Chetcuti-Osorovitz, Natacha, and Sandrine Sanos. "Contemporary Feminisms and the Secularism Controversies: A Model of Emancipation." *Women's Activism and "Second Wave" Feminism*. By Barbara Molony and Jennifer Nelson. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. 63–78. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474250542.ch-003>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 12:18 UTC.

Copyright © Barbara Molony, Jennifer Nelson and Contributors 2017. Released under a CC BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>). You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

Contemporary Feminisms and the Secularism Controversies: A Model of Emancipation

Natacha Chetcuti-Osorovitz (translated by Sandrine Sanos)

[T]heories [of ideology, of subject formations] cannot afford to overlook the category of representation in its two senses. They must note how the staging of the world in representation—its scene of writing, its Darstellung—dissimulates the choice of and need for “heroes,” paternal proxies, agents of power—Vertretung . . . [R]adical practice should attend to this double session of representation rather than reintroduce the individual subject through totalizing concepts of power and desire.¹

The question of the relation between religion, secularism, and gender equality has been a consistent feature of French political debates since the 1989 controversy, or the Headscarf Affair, when three Muslim girls were expelled from their middle-school in northern France because they refused to take off their headscarf.² These debates reveal the ways contemporary French feminism has been the subject of reconfigurations and divisions. As historian Joan W. Scott has shown, although many have argued there is an alliance between gender equality and the separation of Church and State, this was never a central concern during the secularization process undertaken during the Third Republic. However, the “headscarf,” which is now taken as a sign of the absence of gender equality, women’s emancipation, and secularity, has now become an “iconic sign of difference.”³ Debates and discussions have therefore insistently focused on the headscarf’s visibility, turning it into a recurring topic of discussion. As such, it is an especially pertinent site of analysis of the remapping of contemporary French feminist thought and activism.

The 2004 ban on “conspicuous religious symbols” in public schools and the recent debates regarding same-sex marriage illuminate these feminist reconfigurations. Prior to these legislative efforts, European states such as Germany, France, and Belgium had begun to more actively oversee the institutional and religious place of Islam in society in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Controversies over the question of Islam have often opposed feminists against anticolonialists, antisexist against antiracists, and anticapitalists against social liberals. Such tensions and oppositions (especially prevalent during struggles against heteronormativity

and homonationalism) bring to light new theoretical and political developments that have shaped French feminism. Scholars have identified these as "classical republicanism" and "critical republicanism."⁴ They have opposed one another over how they understand the secular contract (defined by political scientist Jean Bauberot as the demise of religion's role as an overarching institution in the wake of the 1905 legislation on separation of church and state). This interpretive conflict has contributed to the emergence of racialized minorities' speech and actions within both feminism and the public sphere, which have taken place within the larger context of changing modes of feminist activism. Until then, feminist activism had defined itself through a universalist vision of gender equality. At the same time, divergent discourses that contested the hegemonic representation of feminist and LGBTQI struggles have denounced the normative Western national framework that feminist activism appeared trapped in.⁵

This new stage in the critique of relationships of domination was further shaped by a loss of feelings of national belonging and the increase of feminist claims for equality. In these debates, controversies, and developments, secularism stands as a prism of sociological analysis and a question at stake in equality claims. Within the context of the reshaping of religious pluralism claimed by minorities, the question of secularism has therefore played a central role in the reconfiguration of feminist politics and alliances.

In this chapter, I will explore the ways in which the "secular contract" has been redefined by a range of actors and explore contemporary feminist articulations of the relationship between citizenship and the secular contract. To do so, I will focus on an analysis of the feminist controversies that erupted around the ban on conspicuous religious symbols in schools, domestic violence, and marriage reform. Building upon the analysis of texts authored by experts, activists, and engaged intellectuals over the last ten years, I will show how a variety of feminist "counter-publics" have recast their emancipatory project. Analyzing the tensions between feminism, secularism, and citizenship allows us to grasp how academics and activists both contributed to the emergence of new public discursive norms: how have the power relations denounced by individuals, who were marked because they are women, racialized minorities, or religious followers, reshaped politics?⁶ Within a context of gendered and racialized discrimination and marginalization, how might we accommodate different forms of equality, be they political or experiential? It is important to note that, as political scientist Valérie Amiraux has argued, the racialization imposed upon European Muslims has taken place within a specific European racial context. Scholars have demonstrated how the very idea of "European identity" (or Europeanness) is an enduring political project relying on a cultural coding that obscures discourses of race while ensuring race's constitutive and disciplinary social role.⁷ Analyzing these contemporary political configurations is an especially urgent task since it goes beyond the issue of religion or feminism and reveals how, within the larger context of a destabilization of the principle of secularism, discrimination based on gender, race, and sexuality shape power relations at the heart of European societies.

On equality of rights and secularism: The secular contract at the heart of feminism

French feminism emerged as a collective political and activist movement in the second half of the nineteenth century. Already various feminist organizations and groups diverged over the issue of secularization and gender equality. One of the main points of discussion focused on the Catholic vision of the “virtuous woman,” which was at complete odds with feminism’s support of secularization in the name of equality between men and women. Two trends could already be distinguished: while a critical, anticlerical, and more left-inclined feminist movement began organizing, other feminists mobilized around a version of secularism that they understood to be a guarantee of neutrality and pluralism. Their difference was evident in their responses to events such as the Dreyfus Affair, one of the important trials of late nineteenth-century France. Those who believed secularism to be a neutral concept often sat on the opposite side of anticlerical and leftist feminists who supported Jewish army captain Alfred Dreyfus, who had been accused of treason. Feminists’ involvement on either side of the issue depended in large part on their relationship to Catholicism and republican secularism. Anti-Semitism shaped feminists’ positions as much as did their understanding of republicanism’s nature and legitimacy.⁸ However, despite these differences, the prevailing feminist thought throughout the century remained committed to universalist equality.

More recently, what has been termed “second wave feminism” or, in France, “MLF feminism,” which emerged in the wake of the May 1968 student uprisings and took its cue from Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, focused mostly on the body and reproductive rights.⁹ Feminists claimed the right of women to control their own bodies and campaigned for the legalization of contraception and abortion as well as equality within the family and the labor force. Those concerns shaped most of 1970s and 1980s activism. Secularism was never a central concern but still functioned as an implicit structuring principle.

Second wave feminist activists protested against the patriarchal and heterosexual underpinnings of the family, the (Catholic) Church, and the French (or Western) State.¹⁰ They aimed to undo the main philosophical, scientific, theoretical, and religious structures at the heart of society in order to escape the educational and familial demands that shaped individuals and upon which, they argued, institutions were built. Feminist critique focused especially upon the coercive nature of heterosexuality and the manner in which sexual difference was given meaning through the principle of complementarity rather than equality. At stake was the dismantling of the cultural “figure of veneration” between virtue and purity embodied in the related figures of the Virgin Mary and the housewife.¹¹ Ultimately, twentieth-century feminist struggles expressed women’s desire to escape the subjection to a power system that claimed neutrality and universalism, yet kept them both invisible and marked as different.

The model of secularism forged within the French republican universalist tradition and inherited from the struggles for civil and political rights profoundly shaped French second wave feminism, irrespective of its different incarnations. This influence, in

turn, determined the bounds of legitimate public speech and a model of emancipation that was taken for granted. The particular French version of secularism was enshrined through late nineteenth-century laws regarding secular and free public school as well as the 1905 law instituting the separation of church and state that aimed to eradicate and overcome regional and religious specificities.¹² This vision of secularism presumes a homogeneous public sphere that does not necessarily reject religion. Secularism was therefore a paradoxical enterprise: on the one hand, it eroded the role of the Church; on the other, it inaugurated an increasing rationalization of life that sociologist Max Weber has termed the "disenchantment of the world" and a secularization of the state and labor. This process that culminated in the "secular contract" posed anew the question of how to mobilize social links within a collective identity.¹³

It is this unique conception of secularism that has pervaded the kinds of feminist activism that came about in the 1970s. Discussion did not focus on the role of religion in the social sphere; instead feminists criticized, and even rejected, all religions, since they were argued to be the means of women's oppression because of their reliance on a hierarchical vision of sexual difference whereby "woman" was conceived as inferior. Second wave feminists centered their work on the struggle for greater equality and universality, focusing on legislative gains and the achievements of rights for men and women. If secularism remained an implicit and invisible foundation to feminists' arguments in the 1970s, what then precipitated this dramatic shift to an explicit engagement with the question of religion and secularity?

Feminisms and postcolonialism: Claiming full citizenship

Beginning in the 1980s, feminists renewed their modes of activism and redefined the stakes of their political involvement mostly around the question of secularism, which they now understood to be a site of resistance. This shift can be explained by the institutionalization of feminism and the demographic transformation of foreign and immigrant populations living in France. It was at that time that differences emerged between those focusing on diversity and secularization models and those critical of cultural relativism. The simultaneous emergence of a subaltern discourse from minority groups reveals how concrete resistance practices were shaped by a political context focused on social movements and a critical reflection on "modern forms of colonialism." Sociologist Didier Lapeyronnie has shown that this relationship was at work in political discourses interpolating immigrants, and especially their children. Second-generation immigrants were called upon to integrate when, in fact, they had already done so.¹⁴ Examining the place of religions in this instance is especially important as it highlights how religion shaped social relationships, in part because of the plurality of religious expressions that now occupied the public sphere.¹⁵ Sociologists Daniele Hervieu-Léger and François Champoin have explored how the loss of authority of traditional institutions coupled with a greater visibility and increase of claims made by marginalized social groups created tensions. In light of multiple forms of sociability that have influenced religious transformations—especially within Islam and Judaism—"secular virtue" is no longer seen as the foundation of national

and social consensus. Rather, it has become evident that we face a different sort of modernity.¹⁶ It is not “less religious” but produces a different kind of relationship to the religious. Beset by what might be termed a “secularization crisis,” France especially seemed less well equipped to deal with the recognition of multiple religious “identities” than other European countries.¹⁷

Such a “crisis” was shaped by the ways in which in the last thirty years Islam had become a site of otherness and an especially visible minority within European nations, even more so in France. The representation of Islam as both visible and “other” has been the cause of transnational expressions of panic and fear in the face of what has become the symptom of national collapse.¹⁸ We should note that the use of religion or religiosity in order to affirm minority collective identities is a process that Emile Durkheim first alerted us to. It is not so much religion (as faith) that is at stake, but a form of sociocultural infrastructure allowing individuals to come together in a collective identity, irrespective of religious practice or attachment, through the establishment of rituals and dogmas. Religion, or the rejection of religion, can even become the site of political identity, as late twentieth-century feminism has shown.

The coming to power of the left in 1981 and the subsequent creation of a Ministry for the Rights of Women, headed by Yvette Roudy, contributed to the institutionalization of French feminism.¹⁹ Such state investment in the fight against discrimination and inequality shaped the emergence of what has been termed “state feminism.”²⁰ That process facilitated the assimilation and appropriation of gender equality rhetoric into state discourse. Such institutionalization unwittingly created a gap between principled declarations on the question of (gender) inequality, proposed legislative solutions, and most women’s actual lives, whether they were activists or not. Consequently, secularism inhabited a different place in activist and state feminist rhetoric throughout the 1980s and 1990s and played a role in transforming some of the political stakes of discussions.

The explicit focus on secularization took place at the same time that second- and third-generation North African immigrants (whose presence in France is the result of a history of colonialism) were increasingly singled out as figures of otherness. These groups’ alleged religious attachment was identified as the origin and symbol of immigrant women’s inequality and oppression. According to this perception, Islam is nothing more than an irreducible site of difference and otherness. The equation of immigrants and Islam to otherness, in turn, obscured and fragmented such racialized groups’ political claims: what claims they made were subsumed under the question of secularism, which was now the issue dominating public discourse.

The feminization of immigration in the 1980s, thanks to the principle of “familial reunification,” has had a profound influence upon the ways secularism was understood, especially in light of the religious, political, and sociological dimensions of this new phenomenon. Those changes have been the subject of controversy. According to Jean Bauberot, this periodization is misleading because it focuses more on secularism rather than the analysis of institutional forms of religious coexistence within the French republican state. Instead, for him, a “new secular contract” is warranted. Echoing this diagnosis, philosopher Etienne Balibar asked in 1991 whether “secularism should be closed or open.” For Balibar, scientism operated as the religious limit of a “closed secularism” while ecumenism functioned as the limit of an “open secularism.”²¹

Following the feminization of immigration, immigrant Algerian women began participating in a variety of organizations through the course of the next two decades, becoming especially visible in the 1990s. As Françoise Gaspard has argued, it was only then that French society (including French feminist movements) appeared to have recognized the enduring consequences of "family reunification" and familial immigration, the new place of Islam in French society, at the same time that both the far-right and Islamic fundamentalism began gaining importance.²²

From the 1980s, two trends surfaced within French feminism and the public sphere: on the one hand, groups such as the Movement of Black Women leveled a powerful critique of the anthropological and sociological foundations that structured power relations between men and women.²³ They also pointed to the ways religion acted as a mechanism for the reproduction and justification of power relations. Another group, the Coordination of Black Women, created in 1978—as well as other organizations of African women—was especially critical of "cultural relativism" which, according to its members, legitimated gendered violence such as polygamy, genital mutilation, and other forms of gendered oppression, rather than condemning them as human rights violations. At the same time, they publicly denounced the racialization of "black bodies" and the naturalization of colonial policies. Those topics were the focus of a March 8, 1980 demonstration.

At the same time, second-generation North African immigrants started organizing politically. Their arrival on the political scene was characterized by a central claim: the demand for equality of rights as a foundation for their membership in French society and in the French nation. One of the earlier expressions of this politicization, signaling at once greater visibility and a different form of political activism, was the 1984 "Marche des Beurs."²⁴ Embedded in claims for equality of rights was a pointed critique of the manner in which religion had become a "natural" and overdetermining site of difference assigned to North African immigrants. Against the argument that an Algerian (whether French citizen or not) was necessarily only Muslim, young French men and women of North African origin instead publicly called for their recognition as "naturally" or fully French.²⁵

Demanding recognition as full French citizens worked against the racialization that had, until then, characterized minority groups. It proved to be one of the central issues for the last two decades of the twentieth century. Two concerns shaped these groups' political demands: the racialization of gender relations and the oppression of foreign or migrant women (especially women of Algerian origin) by men as well as by cultural and religious communities to which they belonged. The 1989 Headscarf Affair erupted within this larger context, which also shaped the debates in its wake (on polygamy, genital mutilation, forced marriage, coed sports, or the wearing of religious signs in schools) that most commentators and scholars deemed related to the question of the headscarf. The year 1989 therefore proved a decisive turning point: from that moment, women belonging to minority groups began participating more widely in feminist organizations. Unlike second wave feminism, which had implicitly relied on a secularization model as a foundation for rights, contemporary feminism rearticulated its goals around a variety of issues such as antisexism, antiracism, anti-imperialism, and the struggle against heterosexism. These feminists pointed to the many experiences of

oppression and focused especially on a critique of “classical” secular republicanism. Their emphasis on plurality and diversity of experiences contested the assumption of homogeneity of the category “women” that feminists too often presumed.

While the Headscarf Affair has been the subject of many discussions, what seems especially important is the ways in which this controversy helped crystallize political affiliations and solidified a variety of feminist positions on this question.²⁶ The headscarf gave a new face to immigration, which became especially visible in the realm of education, the quintessential republican institution and embodiment of secularism, thereby signifying the emergence of “an unexpected Islam” in French politics.²⁷

From that moment on, and in response to the Headscarf Affair, two positions faced off within the ranks of feminist organizations and left-wing political parties. Proponents of a “tolerant feminism” disagreed with the exclusion of the three veiled young schoolgirls from school. Antiracist NGOs such as SOS Racisme and the Movement against Racism and for Friendship between Peoples (Mouvement contre le Racisme et pour l’Amitié entre les Peuples, or MRAP) explained that these students’ exclusion was symptomatic of a desire to “sequester Islam within a ghetto” and pointed to the racist underpinnings of such a decision. Most critics, including leftist parties and feminists, called for persuasion rather than exclusion. They sided with the November 27, 1989 State Council decision that the ban on the headscarf could and should be imposed in the face of instances of propaganda or disruption to teaching. (For instance, when young girls refused to attend biology lessons because of their religious faith or because their practice of sports was seen to be impossible if they were to keep to their religious customs. Playing soccer while wearing a headscarf was seen as impossible. There are also cases of young girls asking to be excused from swimming because it was a mixed-sex activity.) Secularism alone, they argued, was still best able to protect all differences and avoid religious proselytism. Furthermore, they explained that focusing on the headscarf would exoticize women’s oppression and would produce a set of racist assumptions under the guise of ending discrimination against women.²⁸

As a result, feminist discussions centered on offering a new analytical prism for sexist discrimination when, as historian Florence Rochefort has explained, “the veiled young girl is perceived to be the expression of the Iranian revolution and the rise of fundamentalism in Arabo-Muslim countries.”²⁹ That issue (of how to rethink their analytical framework) was especially vexing since, at the time, most feminist groups proclaimed their commitment to a universalist model of women’s rights and allied themselves with North African and Middle-Eastern secular feminist organizations involved in denouncing the headscarf’s reactionary and abusively compulsory nature. The figure of the “veiled woman” was incompatible with feminist emancipation ideals founded on republicanism, secularism, and the right to one’s body. Prominent feminist activists such as the lawyer Gisèle Halimi and philosopher Elisabeth Badinter, as well as feminist organizations like Planned Parenthood (Planning Familial), the League of the Rights of Women and the Ruptures collective, especially defended this position. According to Rochefort again, the headscarf became, in effect, the lightning rod for the reactivation of a secular imaginary, opposing the figure of “the religious woman” allegedly subjected to some archaic obscurantism to the national (republican and secular) figure of Marianne, the allegoric figure of the French Republic.³⁰ Feminists

and political parties pondered the same questions: What version of secularism should be embraced and what legislative efforts might be used, and to what effect? Should one ban or tolerate the veil? What was the best position in order to avoid the exclusion of young Muslim women?

State institutions similarly took an active interest in these issues, turning the question of discrimination against women into a national affair and bringing about a reconfiguration of feminist strategies. The years following the Headscarf Controversy witnessed a flurry of legislative efforts around the question of gendered discrimination. An entire apparatus was devised, which included: the repression of polygamy (1993); labor equality between men and women (2001); the ban of conspicuous symbols in school (2004); the creation of an advisory commission for the monitoring of discrimination called the HALDE (Haute Autorité de Lutte contre les Discriminations et pour l'Égalité, 2004); the reinforcement of prevention and repression of domestic violence, especially genital mutilation and forced marriage (2006); and a law forbidding that a woman or a girl "hide her face" (in cases of burkas) in public spaces (2010).³¹

Meanwhile, feminists remained divided over the presence of veiled women among their ranks. The lens of religion, culture, postcolonialism, and secularism (which no longer seemed self-evident) shaped analyses and posed the question of categorizing women. In effect, whether it was around the headscarf, polygamy, genital mutilation, or the refusal of same-sex educational institutions, these issues brought about a reconfiguration of secularism as feminist politics' organizing principle.

Emancipation strategies and the reconfiguration of contemporary feminist politics

Unlike other European countries, the French "secular contract" is structured through a unifying discourse that emerged in response to the disappearance of Catholicism's public role in the regulation of gender roles and sexuality. Religion has not completely vanished, however. While mainstream discourse understands gender and sexual emancipation derived from secularism, religion is still at work in actual social and political debates over sexuality and family. This became evident, for instance, during the discussions over the proposed legalization of same-sex marriage and adoption. Such interventions of the religious in the political should not be seen as outside of contemporary feminist political reconfigurations. Instead, they require that we analyze what kinds of discourses were mobilized in support of the recognition of "multiple identities"—ethnic, religious, social, and sexual. How do we think about the link between "multiple identities" and the singular republican conception of *the French* identity? How did republicanism insert itself in the articulation of feminist claims?

From "classical republicanism" to a critique of "cultural conformism"

A number of feminist groups have relied on the principle of secularism as it was enshrined in the 1905 law separating Church and State and in the 1948 (United Nations) Universal Declaration of Human Rights which included gender equality as

a human right.³² Since the 1980s, these feminist groups have included the Association for Solidarity with Democratic Algerian Women (Association de solidarité avec les femmes algériennes démocrates, or ASFAD), Neither Whores Nor Doormats (NWND) (Ni Putes ni Soumises), and the network of Women in Solidarity (Femmes Solidaires).³³ They have embraced this political vision, foregrounding the principle that every individual possesses rights.³⁴ Activists and intellectuals in this camp proclaimed their commitment to universalism, which they understood as the refusal of cultural relativism that, according to them, gave different value to women's oppression depending on one's culture or religion. They accused proponents of "critical republicanism"³⁵ of promoting a dangerous particularism that would empty women's rights of its universal content. They argued, for instance, that condoning certain practices restricting women's bodies in the name of religious laws (such as the *Sharia*) would allow each and every society to define women's rights as it saw fit. Consequently, they explained only strict observance of universalism would do. Because they understood republican schools to be the site of molding students as citizens and of individual freedom, the headscarf should not be allowed within their walls as it remained a political symbol of women's oppression.³⁶ Other groups were more concerned with drawing attention to internal community violence, such as NWND and the network of Secular Iranian and Algerian Feminists (Féministes Laïques Algériennes et Iraniennes). These groups also supported the 2004 ban on the headscarf in schools.³⁷ These groups, however, founded their claims upon their experience of racism and racialization. They explained that they aimed to fight "the sexism of Muslim families" and the silence that surrounded gendered violence which, they argued, was the consequence of "indigenous cultures." To them, silence fostered enduring gendered discrimination and unequal power relations between men and women. Like other feminist republicans, they called for a harmonious and secular society opposed to radical Islam.

Condoning the stoning of women in the name of cultural relativism (and in the name of respect for religious laws such as the *Sharia*) amounted, according to them, to ignoring the degradation of women's status in the name of culture or religion. That, in turn, they argued, would lead to civilization's downfall. Republican feminists' critique extended to all practices perceived to oppress or subjugate women, including the wearing of the veil and the regulation of sexuality (such as the demand for sexual purity before marriage, genital mutilation, or polygamy).³⁸

Against the critique that they were upholding a hegemonic version of female emancipation, these feminists contended that cultural relativism must be fought because human rights are not a Western invention but a principle shared across other differences. At the same time, they were also critical of proponents of radical secularity. In this vein, journalist Caroline Fourest has explained that "Multiculturalism tends to view every religious claim as a cultural claim. On the other hand, too narrow a conception of secularism tends to view every religious expression as a political one."³⁹

Furthermore, republican feminists have been especially critical of postcolonial racism. They point to state policies that, they argue, demand an excessive assimilation at the expense of any collective project or the forging of solidarity among different cultural and ethnic groups, which should stand as the symbol of a society to which

every citizen feels committed. Such a normative vision of assimilation, they explain, would only solidify identity categories and force a turn inward. Novelist Wassyra Tamzali notes, "Let's not forget that immigration was already a 'problem' a century ago: Italians and Spaniards suffered violence in the South of France. It is even more so today since we are looking at immigration from non-European populations ... Still, discrimination and racism shapes the relationship between these immigrants and host populations."⁴⁰

Republican feminists remain skeptical of any (state) invocation of "diversity," especially since it appears that the state only appeals to women in terms of the specific, historical, community capital derived from their supposed "race" or "culture." Culture is invoked insofar as it relates to "diversity." According to this framework, "Muslim women" are called upon as the embodiment/symbol of the relationship between the Western and Muslim worlds.⁴¹ This rigid identity category provides the illusion that diversity is indeed being assimilated into a modern world by adding "color" to politics. By making Muslim women hyper-visible in the public sphere and staging their symbolic presence, the state can both anchor and justify its legislative efforts in the field of gendered discrimination by passing laws protecting women against violence and promoting equality in political representation. Activists and scholars have been especially critical of what they have deemed instrumentalization by right-wing parties, on the one hand, which insist upon denying familial origin, and, on the other hand, left-wing policies that overemphasize the issue of the headscarf under the guise of a postcolonial recognition of cultural diversity.

Authors such as noted Algerian writer Assia Djébar have tackled the problem of staging and visibility of the female body in writings about the silence and the forbidden gaze imposed upon Algerian women in the 1980s. Indeed, minority activists who support secular universalism have adopted controversial positions in regard to the burqa and, more recently, the decision by the French Court of Cassation—France's highest appeals court—to annul the 2008 layoff of a day care center teacher because she refused to take off her headscarf at work.⁴² NWND activists have, for instance, publicly decried the simultaneously disabling and disabled gaze imposed upon women. Building upon analyses regarding the invisibility of minority women and their resistance strategies—first articulated by Colette Guillaumin on the intersection of gender and race and Christine Bard on the symbolic politics of women's fashion—these activists have explained that, paradoxically, "veiling" women only makes them more visible in the public sphere while they remain invisible as persons once unveiled. They are women but a representation of Woman, not a sex, but *the sex*.⁴³

Following this logic, some NWND activists have chosen to join the feminist group Femen, which is especially committed to a struggle against religion since they believe religious institutions and doctrines are instrumental in the subjection of women's bodies. The Femen movement, which first emerged in Ukraine in 2008, has quickly become a transnational network and a media and social network sensation. Their media presence can be explained not so much by the political questions they raise but by the very strategies they have adopted: to desexualize female bodies precisely, and ironically, by publicly exposing their breasts while demonstrating.

“Classical republican” feminists have therefore favored struggle against sexism as their prime focus. Their alliance with other international feminist groups is symptomatic of their commitment to identifying and eradicating gendered violence.⁴⁴ According to them, all men share a tendency toward sexist violence that some second-generation French men display. They must focus on a “culture of gendered violence” above all. In response to “critical republican” feminists, they ask whether failing to name gendered violence in the case of racialized minorities does not, in and of itself, also constitute a form of racism. Doesn’t upholding the idea of a “native culture” also allow, they ask, the legitimization of women’s oppression?

Critical republicanism and “deracializing” feminism

Critical republicans have focused instead on a critique of the ways imperialism and racism lay at the heart of secularism. They have pointed to the illusory neutrality of republican secularism and to the underlying colonial and ethnocentric underpinnings of feminist politics. Since, according to them, it is racism and discrimination that first and foremost shape identity, they side with victims of racism, irrespective of gender.

Activist groups such as The Rebellious (Les Insoumises) have argued that support for secularism can exist alongside respect for other religions and cultures. They reject (religious) extremism while fighting against the specific forms of oppression that women who are racialized endure. However, they also reject any form of state paternalism and bemoan the lack of inclusion of women from the “suburbs” (French minority populations are often concentrated in the suburban areas around large cities) into what they call mainstream feminism. Their overarching critique is especially directed at “classical republican” feminism that, they argue, presumes a superiority inherited from a bourgeois identity. As a consequence, their political activism has been especially noticeable as it repeatedly calls for the unity of feminism around the struggle against sexism and class inequalities while calling for transgenerational alliances.⁴⁵

Organizations such as The Natives of the Republic (Les Indigènes de la République) have called for the end of what they consider to be their marginalization and subaltern position as minorities and allies within French feminism. They have publicly refused to situate themselves solely in reference to female or Muslim oppression, instead bringing to the fore their struggle against imperialism and postcolonialism. Their prism of analysis has resulted in a different interpretation of secularism unmoored from its universalist assumptions and underpinnings. Sociologist Christine Delphy has, for instance, argued that legislative efforts such as the ban on conspicuous religious symbols in schools and the debates that have taken place among universalist feminists (or “classical republican”) are nothing more than a racialization of the kinds of social issues created by enduring discrimination. In short, Delphy adds, most participants in the debate instrumentalize egalitarian feminist rhetoric, which amounts to a form of “respectable racism.”⁴⁶ Others, such as essayists Felix Ewanjé-Epée and Stella Magliani-Belkacem, have echoed Delphy, furthering her critique of “white” or “hegemonic feminism” of racism and colonialism.⁴⁷ They explain the issue is not so much pointing to the imperialist instrumentalization of feminism or the LGBTQI movement as racist, but grasping the “convergence of interests” between imperialism and the dominant

impulses within these movements—a convergence, they suggest, might be best understood as “collusion.”⁴⁸

Consequently, these activists criticize the manner in which the prevailing belief that the headscarf can only be a symbol of women's oppression or inferiority has become hegemonic within French feminism and helped justify its ban. They stress instead that wearing the headscarf is a political statement that must be understood as a distinctly political form of visibility and solidarity that women exhibit toward their own culture and social group. The (feminist) debate over the headscarf has therefore framed the issue in terms of rights and gender equality, when it merely reinforced an “ethnocentric universalism.”⁴⁹ State policies and “classical republican” feminists, alongside those “accidental feminists” (who have instrumentalized feminist rhetoric), have designated the headscarf and burqa as the sole visible signs of oppression, thereby implying that gendered violence only affects foreign or migrant women. A similar fear runs through these activists' texts, warning that both minority and racialized men and women purportedly defended by universalist feminists are actually further stigmatized by them. “Critical republican” activists therefore refuse to part from those they see as belonging to the same social group as themselves, for instance, showing solidarity by wearing the headscarf. At the same time, they ask “classical republican” feminists to consider the following: does refusing to stand apart from men who belong to the same social group as themselves, or choosing to wear the veil, necessarily mean embracing one's original community's prevailing hierarchies and norms? Does that also mean an inability to understand criticism of social inequities? Does it mean breaking off with the secular republican context?

Just like the former generation of second wave feminists, “critical republican” feminists emphasize women's right to control and regulate their own bodies as a founding principle of their own emancipation. However, because they reject the idea that there may be only one model of bodily freedom, their activism has taken a different form. For instance, in response to the Femen action which, in April 2013, involved its members publicly revealing their naked breasts in support of an arrested Tunisian Femen member and in protest of the limitation of women's rights among Arabo-Muslims, a group named Muslim Women against Femen publicly claimed their right to live out their faith as they wished. To further emphasize that they were not oppressed, they included the slogan “Muslimah Pride” (proud to be a Muslim) on their group's website.⁵⁰

According to scholar Smaïn Laacher, explicitly aligning with men or with a specific religious practice (be it visible or not) should be understood as a sign of these women's agency. Forging these alliances allows these women to stake out their agency, redefine their ability to maneuver in the political and social area, and map out the affiliations that determine their identity to one's original social group, to feminism, or against sexism and racism. It also allows them to widen their range of possible affiliations while offering a critique of the limits of “classical republican” secularism that refuses any particular form of affiliation in favor of a universalist model. What appears is a will to determine for oneself the very modes in which one understands emancipation. In a similar, though slightly different, fashion, the organization Lesbians of Color (Lesbiennes Of Color) has chosen what might be seen as a “middle-ground.” They reject

both imperialism and the extremes of feminist movements' debates on secularity.⁵¹ At the same time, they argue against both heterosociality and the overdetermining paradigm of religion, especially radical Islam.

Overall, these feminists' denunciation of the colonial continuum is, in part, a result of the legacy of migration and postcolonialism. It allows them to highlight the relation between the recognition of religious, especially Muslim, minorities' rights and citizenship and the discrimination they face in the public sphere. This legacy similarly frames their analysis of the imbrication of feminist emancipatory strategies and the visibility and "deprivatization" of religion, in opposition to the homogeneity of emancipatory strategies promoted by French feminists who remain committed to a "secular morality."⁵² Undeniably, these analyses have shaped the emergence of a feminist practice seeking to escape a colonial paradigm that orders the world according to the binary opposition of "us" (France and Europe) and "them" (the Others). As is evident, while contemporary French feminists still share a commitment to undoing women's oppression and fighting against gendered discrimination, they part ways in their relation to secularism and the political strategies they favor. Analyzing the tensions that have emerged around feminist reinterpretations of the meaning of French republicanism highlights the manner in which the very foundations of citizenship have been challenged. Strikingly, these challenges derive from a social model that departs from the principle of national solidarity and the expression of "multiple identities." These controversies have, in turn, transformed public opinion, public policy, and opened up ways of envisaging social compromise differently.⁵³

Notes

- 1 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988).
- 2 Collège Gabriel-Havez in Creil (Oise department).
- 3 Valerie Amiraux, "Le port de la 'burqa' en Europe : Comment la religion des uns est devenue l'affaire publique des autres," in *Quand la burqa passe à l'ouest, Enjeux éthiques, politiques et juridiques*, ed. David Koussens and Olivier Roy (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2014), 15–37.
- 4 Cécile Laborde, *Français, encore un effort pour être républicains* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2010).
- 5 Jasbir K. Puar, *Homonationalism. Politiques queer après le 11 septembre* (Paris: Ed. Amsterdam, 2012); Félix Boggio Ewanjé-Épée and Stella Magliani-Belkacem, eds., *Les féministes blanches et l'empire* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2012).
- 6 Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992).
- 7 Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Par Sherene Razack, *Casting Out: The Eviction of Muslims from Western Law and Politics* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2008).
- 8 Florence Rochefort, "Foulard, genre et laïcité en 1989," *Vingtième Siècle* 75 (2002): 145–56.

- 9 Christine Bard, Annie Metz, and Valérie Neveu., eds., *Guide des sources de l'histoire du féminisme* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2006). "MLF" is the commonly used acronym for the political movement Mouvement de Libération des Femmes (or Women's Liberation Front), bringing together various radical, Marxist, and other feminist collectives, organizations, and committees that had mobilized from 1967 to 1970 amid the student movement of May 1968. It is said to have officially emerged in 1970. (The acronym was later infamously copyrighted by psychoanalyst and editor Antoinette Fouque in 1979, unbeknownst to many feminist activists and scholars who protested this but, ultimately, could do nothing.) The three main political movements within second wave feminism are identified as materialist, egalitarian, and essentialist feminism. Alternately, scholars have talked about the opposition between feminist "universalists" and "particularists." See Bibia Pavard, *Si je veux, quand je veux* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2012), 358; and Claude Zaidman, "Le Féminisme," *Les cahiers du CEDREF* 15 (2007): 45–71. On essentialism, see Naomi Schor, "Cet essentialisme qui n'en est pas un: Irigaray à bras-le-corps," in *Féminismes au présent*, *Futur Antérieur* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1993).
- 10 Françoise Picq, *Libération des femmes. Les années mouvements* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1993); Cathy Bernheim, *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes. Textes premiers* (Paris: Stock, 2009); Liliane Kandel, "Génération MLF," *Travail, genre et sociétés* 24 (2010): 4–24.
- 11 Kandel, "Génération MLF"
- 12 Liliane Maury, *Les Origines de l'école laïque en France* (Paris: PUF, 1996). Laws were passed in 1882 (Loi Ferry), 1886 (Loi Goblet), and 1905.
- 13 Jean Baubérot, *La morale laïque contre l'ordre moral* (Paris: Seuil, 1997).
- 14 Didier Lapeyronnie, "L'ordre de l'informe," *Hommes et Migrations* 1211 (1998): 68–82.
- 15 Jean-Claude Monod, *La Querelle de la sécularisation, de Hegel à Blumenberg* (Paris: Vrin, 2002).
- 16 Jean Baubérot, *L'intégrisme républicain contre la laïcité* (La Tour d'Aigües: L'Aube, 2006).
- 17 Françoise Champion, "Les Nouveaux mouvements religieux," *Ethnologie Française* XXX, 4 (2000): 533.
- 18 Amiraux, "Le port de la 'burqa' en Europe"; George Morgan and Scott Poynting, eds., *Global Islamophobia: Muslims and Moral Panic in the West* (Surrey, England; and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012); Alana Lentin and Gavan Titley, *The Crisis of Multiculturalism. Racism in a Neo-liberal Age* (Dublin, Ireland: Zed Books, 2011). These fears and anxieties are connected to and were intensified, especially after January 2014, in France. An example of this is the campaign launched to convince students' parents that the latest state efforts to promote gender equality in school manuals and lessons entitled the "Alphabet of Equality" ("*ABCD de l'Égalité*") were, in fact, efforts to "promote gay and lesbian identity" and dissolve sexual difference. These groups' actions (which aimed to mobilize parents through leafletting and social media) pointedly accused these state policies of encouraging "homosexual proselytism" and "gender undifferentiation." These rumors, presented as facts, were expressed through the prism of anti-Semitism. On anti-Semitic rumors, see Edgar Morin, *La Rumeur d'Orléans* (Paris: Ed. du Seuil, 1969); and Natacha Chetcuti, "Quand les question de genre et d'homosexualités deviennent un enjeu républicain," *Les Temps Modernes* 2, 648 (2014): 241–53.
- 19 Yvette Roudy was member of the Socialist Party, politician, and European parliamentary deputy from 1979 to 1981 as well as Minister for the Rights of Women from 1981 to 1986.

- 20 Marie Malavoy, "De l'état de féminisme au féminisme d'État," in *Pluralité et convergences. La recherche féministe dans la francophonie*, ed. Huguette Dagenais (Montréal: Éditions du Remue-ménage, 1999); Francine Descarries, "Partenariat féministe. Pouvons-nous encore rêver de changer le monde?" in *Pluralité et Convergence*, ed. Huguette Dagenais (Montréal: Les Editions du Remue-Ménage, 1999).
- 21 Etienne Balibar, "Faut-il qu'une laïcité soit ouverte ou fermée ?," *Mots* 27 (1991): 73–80.
- 22 Françoise Gaspard, "Pensons aux musulmanes qui se battent !," *Le Nouvel Observateur* 26 (1989).
- 23 The Movement of Black Women (MBW) was founded in May 1976. It brought together Antillean and African women, most of whom were students, exiles, and intellectuals. Its first public meeting took place in Paris on October 29, 1977. They argued that fighting for women's rights should come second to fighting against imperialism or class oppression, a position that created much resistance and debate among African activist groups. The MBW has mobilized against genital mutilation, polygamy, as well as racism, neocolonialism, and exoticizing and "miserabilist" stereotypes of African women which would explain their supposed "submission." They have also demonstrated against Apartheid, political repression in Africa, and forced expulsion of African immigrants. While the group disbanded in 1980, other similar organizations have since emerged.
- 24 "Beur" is the colloquial form predominantly used by French youth beginning in the early 1980s. It reverses syllables so that the French term "Arabe" becomes "rebeu" that was subsequently shortened to "beur." This was a political self-identifier as well as a generational marker.
- 25 Smäin Laacher, *Femmes invisibles, leurs mots contre les violences* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2008).
- 26 Françoise Gaspard and Farad Khosrokhavar, *Le Foulard et la République* (Paris: La Découverte, 1995); Smäin Laacher, *Femmes invisibles, leurs mots contre les violences* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2008); Florence Rochefort, "Foulard, genre et laïcité en 1989," *Vingtième Siècle* 75 (2002): 145–56.
- 27 Laacher, *Femmes invisibles*, 37.
- 28 Joëlle Brunerie-Kauffmann, Harlem Désir, René Dumont, Gilles Perrault, and Alain Touraine, "Pour une laïcité ouverte?" *Politis* (November 1989).
- 29 Rochefort, "Foulard, genre et laïcité en 1989," 147.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 While designed to address the statistically insignificant numbers of women wearing "burkas" or "niqabs," the law never directly refers to these forms of coverings but speaks to the general violation that "hiding one's face" entails in French secular public space.
- 32 Françoise Gaspard, "Féminisation de la politique? Un regard international," *Travail, genre et sociétés* 2 (2007): 135–8.
- 33 The organization Association for Solidarity with Algerian Women was created on July 5, 1995 in France. It descended from the International Network of Solidarity with Algerian Women (RISFA), created in March 1994, when violence against women in Algeria greatly increased. The French organization included both French and Algerian feminists (who had recently moved to France). Their aim was to help immigrant women win their administrative demands and to "create a solidarity network with Algerian women in order to help them fight discrimination, obscurantism, and fundamentalism, and to support them in their claim to ban the familial code." See: <http://www.asfad.org> (accessed November

- 5, 2013). The most well-known organization is Neither Whores nor Doormats (NWND), created in 2003 in the wake of the murder of Sohane Benziane on October 4, 2002 in the Balzac housing project of Vitry-sur-Seine (Val de Marne department). The organization is designed to fight discrimination and violence against women in (working-class and immigrant) suburbs. Women in Solidarity was created in 1945 and has an advisory status with the United Nations. It is an educational organization designed to help women, both immigrants and others, and it is committed to secularism, equality, and antiracism. It is overseen by Sabine Salmon and belongs to the European network of organizations of men and women for a "secular and feminist Europe." See: <http://femmes-solidaires.org/spip.php?rubrique16> (accessed November 5, 2013).
- 34 Caroline Fourest, *La Dernière Utopie: menaces sur l'universalisme* (Paris: Grasset, 2009); Wassyla Tamzali, *Une femme en colère. Lettre d'Alger aux Européens désabusés* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009).
- 35 Critical republicanism defends the idea of a community founded in the law and common good Voir Maurizio Viroli, "Républicanisme, Lormont," *Editions Le Bord de l'Eau* (2011): 20–21.
- 36 Caroline Fourest, "Ne pas se tromper de combat," *Prochoix* 41 (2007).
- 37 This activist group first became known with a "Letter to our Feminist Friends," published on the website of the feminist magazine *Prochoix* on May 22, 2009. It is secular and "universalist." While calling for equality in politics, labor, and family, it is critical of those in the "Critical Republican" camp that it accuses of "colonial guilt." See: <http://www.prochoix.org/cgi/blog/index.php/2009/05/22/2179-des-feministes-laiques-algeriennes-et-iraniennes-parlent-aux-feministes-de-l-exotisme> (accessed November 5, 2013).
- 38 Caroline Fourest and Taslima Nasreen, *Libres de le dire* (Paris: Flammarion, 2010).
- 39 Fourest, *La Dernière Utopie*, 215.
- 40 Tamzali, *Une femme en colère*, 19.
- 41 Tamzali, *Une femme en colère*.
- 42 See <http://www.npns.fr/actualite-npns/cp-npns-rappelle-le-principe-de-laicite-comme-fondement-de-la-republique-a-propos-de-laffaire-babyloup/> (accessed September 10, 2014).
- 43 Colette Guillaumin, *Sexe, race et pratique du pouvoir. L'idée de Nature* (Paris: Côté-femmes, 1992); Christine Bard, *Ce que soulève la jupe: identités, transgressions, résistances* (Paris: Autrement, 2010).
- 44 Josette Trat, "'Les féministes blanches et l'empire,' ou le récit d'un complot féministe fantasmé," *Contretemps* (2012).
- 45 See their website: <http://lesinsoumises.org/>
- 46 Christine Delphy, *Classer, dominer. Qui sont les autres?* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2008).
- 47 Ewanjé-Épée and Magliani-Belkacem, *Les féministes blanches et l'empire*.
- 48 See especially Josette Trat's critique regarding this issue and analysis of the causes of this "alliance."
- 49 Chandra Tapalde Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).
- 50 <http://www.lesobservateurs.ch/2013/04/10/femen-et-islam-merci-mais-non-merci/>
- 51 This group was created in 2009, bringing together lesbian feminists originating from Africa, the Americas, the Antilles, the Caribbean, the Middle East, and Asia.
- 52 Saïd Boumama, *Dictionnaire des dominations* (Paris: Syllepse, 2012).
- 53 David Koussens and Roy Olivier, eds., *Quand la burqa passe à l'ouest, Enjeux éthiques, politiques et juridiques* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2014).