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Abstract

Beginning with popular commentary on the 2013 Taubira Affair, this article aims to unsettle some common assumptions about “French identity.” More generally, it asks how best to approach the notion of culture in upperdivision culture and society courses. Drawing on recent debates in anthropology, it suggests an approach that moves away from an understanding of culture as a bound entity that promotes a common sense of orientation and purpose toward one where culture is viewed as a reservoir of references, whose meanings and values are continuously interpreted, negotiated, and contested.

Keywords

Taubira Affair, French Identity

Disciplines

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Unsettling Stereotypes: Approaches to the French Culture and Society Course

by John P. Murphy

IN SEPTEMBER 2013, a photomontage comparing France's black Minister of Justice Christiane Taubira to a monkey appeared on the Facebook page of Anne-Sophie Leclère. When confronted several weeks later by a journalist, this 33-year-old shopkeeper and mother of three, who also happened to be a Front national candidate for local elections, readily admitted to posting the image. Insisting she was not racist, she nonetheless stated that she would rather see Taubira, whom she repeatedly called a "sauvage," swinging from trees than in the government. A few days later, a Catholic priest in Paris also took aim at Taubira. Addressing a crowd assembled to protest a law legalizing same-sex marriage, a law Taubira had ardently defended, he drew on a well-known racist advertisement, shouting: "Y'a bon Banania, y'a pas bon Taubira!"¹ Then, on 25 Oct., as Taubira visited Angers, she was greeted by another group of jeering anti-gay marriage activists. Among the taunts of "Taubira, casse-toi," "Taubira, tes jours sont comptés," and "Taubira, tu sens mauvais," one insult drew particular attention. Brandishing a banana peel, a 12-year-old girl shouted to the Minister: "La guenon, mange ta banane!" This troubling series of events did not end there. On 13 Nov., the far-right weekly *Minute* assailed Taubira with a cover reading: "Maligne comme un singe, Taubira retrouve la banane." If one could hope at the time that such racist sentiment was confined to segments of the far right, it became clear that this was not the case only a couple of days later when another photomontage was discovered on Facebook, this time on the page of Claudine Declerck, a city councilor and member of the center-right UMP party. The image crudely reproduced the old Banania ad. Below the grotesquely distorted but still recognizable face of Taubira, the slogan read: "Y'a pas bon Taubira. Le petit déjeuner carcéral."²

The "Taubira Affair," as this succession of insults against the Justice Minister came to be known, attracted widespread media attention, both domestically and internationally. According to many journalists, a fundamental question raised was just how racist France is becoming. "La France devient-elle raciste?" asked a headline of *Le Parisien* ("La France"). "Is France Becoming Racist?" echoed the title of an article that appeared the next day on the *Washington Post* website (Lalisse-Jespersen). This question, of course, lacks historical perspective. A quick survey of France's

past provides ample evidence of racialized thought and discriminatory practices, from the 1685 *Code noir* that restricted the rights and movements of blacks in the colonies to the tendency among some eighteenth-century aristocrats to justify their elevated social status in racial terms, arguing that they were descended from the conquering Franks, as opposed to the defeated Gauls. The anti-Semitism that fueled the Dreyfus affair serves as another example, as do the Vichy years, which still cast a dark shadow over the collective conscience. How, then, are we to understand the question of whether or not France is today becoming racist? I would argue that it is best interpreted as a result of particular assumptions about France, and, more specifically, about French culture. The question suggests that at its core, in its essence, France cannot and should not be racist; the Taubira Affair was a betrayal of this primordial cultural identity.

It is this idea of French cultural identity that I would like to develop in this essay, especially as it relates to teaching French “culture and society” courses. One goal routinely attributed to such courses is to help students develop what has been called in foreign language education “cultural competence.” Building on the convention that learning a foreign language requires developing four abilities (reading, writing, listening, and speaking), some educational theorists have referred to culture as a “fifth skill” (Damen).⁴ In other words, to become an effective communicator mastering vocabulary and grammar is not enough; one must also learn to perceive, recognize, and appreciate cultural differences—in sum, to understand, if not approximate, a native’s “worldview.” The risk this objective carries is portraying French society (or any society, for that matter) as a cohesive whole—a unified group, whose members automatically share a sense of orientation and purpose. In the process, culture becomes an explanation for everything: Americans do things this way because they are American, and the French behave that way because they are French.

Media coverage of the Taubira Affair reminds us just how easy—and dangerous—it is to fall into this tautological trap. France and America are often juxtaposed as polar opposites when it comes to questions regarding assimilation and difference, race and diversity. America, we are told time and again, is a cultural mosaic.⁵ The land of Chinatowns and Little Italys, barrios and Harlems, it is a country that is said not only to recognize but also to embrace its diverse roots.⁶ In contrast, France, at least in this cross-Atlantic comparison, is presented as a homogeneous nation, fundamentally allergic to any expression of cultural or racial difference. During the Taubira affair, many articles seemed to explain the insults that fell upon the Justice Minister by drawing on this well-worn cultural opposition. For example, a *New York Times* piece asserted that “[p]olitically correct has long been scorned in French political debates as an Americanism that shrouds the truth with a veil of well-meaning but misleading euphemisms.” After taking stock of the Taubira affair, the author concludes: “Maybe political correctness isn’t such a bad idea after all”

(Bohlen). In other words, being politically correct is how it is done in the United States; it is part of American culture, not French culture. However, in light of these recent, very public racial slurs, the French could (should?) borrow a page from the Americans' cultural playbook. Other articles similarly held up culture as the leading cause for the scandal. "Racist 'monkey' taunt prompts soul-searching in France" (Platiau), proclaimed an *NBCnews.com* headline. In opposition to the "Is-France-Becoming-Racist" articles discussed above, this report implies that there is in fact something primordial or essential about the French that made the insults against Taubira possible—something that the French now need to search their collective "soul" to come to terms with and eventually, readers are left hoping, wipe out. Bombarded by such essentializing commentary, it is no wonder that students enter our classrooms prepared to make similar judgments—whether about Americans, the French, or both. How can we push them toward a more critical engagement with the notions of culture and difference as they study contemporary French society?

As a cultural anthropologist teaching in a French department, I am interested in what debates about culture in anthropology have to offer us as we confront this task. At least in American anthropology, culture came during the first half of the twentieth century to define the very subject matter of the discipline. However, beginning in the 1970s the concept came under attack as a new generation of anthropologists argued that previous approaches, centered on the idea of "peoples and cultures" too often presented groups as static and timeless; one deleterious consequence of this, they maintained, was the reified exoticization of the lifeways of "others," who, as a result, could never seem to become quite as modern as "us" (Abu-Lughod; Asad; Fabian; Marcus and Fischer). These anthropologists, alongside colleagues in the new disciplines grouped under the rubric of cultural or critical studies, called for a focus instead on the "displaced peoples, dislocated cultures and fractured communities [...] the products of the new diasporas, obliged to inhabit at least two identities, to speak at least two cultural languages, to negotiate and 'translate' between them" (Hall 8). "Cultural hybridity" became a central trope of these critical multiculturalists' work as they sought to bring in other voices, to expose other points of view—to let, in a word, the "subaltern" speak. Often overtly political, these scholars intended in the process to lay bare the myths of national homogeneity or cultural superiority by which elites maintain power. The goal was to help underrepresented groups achieve recognition, respect, and—ultimately—greater rights.

Riding this wave, a number of important works on France were produced, including David Beriss's *Black Skins, French Voices* and Paul Silverstein's *Algeria in France*. Both of these books explore how the immigrant experience fits into and calls into question prevailing notions of "self" and "other" in the French context.

In so doing, these authors provide insights into the complex articulation of identity in the postcolonial world. However, these studies and others like them have been criticized for reproducing old assumptions about peoples and cultures. “[T]his scholarship,” writes Beth Epstein, “continues to treat the ‘dominant’ and the ‘dominated,’ the colonizer and the colonized, French and immigrant, as discrete ethnic groups, even as it aims to show how these identities are constructed and dynamic” (139–40). Epstein calls for a more critical examination of the notions of culture, difference, and diversity—“keywords,” according to her, in contemporary discussions and debates about multiculturalism. Rather than take distinctions such as “French,” “immigrant,” or “black,” as ready-made, she submits that we need to draw out to the extent possible how these terms are used, by whom, and to what ends. In other words, what *work* are they being asked to do in the specific social contexts where they are put into use?

It is this approach that I have tried to adopt in my culture and society courses. Rather than start from the premise that the French have a culture and that we are going to study that culture, students are encouraged to think about how the idea of culture itself has been defined and used by people (both ordinary and less ordinary) in France as they position themselves and others in their social world. This approach may well reveal trends or tendencies that cut across French society, a basis for claiming shared culture, in some sense. Yet, it is equally likely to expose ambiguities, contradictions, and tensions—fault lines that exist in any society. These inconsistencies merit our attention in particular, because it is often around them that significant social, political, and economic struggles are waged. Masking them, as was the case for much of the journalistic commentary on the Taubira Affair, risks not only reifying and essentializing culture but also blurring the processes through which power is achieved and maintained.

In what follows, I will describe the materials and methods I use to approach the notion of culture in my courses. Three themes lend themselves particularly well to this goal: 1) imagining the nation; 2) understandings of and responses to globalization; and 3) cultural pluralism and particularism as political strategy.⁷ I incorporate most of these themes into an introductory course on contemporary French society required of our department’s majors.⁸ I develop all of them in a more advanced course, which, based loosely on my own ethnographic field research in a French *banlieue*, explores explicitly how the concept of diversity is conceived, managed, and used in the French context. As I proceed, I will indicate which materials have worked best at these levels.

Before moving on, two points concerning materials bear mentioning. The first concerns their type. Mark Ingram has already noted the benefits of using interdisciplinary sources in the French culture and society classroom to encourage students to develop critical and comparative skills. In my courses, I use historical,

anthropological, and sociological texts, in addition to literary, philosophical, and political writings. This variety poses certain challenges. As a general rule, I have found that my students have a stronger background in literary analysis than social theory. To overcome this obstacle, I have implemented what I call *pistes de lecture*. Providing students with a series of reading questions, or at the very least a list of important themes, before each class meeting helps guide them through the materials as they prepare for class and gives me a concrete way to assess their understanding of what they have read. Second, in terms of the language of the materials, I do not automatically dismiss texts in English. Although documents in French are preferable—and the majority of what I use is in French—sometimes the best scholarship (best, either in terms of the work's critical approach or its accessibility to non-specialists) is in English. This is not necessarily prejudicial: pushing students to summarize in French complex ideas presented in English is a constructive exercise that will serve them well, not only in advanced French classes but also if they go on to use French in their future careers.

Imagining the Nation

To understand current debates about culture and difference in France, it is helpful to reflect on how these ideas have been mobilized and deployed in the past by statesmen and intellectuals as they pondered what constitutes the nation. In both of the culture and society courses under consideration here, I devote significant time to this question, beginning with the 1789 Revolution and the founding myth of the Republic as “une et indivisible.” We start by examining a selection of Enlightenment writings in the original French. Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* (especially Letters 24 and 37) offer an accessible introduction to some of the critiques levied against the Ancien Régime. After criticizing the unceasing hustle and bustle of Paris and the bad manners of its inhabitants, Montesquieu takes direct aim at the king (“un grand magicien”) and, even more audaciously, the Pope (“un autre magicien plus fort que lui”). His censure of the arbitrariness of privilege in Ancien Régime society is echoed by Rousseau in his *Du contrat social*, which we examine next. In the introductory course, we focus on Book I, where Rousseau defines the social contract and explains its purpose. In the more advanced course, we also read chapters 1–4 of Book II, and chapter 1 of Book IV, where the author talks about the dangers that associations or intermediary groups may represent for social cohesion. Regardless of their level, students tend to struggle with this text. To help make it more accessible, in class we discuss Rousseau's ideas alongside an examination of the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme*; students work in groups to identify passages that echo Rousseau's teachings.⁹

Rather than suggest that the ideas laid out in these documents are somehow “core” French values, students are guided to analyze them as *interventions* into

particular moments in time. The revolutionaries, like the Enlightenment thinkers before them, were attacking the framework of privilege that had served to structure the social order of the Ancien Régime. By proposing a polity based on individual rights where there was little or no room for other allegiances, they were aiming above all to weaken the grasp of the Catholic Church, which had provided the basis for the king's power. Against such notions as *noble* and *roturier*, they offered up the idea of citizenship as the only relevant distinction for defining inclusion and exclusion in France. Pushed to its logical conclusion, this argument led some revolutionaries to call for the inclusion of Jews into the nation. During class, students analyze the following statement made toward the end of 1789 by the Count of Clermont-Tonnerre, which has proven particularly effective in driving this point home for them: "Il faut tout refuser aux Juifs comme nation et tout accorder aux Juifs comme individus. Il faut qu'ils ne fassent dans l'État ni un corps politique ni un ordre; il faut qu'ils soient individuellement citoyens. [...] S'ils ne veulent pas l'être qu'ils le disent et alors qu'on les bannisse" (qtd. in Noiriel 278).

To be sure, such revolutionary principles did not fall out of circulation with Napoléon's coup d'État or, later, the restoration of the monarchy. On the contrary, they were invoked at different moments throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and continue to be so today. The temptation is therefore great to explain their longstanding influence as simply part of French culture, as the way the French are hardwired to think. To help students move beyond this facile explanation, we examine in both the introductory and the more advanced courses other key moments when these principles were proposed, challenged, or defended. Ernest Renan's famous lecture *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?*, delivered at the Sorbonne in 1882, offers such an opportunity. Both concise and written in an accessible manner, it presents ideas that should be very familiar to students having already explored revolutionary rhetoric concerning nationhood and citizenship. Much like Rousseau, who argued that legitimate laws are founded on the general will, Renan proclaims: "Une nation est [...] une grande solidarité [qui se résume] par un fait tangible: le consentement, le désir clairement exprimé de continuer la vie commune." For Renan, a nation is not about commonalities of race, religion, or even culture; rather, it is a "plébiscite de tous les jours" (32).

If these writers' ideas appear very similar, what distinguishes them is the historical context into which they were put into play, and thus the sort of intervention these authors were aiming to make. Whereas Rousseau was writing against the abuses of absolutism in Ancien Régime France, Renan was defending the right of the people of Alsace and Lorraine to remain French following the Prussian annexation of this region in 1871, even though many of these people spoke German as their first language. To this end, Renan amended the universalism championed during the Revolution, adding that "les ancêtres nous ont faits ce que nous sommes" (31). In this view, Frenchness becomes historically grounded: ancestry and the

common heritage it bestows give some people more will to embrace France than others. Far from novel, the ambivalence regarding French identity that pervades Renan's text (Is it universalist? Is it particularist?) has deep roots stretching back to the Revolution of 1789. Placing this ambivalence center stage in class pushes students to see that culture, at least in the sense of how people understand the world around them and position themselves and others in it, is never static and rarely involves complete consensus across groups.¹⁰

A number of texts highlighting the tensions, contradictions, and ambiguities that have characterized debates over what constitutes Frenchness have worked well in the classroom. Beginning with the Revolution, we consider perspectives that diverge from those expressed in Rousseau's work or the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme*. Bringing in the voices of such Counter-Enlightenment thinkers as Joseph de Maistre has proved to be productive. An ardent defender of the monarchy and a virulent critic of assumptions about the universality of human experience, Maistre argued that each nation, each *peuple*, has its own needs and therefore requires its own, unique form of government: "Une constitution qui est faite pour toutes les nations n'est faite pour aucune" (qtd. in Glaudes 53).

Beyond such contemporaneous critiques of universalist revolutionary thinking, students probe the aporias of the revolutionaries' liberal-republican project. Joan Scott's work on French feminism provides an effective introduction. Whereas her monograph (*Only Paradoxes to Offer*) may be suitable at more advanced levels, in the introductory course, we focus on a single article ("French Feminists"), dealing with Olympe de Gouges and her challenges during the Revolution to the view that women were second-class citizens.

Scott presents the condition of women as just one glaring contradiction between the revolutionaries' theorizing and their actual practice. Slavery, of course, constitutes another. Abolished in February 1794, slavery was reestablished by Napoleon in 1802 to placate planters in the Antilles. More than 40 years later, Alexis de Tocqueville condemned the continued practice of slavery in a contribution to the newspaper *Le Siècle*. Pointing out that Great Britain had already abolished it throughout its empire, he opined: "Les Anglais ne font autre chose, en ce moment, qu'appliquer dans leurs colonies *nos* principes. Ils agissent en concordance avec ce que nous avons encore le droit d'appeler le *sentiment français*. Seront-ils plus Français que nous-mêmes?" (275). This quote, which I present in my introductory course (in my more advanced class, students read the entire article), is striking for at least two reasons: Like Scott's piece, it underscores a discrepancy between universalist republican rhetoric and actual practice. At the same time, it suggests that there is something specific or particularistic about French character. According to Tocqueville, abolishing slavery aligns with *French* values, which he distinguishes from English values. So which is it: is the French nation founded on universal values or particularistic ones? Answering this question is not the point. Under-

scoring the ambivalence, often expressed through a fair amount of discursive gymnastics by various French figures throughout time, is.

Examining documents relating to colonization adds another layer to the complex question of what it means to be French. In the introductory course, we begin with excerpts from Pascal Blanchard and Nicolas Bancel's visually rich text. Students choose and then describe one of the images from the first two chapters. These range from actual black-and-white photographs to stylized representations of colonized peoples, including the famous Banania ad used recently to insult Taubira. Following this exercise, we discuss how, during the second half of the nineteenth century, pseudo-scientific techniques and theories, including anthropometry and the idea of social Darwinism, were used to justify belief in a racial hierarchy, where white Europeans occupied a superior position. How, we ask, did such a belief work in France, especially after 1870, when reaction to the loss of Alsace-Lorraine reinforced the idea that race and ethnicity were illegitimate bases for claiming—or refusing—membership in the republican polity?

In her work on the *mission civilisatrice*, Alice Conklin takes up this question, exploring how colonial administrators stationed in West Africa reconciled the fundamental contradictions between the Republic's stated goal of upholding the "rights of man" and the forcible acquisition of an empire that violates those rights.¹¹ In discussions on France's mission to civilize, Patricia Morton's engaging account of the Colonial Exposition of 1931 is equally effective. In particular, chapter 5, "The Civilizing Mission of Architecture," contrasts the pavilions' "authentic" exteriors with their "modern" interiors. This intermingling of indigenous and European architectural styles, Morton contends, reflects the hybrid subjects produced by the colonial encounter, undermining in the process efforts made at the Exposition, and during the colonial enterprise more generally, to define the colonized as "different." Morton's analysis invites reflection on the myth of an idealized, homogenous cultural group.

One reason, Conklin contends, that the *mission civilisatrice* held such sway over colonial administrators was because it was also being undertaken at home. In other words, provincial France was at the same time being colonized by Paris. In the introductory course, we seriously consider this thesis, thinking about how difference—especially perceived ethnic and racial difference—was understood and used within metropolitan France during the nineteenth century. Eugen Weber's work on the modernization of the countryside, particularly chapters 1 and 2, are helpful in this regard.¹² Examining documents ranging from travel diaries to official reports by Third Republic reformers, the author tracks (bourgeois) city-dwellers' perceptions of peasants. Very often in these accounts, country folk are presented as both culturally and racially different and deficient. Consider, for example, the description offered by a Limousin landowner: "[A]nimals with two feet, hardly resembling a man. [The peasant's] clothes are filthy; under his thick skin one

cannot see the blood flow. The wild, dull gaze betrays no flicker of thought in the brain of this being, morally and physically atrophied" (Weber, *Peasants* 4). As Louis Chevalier has remarked in his work on the "dangerous laboring classes," this racialized view echoes bourgeois commentary produced earlier in the century on the illiterate, increasingly proletarianized workers, drifters, and scavengers whose numbers began to swell in cities at that time.¹³

The discourse on race that accompanied colonization and reform efforts in mainland France during the nineteenth century doubtless made it easier for various propagandists to peddle a more racialized form of anti-Semitism. Studying the Dreyfus Affair, we spend some time in my introductory course analyzing visual documents. Pierre Birnbaum's short text offers a useful overview of the main stakes of the Affair and includes many striking images, some of which I have scanned and displayed in class using PowerPoint.¹⁴ Of particular interest is a highly stylized representation of a "Jewish" Marianne surrounded by a group of dotting financiers (22–23). In the more advanced course, students discuss this image in relation to Édouard Drumont's racist *La France juive*.¹⁵ After explaining the immediate success of this book—it sold over 60,000 copies during its first year in print and was republished 200 times by 1914—I ask students to ponder how this was possible. Such bigotry, I push them to understand, attracted this audience due at least in part to fears of national decline after France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, fears which were compounded for some Catholic conservatives by the Third Republic's mission to secularize education. In this context, Drumont and other like-minded anti-Semites presented Jews as a threat of racial degeneration within France. Links can be drawn with the Taubira Affair and its context of a flagging economy and the 2013 law legalizing same-sex marriage.

Understanding and Responding to Globalization

To help students draw out connections between past and present conceptions of national identity in France, it is useful to consider French responses to globalization. Globalization, of course, is not a new phenomenon. However, as Zygmunt Bauman has argued, it is when this process calls into question understandings of national sovereignty, as it began to do in France following the Second World War, that it leads people to produce a great deal of commentary on identity, particularly national identity.

One text that has been especially helpful in bridging the past and the present is Kristin Ross's work on the development of mass consumption in France in the 1950s and 60s. In her chapter "Housekeeping," Ross links a general fascination in France for all things "made in USA" with decolonization, arguing that in order to maintain a sense of superiority over the newly-liberated, former colonies, many

people in France sought to become as “modern” and “hygienic” as possible. As American household products flooded the French market, women in particular were urged to consume (Ross provides visuals of a number of striking advertisements from the period). Rather than liberate women from their domestic chores, however, these products created new expectations and obligations for them, in effect subjugating women, who, according to Ross, came to replace the *indigène* in the collective imaginary. Being French, in this view, is inextricably linked to understandings of a cultural, but also a gendered, hierarchy.

Fears of Americanization and its effects on “French identity” are taken up explicitly by the politician Hubert Védérine in a lengthy exchange with political scientist Dominique Moïsi. In the introductory course, students analyze Védérine’s comments. How does he define globalization? What, according to him, are its stakes for France? What exactly does he mean when he evokes the idea of French identity? One of the goals of these questions is to push students to see that definitions of social phenomena, such as globalization, are contextually dependent. Whereas in the American context, globalization tends to be viewed in a positive light (polling students in class generally returns this perspective), for Védérine, at least, globalization is above all a destructive force that risks flattening what is in his estimation valuable cultural difference. Védérine equates French identity with a particular cultural heritage: “Se présenter comme Français... c’est se faire connaître comme l’héritier de Molière, de Pascal, de Balzac, [...] et de tant d’autres. C’est un legs de l’Histoire” (42). Armed with this cultural legacy, Védérine calls upon his fellow countrymen and women to “civiliser la mondialisation” (47). It is not entirely clear what Védérine’s ideal outcome would be. Is he arguing for equity in diversity, that is, that all cultures and peoples should have the right to coexist on the world stage? Or, drawing on revolutionary rhetoric, is he promoting the idea of equality in French superiority? The reference to France’s colonial *mission civilisatrice* would seem to suggest the latter. Regardless, what is notable is his oscillation between cultural particularism and the republican pretension to universalism when defining French identity.¹⁶

Cultural Pluralism and Particularism as Political Strategy

This brings me to the last theme of this essay: the political uses of cultural pluralism and particularism. Much of what appears in the news in France or elsewhere whenever a scandal such as the Taubira Affair breaks suggests that what people say is directly linked to what they think or believe. This may be true, but it is equally possible that statements—especially incendiary ones—are put into circulation by social actors less out of personal conviction than opportunism. In other words, they may be calculated moves to achieve desired results. It is through

this lens that we approach in my courses such recent controversies as the headscarf affairs, the 2005 “riots,” the 2009 debate on national identity, and the 2013 law legalizing same-sex marriage.¹⁷

An especially helpful text in preparing the terrain for this sort of approach is Françoise Gaspard’s *Une petite ville en France*. This book can prove difficult for students because of the familiarity with the French political landscape it assumes. Therefore, before students begin reading I distribute a *feuille de préparation*, asking them to identify via an Internet search the main political parties and figures mentioned in the text. In class, we focus on chapters 2 and 3, where Gaspard explicitly links the rise of the Front national (FN) in the small city of Dreux to the post-1973 economic slowdown. As unemployment levels soared, public housing deteriorated, and unscrupulous land developers lured white Parisian retirees to Dreux with empty promises of a new, bucolic way of life, the situation in Dreux, Gaspard explains, became ripe for an FN victory. The example of the “Letter to Mustapha,” reported by the author, is striking (168–69). This document, which mysteriously appeared on Drouais’ doorsteps and under their windshield wipers during the period leading up to the 1983 municipal elections, reproduced a letter, supposedly sent by an Algerian immigrant to his friend Mustapha back home. In it, he urges Mustapha to join him in France, where, he explains, he and his fellow Algerians have become “maîtres et seigneurs.” He goes on to list all the rights Mustapha, his wives, and his children can enjoy in France, before concluding that before long Algerians will drive the French out of France, as they had done in Algeria two decades earlier. The letter, Gaspard concludes, was the work of the FN campaign.

If, in Dreux in the 1980s, the FN framed French identity as culturally different from immigrant identity and represented this difference as incompatible or dangerous to the French nation, more recently Nicolas Sarkozy has conspicuously flip-flopped on the issue. In the upper-level course, we consider his wavering between cultural pluralism and particularism as an instructive case study. How is it, we ask, that in his 2004 book *La République, les religions, l’espérance*, Sarkozy advocated “intégration” rather than “assimilation,” insisting that the former “n’exige pas, pour réussir, que celui qui est accueilli renonce à ce qu’il est” (109–10), whereas in 2011, during a televised discussion, he declared multiculturalism an “échec,” noting, “la communauté nationale française ne veut pas changer son mode de vie: nous ne voulons pas que l’on prie de façon ostentatoire dans la rue, nous ne voulons pas que les imams puissent prêcher la violence.”¹⁸ In an essay students read, Éric Fassin provides a useful frame for studying this contradiction. Drawing on examples from both the American and French contexts, he demonstrates how politicians and others mold their discourse to the context at hand in such a way that when their comments are compared out of context they sometimes seem entirely at odds with each other. What are Sarkozy’s real convictions? Does he define French identity as multicultural or monocultural? It is hard to know for

sure. However, this is not the interesting question. Rather, students probe Sarkozy's *motivations* in each case. In what ways did his earlier, multicultural discourse serve to counterbalance his tough stance on immigration as he prepared his 2007 presidential bid? And how might his more recent, particularistic turn, especially his denunciation of Islam, constitute a maneuver aimed at diverting attention away from both the unpopularity of his economic and social policy and mounting fears of insecurity as he looked ahead to 2012 in the hopes of being reelected? In both instances, students are asked to tease out how Sarkozy manipulated to greater or lesser effect longstanding contradictions concerning culture and cultural difference in French republican ideology.¹⁹

Thinking Differently about Difference

I began this article by taking issue with various assumptions about French culture and identity produced during the Taubira Affair. Although largely presented as matters of common consent, these notions cannot—and should not—be held to any strict definition outside of their juridical applications. This is one of the primary messages I strive to convey in my culture and society courses. Rather than accept culture as a given, that is, as some sort of primordial essence, students examine the specific social, political, and economic contexts in which categories, such as “French,” but also, “Jewish,” “woman,” “Algerian,” “Muslim,” or “gay,” come into play.

In France, the overarching discursive frame within which such distinctions are negotiated is the French republican contract and its integration ideal. Resolutely defended by some, this ideal has been just as virulently attacked by others since its inception over 200 years ago. Each time the republican project has been championed or challenged, it has been so amid and in reaction to specific circumstances. By inquiring into the particular interests or anxieties driving these debates, students can better grasp the mutability of the meanings attached to the classifications in use in France. Surely, being French had quite different implications in 1789 than it did at the turn of the twentieth century, or does today.

In today's “liquid” times, where cultural pluralism is a defining feature of most people's experience and “diversity” has become a political agenda, we are confronted by a proliferation of claims to difference as people across the globe attempt to situate themselves in relation to others. This is no less the case in France than anywhere else. Yet, in France the tenacity of the republican model of integration provides a productive case study, especially for American students who tend to be accustomed to more explicitly cultural readings of these issues, to think differently about difference. The culture and society course that highlights how difference is negotiated in France is thus likely to serve students well. It will help to prepare them for study abroad or aid them in making sense of their experience once they

return to campus. More generally, it will push them to call into question their own assumptions about difference and, in the process, hopefully unsettle some of the stereotypes they may carry.

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Notes

¹In 2006, a court judged the “Y’a bon Banania” slogan racist. Nutrimaine, the parent company, has since dropped it.

²Although the image was “discovered” on 15 Nov. by the news media, Declerck had published it on her Facebook page two months earlier.

³Following Peer, I am uncomfortable with the designation “civilization” for this type of course, because it evokes France’s troubled colonial past. Although more neutral, the label “culture and society,” in widespread circulation today, presents its own problems—notably, the potential to suggest a single, shared French culture. For lack of a better alternative, I adopt the designation “culture and society” in this essay but maintain that one important goal of such courses is to push against this idea.

⁴Kramersch goes a step further: “Rather than seek ways of teaching culture as a fifth skill, we have to explore the cultural dimensions of the very languages we teach if we want learners to be fully communicatively competent in these languages” (218).

⁵For example, Coca-Cola’s “It’s Beautiful” ad premiered during the 2014 Super Bowl. It features the familiar song “America the Beautiful,” sung in a number of different languages: <youtu.be/443Vy3I0gJs>.

⁶The immediate backlash the Coca-Cola ad received on Twitter and the company’s Facebook page brings into sharp focus just how contested this vision of a harmonious, multicultural America really is (Lee).

⁷Other themes are doubtless just as relevant. I choose to concentrate on these primarily because of their relationship to my own research.

⁸In our French curriculum, this introductory course is a prerequisite for all upper-division culture and society courses.

⁹In an introductory course, I complement these readings with a comic book on French history (Joly and Heitz). Both engaging and historically accurate, it helps students “fill in the gaps” in terms of context, without presenting an overwhelming amount of information, which many French-language histories do.

¹⁰Renan’s speech represents just one moment when universalist republican values were used to achieve a particular goal; other moments lend themselves equally well to analysis in class, including the Dreyfus Affair (more on this later) and, following the Second World War, the drafting of the Constitution of 1946, which explicitly condemned the collection of racial or ethnic statistics in reaction to the atrocities of

the Nazi regime: <www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/conseil-constitutionnel/francais/la-constitution/les-constitutions-de-la-france/constitution-de-1946-ive-republique.5109.html>.

¹¹I have used Conklin's article ("Colonialism"), drawn from the central chapters of her book (*A Mission*), in a more advanced class. Although straightforward, it requires careful reading. More than once, students have come to class convinced the author was trying to justify colonization. This, of course, is not her objective.

¹²Weber's book has been translated into French as *La fin des terroirs*. Although students tend to struggle with some of the vocabulary, I use the French version in class.

¹³Chevalier's prose is dense and requires a fair amount of familiarity with French history. I have not assigned the book to students, although I do mention the author's findings in both of the courses under discussion here.

¹⁴The Dreyfus Affair is complicated. Students appreciate Gopnik's overview.

¹⁵Drumont's book contains over 1200 pages. My students only read the introduction.

¹⁶Védrine and Moïsi's book was published in 1996, but similar perspectives are routinely expressed today in France's leading newspapers (see Fournier and Quentin).

¹⁷Space does not permit a detailed discussion of how I approach each of these events in the classroom. In terms of documents, I have used both Fernando and Weil to explore the headscarf affairs, Cesari as well as Silverstein and Tetreault to examine the 2005 "riots," Ribert to study the debate on national identity, and Poulin-Deltour to probe the controversy surrounding gay marriage.

¹⁸I show an excerpt of the discussion in class: <videos.tf1.fr/infos/2011/oui-le-multiculturalisme-est-un-echec-6273428.html>.

¹⁹With regard to Sarkozy's political maneuvering around the Roma question, Amselle (ch. 3) offers a cogent analysis suitable for use in an advanced class.

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