



Race-Blind: Rethinking a French-American Conversation

written by Beth Epstein
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You don't waste your energy fighting the fever; you must only fight the disease. And the disease is not racism. It is greed and the struggle for power.
— Toni Morrison, May 30, 1975

Is France race-blind? For over 30 years this has been one of the foremost concerns framing the work of journalists and scholars from the United States



working on questions of immigration, social conflict, urban policy, and identity in France. Whether it be the question of the disadvantaged French suburbs, disproportionately inhabited by people of immigrant origin, or the ban on headscarf wearing in the public schools, or the interdiction on collecting “ethnic statistics”: these and other events that relate to diversity are regularly received by American observers as evidence of a country so wed to its republican principles that it refuses to tackle its problems of racial discrimination head on. Recently described in *The New Yorker* as a “distorting force” (July 16, 2018; see also Piser 2018), French race-blindness has been critiqued by observers from across the Atlantic for upholding illusory claims to universality, for serving as a screen behind which the country’s essential “whiteness” is concealed, and for obfuscating, under the guise of enlightened emancipation, the discriminating effects of racialized social orders and their defence of the status quo (among others, Beaman 2017; Keaton et al. 2012; Kleinman 2019). United by a common and not unfounded wariness about the French integration project, these accounts sustain what many in France contend to be a particularly American focus on race and difference as fundamental principles of social and political life.

Since the early 2000s these concerns have also received an important hearing in France, reflected in a significant number of scholarly works, political tracts, films, websites and social movements that wrestle with the race question and its place in France historically and in the present day. The scholarly debates on these questions are legion; organizations such as the *Indigènes de la République*, the CRAN (*Conseil Représentatif des Associations Noires*), the Mwasi Collectif, the Brigades Anti-Nérophobie and others that bring attention to racism and their members’ experience of it have further contributed to a landscape of post-colonial critique that has sought to re-frame debates about French identity and belonging in significant ways. The US experience figures prominently in this discussion, with “Anglo-Saxon” theory – multiculturalism, intersectionality, critical race theory, whiteness studies — providing a significant source of critique and reflection, and triumphant stories of American minority achievement serving as a foil against which the French equivalent is imagined to come up short. Not



without controversy, these trends seem to provide evidence – or so some like to argue — of a growing convergence between the US and France with respect to the way racial matters in the two countries are framed.

Is France race-blind? More pertinent is to ask how the republican configuration and its multiple effects impact how differences in France are constituted, and the social and political consequences that ensue.

As I write this my son brings to my attention the news of yet another heinous police killing of a black man in the United States. In France where we live, we watch in desperation as the US continues to slide into heart-breaking recrimination and fatal division. A young man “of color”, my son reminds me he is subject to similar forms of discrimination in France: the disproportionate incidence of police harassment and violence against young black and brown men is all too known and shows no signs of abating. I know my son is right and yet I know also that these parallels should not be facilely made. Originally from the US, I have moved regularly between these French and American renderings for the past 20+ years. On the one hand the histories of racial oppression and the racist content of contemporary acts of discrimination in both countries must not and cannot be denied; on the other I am disturbed by how, as a consequence, the vast differences of scale and in practices of collective engagement, social integration, and distribution of resources between the two countries become obscured. It is critical, I argue, not to lose sight of those differences. To do so is to risk reducing race or difference to a simple demographic factor alone; it is to lose sight of the ideological and organizational arrangements that mediate how people imagine themselves and others and the contours of the civic spaces that they share; and it is to feed into perilous understandings of race as impervious to context — “essentially there rather than historically composed,” as the sociologist Julie Bettie puts it (2014:39) – that comfort neoliberal agendas promoting accumulation at the cost of social programs. Such configurations reinforce an idea of race as free-floating and causative, as if it is “race” which creates conflict, and not the other way around.



French republicanism does, to be sure, offer an oblique rejoinder to post-structuralist analyses that insist on the primacy of difference and identity as keys to unlocking enduring structures of inequality. Within the republican framework, identity concerns are positioned as non-vital components of social life that are not to intrude on the quotidian challenge of building a cohesive collective sphere. Difference is not denied in this schema but is, rather, to be transcended, the better for people of all walks of life to come together and locate the shared interests that allow them to build a common core. For its defenders, the beauty of this ideal lies in its defence of abstraction, wherein people are not tied *de facto* to primordial categories but able to imagine themselves and others in abstract terms. The republican pact is thus considered a bulwark against the solidification of discrete, integral ethnocultural groups, a prelude to civic participation, and a necessary defence against the essentialisms of racial thought.

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“An abyss built upon the abyss, the emptiness...the unspeakable, the unmentionable, though thought by almost all. Say it not, but act in its name even as its effects are denied, are in denial” (Goldberg 2006:338). For the philosopher David Theo Goldberg, the consequence, not only in France but also in other countries of Europe where race is deemed unsayable, is a masquerade. “No race here. No imagination of the racial because the terms are deadened, taken away...Buried. But buried alive” (2006:338). It is easy to concede with Goldberg that official French “race-blindness” does not match up to the complexity of French life on the ground, where multiple forms of difference, many of them the product of racist and colonial histories, circulate and play out in significant ways. Important scholarly work and social movements of the past several decades that demand a reckoning of France’s colonial history and of the compromised implementation of its enlightenment promise have moved these discussions in significant ways. At stake here however is also how those past and present events



are named and mobilised, and the distinct conceptual, political and social practices to which those namings and mobilisations give rise. As a symbolically charged piece of everyday politics, the republican ideal extends deep into multiple arenas of French social life, shaping multiple discourses about civics, allocation of resources, and forms of acceptable practice. Is France race-blind? More pertinent is to ask how the republican configuration and its multiple effects impact how differences in France are constituted, and the social and political consequences that ensue.

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Deep-rooted concerns about “solidarity” and the destabilizing effects of “social exclusion,” for example, are direct emanations of this ideal that reflect broader concerns about the importance of social cohesion for the advancement of economic and political life. While hardly disinterested – pushing against “social fracture” is a way to protect one’s own interests as much as it is an effort to ensure that others do not falter and fall – such principles underscore a conceptualisation of the social as made up of interdependent parts that positions the pursuit of the common interest as a political project. It is this, among other things, which underlies staunch defence of the French state’s increasingly fragile social welfare net, including universal health care, dramatically low-cost university education, housing and transportation subsidies, and a panoply of other forms of assistance designed to help individuals and families struggling to make ends meet. Such services are, to be sure, in the process of being eroded as successive governments appeal to neoliberal arguments about global competitiveness; they continue to stand in stark contrast however to the radical dismantling of public support that has so dramatically impacted American society since the Reagan era. How many Americans know, for example, that economically disadvantaged families in France can receive assistance to help pay for their children’s school supplies, send their kids on summer vacation, or allow



a parent to stay at home to tend to a sick child? While hardly a panacea for the difficulties sustained by families touched by economic insecurity and unemployment, these and other realities of French life have a direct impact on the way people of various backgrounds are positioned and position themselves in French society. More important for my current purposes, they reflect key ideological concerns about the role of the state, solidarity and citizenship that are deeply imbricated in conceptualizations of race and diversity and the way these play out in everyday life. One has to wonder how far such programs could go toward curing the American racial divide.

I argue that analysis of racial matters cannot be divorced from these and other social, economic, and political concerns.

In making this argument I do not mean to suggest that we should therefore close our eyes to these actions' discriminating effects; I argue rather that analysis of racial matters cannot be divorced from these and other social, economic, and political concerns. Should we not, after all, be raising similar questions about the relationship between the way diversity is codified in the United States and the privatisation of basic goods and services that has proved so devastating for so many of the US's most vulnerable citizens? It is precisely in relation to such neoliberal reforms that these questions find their greatest urgency; if we want to understand how such reforms are wielded then we must pay special attention to the way they act on and are sustained by shifting representations of social difference. The brutal death of George Floyd is yet one more tragic case in point. As the crisis unfolds, it is not only the grievous history of racial oppression in America that is playing out before the world.

In France too, of course, the past 40 years have seen a significant rise in inequality and racially-inflected social tensions. These are more often than not signified by sensationalised depictions of the notorious French suburbs, which over the course of the past decades have become disproportionately inhabited by immigrants and their descendants. Typically portrayed under signs of violence



and disorder, the suburbs have become sites of stigma that exist in contradistinction to the “ghettos of the rich,” inhabited by the mostly white bourgeoisie (Pinçon & Pinçon-Charlot 2016). These and other trends lend themselves to a racial reading; what needs excavating here however is not the demonstration that such phenomena provide that race exists in France, but the historic, economic, and political forces that have brought such disparities into being. What has been the effect of the retrenchment of state services and the whittling away of public support, not only on economic conditions but also on broader conceptions of shared responsibility for the commonweal? How do notions of distinction, difference, merit, austerity, and inclusion conspire to corrode arguments for comprehensive social programs, cast aspersion on practices of solidarity, and sustain entrenched structures of privilege? As the stigmatization of the *banlieue* feeds into increasingly fixed understandings of France and its “others,” so has it had a negative impact on policies intended to aid in the development of social and ethnically “mixed” cities and towns (while here too comparison with the United States is instructive: according to a study from 2011, the probability of living in a highly segregated neighborhood is ten times higher for African-Americans in major metropolitan cities such as Chicago and New York than for North or sub-Saharan Africans living in Paris and surrounding towns (Préteceille 2011)). All too frequently overlooked as a result are the flourishing forms of cultural pluralism and civic engagement that also characterise life in these towns, which not only belie overdetermined portrayals of France and its “others” but beg the question of who gains most from racialized depictions of the disadvantaged *banlieue*. It is these questions, about racialized forms of inequality and their effects, that in this moment of insecurity and crisis most critically demand our attention.

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