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Islamophobia in France

Nicolas Lebourg

Translated from the French by Vanessa Glauser, with editing by Cécile Alduy

THE ACCUSATION OF BLASPHEMY MADE *Charlie Hebdo* the target of the January 7 attack in 2015. The accusation was justified: the newspaper claims to blaspheme all religions. But it is the accusation of Islamophobia raised against the weekly that caused some pupils to refuse the one-minute silence called for by the Ministry of National Education in certain schools on January 8. Faced with the tide of people attending the solidarity march on January 11, the postcolonial Left and various media commentators declared, “yes, but *Charlie Hebdo* is Islamophobic.”¹ From the question of Islamist terrorism, the debate very quickly circled back to this word “Islamophobia”—a word whose legitimacy divides society deeply, particularly on the left. Depending on whom you ask, the word is a totem (“*Charlie Hebdo* is an Islamophobic newspaper”; “the January 11 march is a march of an Islamophobic France”) or a taboo (“Islamophobia does not exist”; “it is an Islamist trap for the Republic”).

Where does this neologism come from? Its first appearance (1910) is significantly earlier than its entry into common usage (after 1997).² The birth of the term was part of a lexical frenzy revelatory of the tensions that emerged in France because of the necessity of reconciling the nation-state, industrial society, and the colonial empire: the words “nationality,” “immigration,”

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¹ See, for example, the collective “no at the holy union,” in *Le Monde*, January 16, 2015, a perfect digest of the “yesbutism”; and Emmanuel Todd, *Qui est Charlie? Sociologie d'une crise religieuse* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2015).

² Houda Asal, “Islamophobia: La fabrique d'un nouveau concept; État des lieux de la recherche,” *Sociologie* 5 (2014): 13–29.

“ethnicity,” and “xenophobia” all emerge between 1825 and 1901.³ But, in a first phase that extends from the nineteenth century all the way up to 9/11, Islamophobia did not surface in public debate in connection with the nationalist movement of the Far Right. After 9/11, Islamophobia’s capacity to reorganize the political sphere, particularly on the left, has allowed it to become a central pre-occupation of French society and has provoked heated disputes over how to analyze the *Charlie Hebdo* murders. Beyond this, “Islamophobia” has been used to provide a coherent framework to make sense of a deep cultural crisis that has translated politically into the recent electoral success of Marine Le Pen. In France, the debate over the scope of Islamophobia and the causes of its diffusion is very lively.

ISLAM IN FRENCH NATIONALISM PRIOR TO 9/11

The first “globalization,” with 180 million migrants changing countries between 1840 and 1940,⁴ is a period when massive demographic growth threatened to make the framework of the nation-state tear at the seams. At the same time, it benefited new empires and their discriminatory judicial theories and practices, such as, for example, the Code de l’indigénat of 1865, which granted French nationality to Algerians but required them to relinquish their religion in order to receive citizenship. Incidentally, the word “racism” enters the dictionary in 1932.⁵ That said, Islam did not assume a specific role in the nationalist frenzy of the period. A theorist of anti-Semitism, Édouard Drumont—a key figure of the French Far Right at the end of the nineteenth century—dreamt of an alliance between Christians and Arabs in order to combat Judaism. He was outraged at the decree of 1870 that granted citizenship to Algerian Jews and argued that certain “heroic Arabs” should have received citizenship rather than the Jews.⁶ Even in Algeria, when colonists and their descendants concocted a set of derogatory epithets for the indigenous population (“*bicots*,” “*bougnoules*,” “*gris*,” etc., terms still in use today), this racist language referred to ethnicity and did not have Islamophobic connotations.⁷ Indeed, reference to religion was even used at the time in order to *avoid* using ethnic references and to eschew accusations of racism. The colonial administration referred to Algerians as “Muslim French” or “French of Muslim descent.” The press releases of the National Front (Front national, FN) before it entered French electoral politics⁸ used the same language in order to avoid the term “Arab,” for fear of being accused of racism.⁹ Even today, National Front leader Marine Le Pen misses no opportunity to pay tribute

³ Gérard Noiriel, “Socio-histoire d’un concept: Les usages du mot ‘nationalité’ au XIXe siècle,” *Genèses* 20 (1995): 4–23; Christine Barats-Malbré, “Politisation de l’immigration en France: Logiques politiques et enjeux discursifs,” *Quaderni* 36 (1998): 70; and Pierre Villard, “Naissance d’un mot grec en 1900: Anatole France et les xénophobes,” *Mots* 8 (March 1984): 191–95.

⁴ Adam McKeown, “Les migrations internationales à l’ère de la mondialisation industrielle, 1840–1940,” *Le mouvement social* 241 (2012): 31–46.

⁵ Stéphane Pessina Dassonville, *Le Statut des peuples autochtones: A la croisée des savoirs, Cahiers d’anthropologie du droit, 2011–2012* (Paris: Karthala, 2012), 367–69; and Michel Wieviorka, *Le racisme: Une introduction* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 1998), 15.

⁶ Édouard Drumont, *La France juive*, vol. 2 (1886; Paris: Flammarion, 1941), 12–13.

⁷ Emanuel Sivan, “Colonialism and Popular Culture in Algeria,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 14, no. 1 (January 1979): 21–53.

⁸ The FN was founded in 1972 by the openly Fascist movement *Ordre nouveau* in order to increase its audience—the ON was disbanded the following year for having attacked the security of the state. The FN achieved electoral success only after 1983.

⁹ Jean-Paul Honoré, “La ‘hiérarchie des sentiments,’ description et mise en scène du Français et de l’immigré dans le discours du Front national,” *Mots* 12 (March 1986): 129–57.

to the “*harkis*,” those “French Muslims” who chose to fight on the French side during the Algerian War of Independence, a quick and efficacious way for her to show that she is neither racist nor Islamophobic and that her conception of nationality is not based on ethnicity.

External, rather than internal, factors led French nationalists to modify their stance toward Islam. More than the question of Algeria, it was the impact of the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the dialectical interplay between a Far Right electorate and radical Far Right sects that have been decisive. These Far Right groups tend to follow the lead of their European counterparts. Since the Congress of Verona in 1943, where Mussolini’s ideology was reasserted, the Fascist ideal has consisted of creating a European federation of nationalist states that would engage in the fight against “worldwide plutocracy” and organize the development of Africa with the support of Muslim nationalists.¹⁰ The beacon of neo-Fascist doctrine, the French Maurice Bardèche, argued that the Koran had “something virile, something Roman so to speak.”¹¹ More than anything else the ideological fervor of Italian neo-Fascism played a decisive role, notably because it took its inspiration from the philosopher Julius Evola, particularly the traditionalist-revolutionary (dubbed “Nazi-Maoiste” by the Italian press) movement highly supportive of the Palestinian cause. Add to the mix the influence of French philosopher René Guénon, who converted to Islam, and the anti-Americanism of the Iranian Revolution, and one can start to understand why some in the traditionalist movement could lean toward pro-Shiite sympathies—for instance, the traditionalist-revolutionary Claudio Mutti, who officially converted to Shiism, or Alain de Benoist, the pope of the “new French Right,” who saw in the new Iran a “third way” and “a revolutionary traditionalism,” a formula that precisely harkens back to the Italian “Nazi-Maoism.”¹²

In a symptomatic fashion, it is a prominent critic of worldwide “Communist subversion,” Jules Monnerot, who began to transfer his anti-Communist anxieties to the Arab-Muslim world in the early 1980s. Threat from abroad, subversion within: the patterns of anti-Communist denunciation were redeployed against Iran, Islam, and immigrants.¹³ Moreover, at the same time, the French Far Right found a new social outlet with the electoral success of the FN. Members of the French New Right joined the leadership of the FN. One month after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Bruno Mégret, a neo-rightist who became vice-president of the FN, inaugurated the organization’s doctrinal journal, *Identité*. From then on, the stage was set for a global conflict between supporters (ranging from the NF to Islamists) of “identity” as a ruling concept to divide the world, on the one hand, and the defenders of the “New World Order” of a globalized economy flattening cultural differences among nations, on the other. At this stage, the new ethnicizing discourse of the Far Right either did not engage with the religious dimension or positively integrated Islamism into the “identity awakening” that it proclaimed.¹⁴

The dismemberment of former Yugoslavia (1991–95) caused Islamophobia to emerge in France at the fringes of radical politics and social elites but not yet among the general population. The nationalists of Greater Serbia resurrected the *Islamic Declaration*, a manifesto written in 1970 by Alija Izetbegovic, the leader of the Bosnian cause, who was in favor of a great Islamic

¹⁰ “Manifeste de Véronne,” in *Manifestes pour une Gauche fasciste* (n.p.: n.p., 1943), n.p.

¹¹ Maurice Bardèche, *Qu’est ce que le fascisme?* (1961; Sassetot-le-Mauconduit: Pythéas, 1995), 127.

¹² *Le Monde*, August 25, 1987.

¹³ Romain Ducoulombier, “Penser et combattre: Jules Monnerot face à la subversion des ‘sociétés ouvertes,’” in *Subversion, contre-subversion, antisubversion*, ed. François Cochet and Olivier Dard (Paris: Riveneuve, 2009), 45–61.

¹⁴ *Identité*, January–February 1994.

Republic. On this basis, the Serbian nationalism that already for twenty years had denounced the Muslim intention of committing a “Serbian genocide” answered the perceived Bosnian threat, with Serbians presenting themselves as facing a “red-brown” monster or even “Nazis.” Serbian nationalists argued that their war was not imperialist but a defense of Europe against the establishment of an Islamist regime that would destabilize the West.¹⁵ Although the radical Far Right was the first to take up the themes of Serbian propaganda, the NF was soon joined by leaders from other political horizons. The New Right denounced the Kosovo War (1999) with a petition and a group “No to War.” It charged that NATO’s intervention aimed at preventing a union between Europe and Russia capable of constituting a Eurasia and a counterweight to America. From then on, most on the Far Right believed that the conflicts in the Balkans bore witness to an American conspiracy intent on creating, with the help of Islam, disturbances in Europe that would prevent the realization of European unity. The hypothesis of a brand of Islamism manipulated by the United States against Europe was in part echoed in French university and military circles.

However, beyond the war in Kosovo, the year 1999 was marked by a crisis among Far Right groups. The radical European far right had managed to assemble the majority of its affiliates under the European Liberation Front (ELF), which favored a geopolitical alliance with Arab regimes and, in internal politics, an agreement with Islamists. But the ELF was destroyed in 1997 following the actions of one of its branches, a Belgian movement that starting in 1995 that spread Serbian propaganda and accused the ELF of having sold out to the Islamization of Europe. As for the electoral Far Right, Bruno Mégret broke away from the FN in January 1999, and the majority of its leaders, militants as well as elected officials, followed him. Forced to justify the autonomy of this new party and to distinguish himself from the FN during the European elections in the summer of 1999, Mégret appropriated an Islamophobic rhetoric.¹⁶ His propaganda documents are the first to establish a link between criminality attributed to youths of Arab-Muslim descent and Islamists’ attempt to destroy Europe. As for the New Right, one of its principal leaders, Guillaume Faye, an Islamophobic and anti-immigrant firebrand, violently shook up the Far Right with his book *The Colonization of Europe: A True Study of Immigration and Europe*. Published by a neo-Nazi editor, the work provoked great tensions in the radical sphere, with the anti-Zionists accusing the author of wanting to convert the French Far Right to the defense of Zionism. Although the racist virulence of his statements caused Faye to be excluded from the centers of power of the New Right, the work nevertheless received an enthusiastic reception on certain Jewish online sites. Islam had become an object of contempt for different social segments that previously had been completely dissociated from one another.

ISLAM: AN IDEOLOGICAL OSCILLATOR

If Islamophobia has been able to emancipate itself from underground movements and become mainstream, this is, among other reasons, because of the confusion about Islam that dominates the French debate. Islam has not become a normalized object in the public debate, and each commentator uses the same signifier for different signifieds. In particular, the Iranian referent causes trouble. Among the secular Left, the first sign of this trouble surfaced in 1983 when Prime

¹⁵ Xavier Bougarel, “Travailler sur l’islam dans la Bosnie en guerre,” *Cultures et conflits* 47 (2002): 49–80; and Jacques Sémelin, *Purifier et détruire: Usages politiques des massacres et génocides* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2005), 33.

¹⁶ See Nicolas Lebourg, “Arriba Eurasia? The Difficult Establishment of Eurasianism in Spain,” in *Eurasianism and the European Far Right: Reshaping the Europe-Russia Relationship*, ed. Marlène Laruelle (Washington, DC: Lexington Books, 2015), 125–42.

Minister Pierre Mauroy alleged that the action of Islamist agitators was responsible for a strike of immigrant workers, thus transforming them into “ayatollahs.”¹⁷ In sum, confronted with political responsibility for the first time since 1958 and radically changing its economic policy, part of the left wing looked toward its historical trademarks (secularism, human rights) in order to find a way to delegitimize immigrant workers, while another part considered these same trademarks as evidence of an authoritarian voluntarism that had been discredited. In 1989 another historical trademark of the French Left was touched: secularism at school. A national controversy ignited over adolescents wearing the hijab on school grounds. However, the press and the politicians did not speak of the “hijab” but instead used the Iranian term “*tchador*,” which exacerbated the divide and underlined the confusions. The Iranian obsession was certainly at work, since fifteen years later various left-wing intellectuals, familiar from national media (in particular Caroline Fourest and Pierre-André Taguieff), wrote off the use of the term “Islamophobia” by falsely asserting that it had its origin in the Iranian propaganda from 1979—an argument that was again taken up by Prime Minister Manuel Valls in 2014. The popularity of the idea underlined the “evil” connotation of the Iranian referent and managed to shatter an element as fundamental to the French Left as secularism. The controversy over whether or not to use the term “Islamophobia” would not stop dividing the leftists. Beyond the factual error, we indeed are dealing with an absurdity, since if there was a principle according to which the origin of a word could entail its censure, then the social sciences would also have to purify themselves of the words “nationalism,” “anti-Semitism,” “racism,” “neo-racism,” and “radicalism,” whose origins in France are strictly militant oriented.

The word “Islamophobia” can certainly be manipulated for ulterior motives, but there is not a single political term that could not be used and abused like this as well. This is exemplified by the neo-Fascists in the early 1990s, who denounced “anti-Muslim racism” in order to advance the cause of a brand of ethnopluralism that sought to challenge biological and cultural interbreeding. Following the example of certain American Klans, this led them to get in touch with the International Pan-African Movement and the Nation of Islam (which tried in vain at the time to establish itself in the French suburbs).¹⁸ After 9/11, these organizations were confronted with the rebellion of their militants, who henceforth considered the Arab-Muslim element to be their primary enemy. A case in point is Frédéric Larsen, a member of the main radical leadership, who had also been one of the leading members of the FN: he had formerly professed a violent form of anti-Zionism and favored an alliance with Islamists. However, soon after 9/11 he published a text on the website of Radical Unity, where he asserted that he wanted to “cut off his prepuce” in order to be able, like Ariel Sharon, to clean the French territories of the Arab-Muslim presence.¹⁹ In the summer of 2002, the dissolution by the government of Radical Unity after the attempted assassination of the president of the Republic Jacques Chirac by one of its militant members who saw in the president “an agent of ZOG”²⁰ brought about a complete reorientation of the

¹⁷ *Le Monde*, March 23, 1983.

¹⁸ *Lutte du peuple*, April 1993; July 1993; May–June 1994; March–April 1995; June–July 1995.

¹⁹ Frédéric Larsen, “Promo sur les sécateurs,” April 29, 2002. This site was deleted in the summer of 2002, but I have preserved a copy of the web page.

²⁰ The initialism ZOG for Zionist Occupation Government was popularized in the United States by the magazine *Resistance* and, because of the strong influence of American radicals on their European counterparts and the development of the Internet, spread to European Far Right movements at the end of the 1990s. See Martin Durham, “From Imperium to Internet: The National Alliance and the American Extreme Right,” in “The

movement. The leadership started a new movement, the Identity Block, whose central theme is up to this day Islamophobia.

The 2002 presidential election focused on the theme of insecurity; this topic did not benefit Bruno Mégrét (2.3 percent of the votes) but helped Jean-Marie Le Pen make the second round against Jacques Chirac. On the left, the electoral campaign saw Pierre-André Taguieff, a leading scholar on racism and the Far Right, publish a pamphlet to champion the candidacy of former minister of interior Jean-Pierre Chevènement. He presented him as the political figure who could stitch together a nation torn by communitarianism, that is to say, in his words, by an Islamic-leftist “drive.”²¹ Taguieff’s prose is symptomatic of the anti-Islamist radicalization of middle- and upper-class social actors whose cultural capital is an obstacle to the polarization accepted on the Far Right. The disruption is particularly significant for the left wing, for which secularism and antiracism are historical pillars. Confronted with the issue of “anti-Semitism stemming from youths of immigrant origin,” the Left has seen itself forced to ask whether its loyalty to secularism might require a break with its antiracism. The French Left has split over this question. On the one side, there is a liberal and Atlanticist trend eager to fight the anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism of those, in the opinion of this faction, with links to the Arab-Muslim world. They go so far as to refuse the word “Islamophobia” in order to avoid the countereffect of “Nazifying” the Arab-Muslim world they describe in their speeches. On the other side, there is an antiliberal tendency concerned about the fate of Palestinians and eager for a socially robust but societally weak state, readily “Nazifying” Israel but refusing to admit that this type of language constitutes a powerful vehicle of anti-Semitism.

If the ideological shock has been so intense, it is because debate among politicians and in the media has been carried out not by scholars active on the “first market” of knowledge—that is, scientists following the rules of university competition and cooperation—but by those active on the “second market,” the media, which is structured by ethics and aesthetics.²² Actors in this second market have spoken out about “fascislamisme” (Bernard-Henry Lévy), “Nazislamistes” (the popular right-wing journalist Yvan Roufiol), and so on, without mastering the concepts involved. Islamism is reduced to anti-Judaism and anti-Zionism, Nazism to murderous anti-Semitism, and an equal sign is drawn between the two terms. Those specialists of the first market who have spoken out on these topics, such as Alain Finkielkraut and Pierre-André Taguieff, have done so according to the forms and frameworks of the second market. Media representatives choose a segment: the criticism of “Islamophobia” or of “Judeophobia,” with each segment denying the other, on the basis of criteria that in fact reflect their own position vis-à-vis the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The hypertrophy of the impact on French society attributed to this conflict has made any impartial assessment of France’s tensions impossible, in particular those tensions that involve “identity.” The exploitation of Islamophobia for political purposes has also been the product of a “postcolonial” Left that, just as Islamophobes do, assigns individuals to an ethnic-cultural origin. In 2005 the antiracist Left witnessed a separatist movement emerge from its center: “les Indigènes de la République” (the Natives of the French Republic), who denounce a state that is,

‘Groupuscular Right’: A Neglected Political Genus,” ed. Roger Griffen, special issue, *Patterns of Prejudice* 36, no. 3 (2002): 50–61.

²¹ Pierre-André Taguieff, *La nouvelle judéophobie* (Paris: Mille et Une Nuits, 2002).

²² See Raymond Boudon, “Les intellectuels et le second marché,” *Revue européenne des sciences sociales* 87 (1990): 89–104.

according to them, Islamophobic and pro-Jewish by nature. Championing racial endogamy, they instead demand that in the event of an inter-ethnic union, the white partner convert to Islam.²³

In 2006, in the aftermath of the affair of the Danish cartoons of Muhammed published in France by *Charlie Hebdo*, the assimilation of Islamism to fascism became central to the rhetoric of the “Manifesto against the New Totalitarianism” published in *Charlie Hebdo* and cosigned by its director Philippe Val, Caroline Fourest, Bernard-Henri Lévy, and others. Although the libertarian tradition of the weekly could have furnished arguments against the temptation to censure, their choice was to fully implicate themselves in the neoconservative position.²⁴ The criticism of religion is consubstantial to *Charlie Hebdo*, but it nourishes itself in part in the libertarian spirit of post-1968 and in part in the lively tradition of the post-1889 anticlerical press. The neoconservative conceptions were imported into the weekly during this particular period and have disappeared with the departure of Philippe Val. (For the record, the author of the present article himself published an article deconstructing and condemning Islamophobic arguments.) *Charlie Hebdo* is considered Islamophobic outside France due to lack of knowledge of the paper’s traditions and, inside France, from an intentional volition that benefits the postcolonial Left. In the same way as the Islamophobes confound Islam and Islamism, the postcolonial Left confounds anxiety about Islamism and Islamophobia.

ISLAM OR POSTMODERNITY?

In order to grasp the impact of Islamophobia, one has to gauge the extent of the cultural crisis that France is going through in the era of globalization and postmodernity. This crisis is deep since French culture was built on values promoting unity. French nationalism is inseparable from the centralization efforts undertaken by the “King of France” (the term was adopted instead of “King of the Franks” in 1254); the word “nation” appeared in 1270; and in this regard, the French Revolution did not break with the politics of the Old Regime but instead brought them to their full conclusion. It put an end to feudal multiplicity in favor of unity. Unification of the land: the kaleidoscopic kingdom disappeared (the royal administration established the notion of borders between 1327 and 1648).²⁵ Unification of time: the adoption in 1582 of the Gregorian calendar put an end to the concomitance of different time lines. Unification of the language: Francis I decided that only French may be used in public proceedings (1539); the creation of the French Academy (1635) allowed for linguistic standardization. Unification of powers: they were concentrated to the benefit of the administrative monarchy; with Versailles as the royal residency from 1682 to 1789, state power was politically, judicially, and also spatially unified. Unification in the arts: classical theater adopted the rule of three unities (time, space, and action).

In contrast to this multisecular process, the postmodern age that emerged in the 1970s has brought about a fragmentation of reality, society, representations, and biology, while segmentation has become the rule on the economic and political scene. Orthodoxies have yielded to individualized tenets. Globalization has brought about a “moral panic,” all the more so because globalization foremost means a kind of de-Westernization.²⁶ In France, the atomization of cen-

²³ Caroline Izambert, Paul Guillibert, and Sophie Wahnich, “Revendiquer un monde décolonial: Entretien avec Houria Bouteldja,” *Vacarme* 71 (2015): 44–69.

²⁴ *Charlie Hebdo*, March 1, 2006.

²⁵ Pierre Nora, ed., *Les lieux de mémoire: La République, la nation, la France* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 1103–70.

²⁶ Gaël Brustier, *La guerre culturelle aura bien lieu . . . l’occidentalisme ou l’idéologie de la crise* (Paris: Mille et Une Nuits, 2013).

turies-old social structures raises the specter of real or imagined communitarianism. For parts of French society, this globalized world, where any unitary framework fades away, where those who are not on the move seem to be disqualified, represents insecurity. This dynamic has contributed to the spread of a social fiction according to which populations of Arab-Muslim origin represent a unified body—socially, culturally, and religiously speaking. This crystallization of an “us” composed of separate individuals in competition with each other and a “them” imagined as united has replaced the critique of the influence of economic and technical transformations on our way of life by a critique of the Arab-Muslim world. This sentiment is even more alive among those categories of people who it is said are not as well adjusted to globalization. This precisely is one of the main causes for what in France has frequently been described as “drift to the right” of European societies. This “right turn” should not be apprehended as a simple questioning of cultural liberalism or as a “Le Pen-ization of the mind.” What is taking place is a dismantling of the social state and of egalitarian humanism, connected to an ethnicization of social representations, in favor of the growth of the disciplinary state. This new social demand is not a reaction against May 1968, as right-wing French intellectuals assert, but a reaction to postmodernity, that is, to the transformation and atomization of modes of life and representations in a globalized economic universe of which the West is no longer the center. The political role of Islamophobia has been to enable someone to embody and to capitalize on this moral panic: Marine Le Pen.

She has perfectly mastered how to handle these questions. When she undertook to take over the FN Party, she was confronted with a traditionalist Catholic faction that supported her opponent, Bruno Gollnisch. Her secular rebranding of the party’s message allowed her to kill two birds with one stone: on the one hand, she provided a direction for the party favorable to electoral canvassing, and on the other, she marginalized her adversaries. She first worked with the anti-Zionist movement, hoping to put forward candidates of African or North African descent, in order to present these as proof of the “party’s de-demonization.” However, as this movement proved irreconcilable with the party’s image of outright anti-Semitism, Marine Le Pen was forced to change course. Having witnessed the communicational dynamism of the Identity Block, she appropriated their attacks against halal food and against prayers in the streets for her own benefit starting in 2010. She reacted against the Islamist attacks of 2012 with a scathing speech: “What happened is the beginning of the advancement of green fascism in our country. . . . How many Mohamed Merah arrive in France every day in boats, in planes filled with immigrants? How many Mohamed Merah among the children of those unassimilated immigrants?” Qualifying “radical Islam” as “gangrene” and as “cancer,” she swore that if she were president in the following weeks, she would bring it to “its knees.”²⁷

Behind its critique of an Islamism that is subverting France, Marine Le Pen’s FN has become the party of “anti-postmodernity.” She makes people dream by invoking an industrial France, unified and united, and by opposing what she claims to be the present reign of fragments of individual and communal memories. Closer to the “identitarian” circles than to the conservative Right, Marion Maréchal-Le Pen, the niece of Marine Le Pen and the only congresswoman of the party, also knows how to use the “unitarist” argument against religious communitarianism, declaring: “We have youths who look daggers at each other and who have the impression of no longer having anything in common. . . . [T]he big challenge for today’s France is to reunite

²⁷ *Le nouvel observateur*, March 25, 2012.

all these French people who are of different origin, of different religion, by means of this great weapon which is the Republic.”²⁸

CONCLUSION

Islamophobia in France can be understood only by questioning the cultural structures of the country. Having had a long experience of terrorist attacks, French society has remained concerned with possible terrorist attacks at a steady rate of 50 percent of those questioned between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Islamist attacks perpetrated by Mohamed Merah in March 2012 (with a peak at 64 percent of citizens expressing concern in October 2011). Afterward, the dismantling of jihadist branches all over the country showed that the phenomenon was no longer foreign but that it implicated French people of all regions, which made the anxiety over terrorism nearly ubiquitous (93 percent of those interviewed are now anxious after the attacks of January 2015). This state of public opinion has rational causes. However, the negative image of Islam that 45 percent of those interviewed in 2014 acknowledge to hold does not rely on a rational and empirical basis.²⁹ Islamophobia is a myth in the sense that Georges Sorel gave to the word: a representation capable of mobilizing and directing collective action. The traction that Marine Le Pen has gained on this issue comes from her capacity to make this myth resonate with the myth of France’s unity.

The first globalization witnessed the success of racist theories and practices. The second, because of its cultural impact, has generated a social authoritarianism, a demand all the more fierce in a culture as unitarian as France. This explains the success of the Far Right in France, while in neighboring countries such as Spain, which was very heavily hit by the economic crisis of 2008, the Far Right does not exist. The spread of Islamophobia in France stems from deep transformations in the relationships between the state, society, and the market. The socio-economic fragmentation of the society of the Welfare State is attributed to a multicultural society, and such multiculturalism is reduced to the question of the presence of people originating from Arab-Muslim countries. The FN has managed to gather a scattered clientele by presenting itself as the sovereignist global solution to the cultural, economic, ethnic, and social destabilization that has been diagnosed. The debate concerning Islam in fact conceals a much larger question: is France, as a culture and as a Republic, willing to be compatible with a liberal postmodern society? The question has little to do with a satirical weekly newspaper. A

²⁸ Interview with the author, February 3, 2013.

²⁹ Jérôme Fourquet and Alain Mergier, *Janvier 2015: Le catalyseur* (Paris: Fondation Jean Jaurès, 2015); and Mattei Dogan, “Le nationalisme en Europe: Déclin à l’Ouest, résurgence à l’Est,” in *Nations et frontières dans la nouvelle Europe*, ed. Eric Philippart (Brussels: Complexe, 1993), 145.