible and foster the pathologies that result from a lack of recognition. “Squeezed between injunctions to integrate into something invisible, on the one hand, and to honor their roots, on the other, the young descendants of Muslim immigrants face many challenges in making any sense of the lessons of secular morality, even as a binary and sterile debate sets in between Islam and secularism” (p. 87). At the same time when “pluralistic” identities are denied, social and educational policies, we are told, are constantly reintroducing them in surreptitious ways, in school districting, urban policy, and the spontaneous etiology of school dropouts, which attribute difficulties in school to the origins of students’ parents

A Strong Case—But Is It a Convincing One?

Reading *La Laïcité au risque de l’Autre*, one often has the feeling of running straight into the aporias of the constructivist methodology that, in the social sciences, has become something of a professional routine. Asserting that nations and identities, whether or not they are majoritarian, are based on representations and “narratives” that are historically constructed and rooted in political projects and power relations does not mean that these constructions do not become “real,” in the sense of producing practices and subjectivities that are very real indeed, with equally real consequences. Yet intellectual and scholarly deconstruction does not mean that, in practice, “things” can be deconstructed just as easily.

Thus the authors' judgments fluctuate over the course of their argument. At times, Islamophobia produces Muslim identities, which are essentially the product of discriminating and demeaning gazes; at others, these identities are seen as constant, solid, and irreducible to the gaze of the other, thus necessitating a transformation of educational practices. At times the headscarf is simply a juvenile "look" like any other, despite being the focus of secularism's negative fantasies; at others, it is the expression of a powerful demand for recognition, in a way that is absolutely vital for particular individuals. At times, and notably in the book's conclusion, they note, following Cornelius Castoriadis, that "abstract" institutions are indispensable to the political imagination, allowing subjects to constitute themselves; at others, institutions are no more than domination's visible face. As for the conceptions of national identity and citizenship that were built thanks to Third Republic secularism, they have become as "real," as deeply rooted in contemporary subjectivity as the "pluralistic" identities and cultures that now demand recognition from—or against—this model. Often, the authors seem to adhere to the Sartrean theory that the Jew (or in this case, the Muslim) is the product of anti-Semitism (or postcolonial Islamophobia). Yet just as often, they suggest that these identities really exist, "in themselves" and "for themselves," and that it is important that they be given their due and recognized for what they are. Though social facts may be constructed, they can become so substantial that revealing their constructed nature in no way cancels them out.

While one can easily share this critique of a rigidified secularism that has lost its original mission, becoming nothing more than a form of self-defense against an increasingly pluralistic society, the fact remains that the question of secularism does not, for this reason alone, vanish into thin air, any more than does the nation, despite losing much of its sovereignty and purported homogeneity. The call for the equal recognition of all cultural identities, which implies that they are not simply "myths," presupposes that one is able to define what we share in common beyond these more or less stable cultural differences. If we are to avoid using the word in a way that is cheap, snobbish, and indifferent to difference, "recognition" must mean distinguishing between our commonalities and our singularities—and the latter need not threaten the former. French secularism, which is strongly associated with the nation-building project, the creation of a political system, and a moral educational mission, responded to this problem and it worked. Through the abstraction of a universalistic and national model, many have found a path to personal emancipation and a degree of freedom. They have been able to free themselves from the obligation of religious faith and, to some extent (less than the legend would have it, yet without being purely imaginary), they have managed to escape traditional ascriptive roles. Who has not experienced at school that strange sensation of feeling crushed by a "universal" system of education and culture while, at the same time, being protected and oddly liberated by it? By keeping society and the school at some distance from each other, French secularism denies individuals' roots and singularities, while also opening, through this very breach, a space for a new experience of freedom and other processes of subjectivation.

That this kind of secularism, in this particular form, is no longer possible seems to be a given, since French society is no longer divided between Christians who go to church and Christians who do not; because the nation is resolutely pluralistic; because the "French crucible," which incorporated immigrants first into the working class and then into the nation, is no longer functional; because the assertion of singularity has become a right; and because individuals move around more than ever. But this is no reason not to redefine a secular alternative—a rule for preserving a way of living together amidst our differences. On this point, *La laïcité au risque de l'Autre* offers few answers. Other than a few allusions to the

“reasonable accommodations” implemented by the French Canadians and a call for a more hospitable school—one that is more committed to education and relationships than moral sermons—the book has little to say about what kind of secularism we need after the shock of January 2015, particularly once the moment of grand statements and great emotions subsides.

It seems likely that it will take much time, many books, and considerable energy in arguing among ourselves over how to define secularism. It is also likely that declarations of principle, moral sermons, and calls for a return to an idealized past will come to the forefront. It is in resisting this prevailing view that the importance of this book lies, and the reason why it is a key element in the debate we must now deal with.

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