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DIFFICULTY OF STUDYING RACISM AND XENOPHOBIA IN MODERN WESTERN EUROPEAN ACADEMIA: THE CASE OF FRANCE

Introduction

Over the recent years, the French academic landscape has been increasingly confronted with contentious debates surrounding the concept of “Islamogauchisme,”¹ which symbolizes a descriptive value designating a convergence between Muslim fundamentalists and far-left groups in favor of common enemies, and the potential influence of foreign states in higher education and research institutions. As per the first debate, Frédérique Vidal, the former French minister of

1 Valentine Faure, “« Islamogauchisme » : histoire tortueuse d’une expression devenue une invective,” *Le Monde.fr*, December 11, 2020, https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2020/12/11/islamogauchisme-histoire-tortueuse-d-une-expression-devenue-une-invective_6063006_3232.html. As per the article the term first used by French socialist Pierre-André Taguieff in his book titled “La Nouvelle Judéophobie” in 2002.

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higher education, in March 2021 initiated an inquiry into the purported phenomenon of “Islamofleftism” in French academic institutions. Regarding the second debate on higher education and research institutions, a fact-finding mission initiated by the “Rassemblement des démocrates, progressistes et indépendants (RDPI)” group in July 2021, under the chairmanship of Senator Etienne Blance and rapporteur Senator André Gattolin, investigated non-European state influences in the French university and academic world. The report from this mission formulates 26 recommendations to preserve and protect French scientific heritage, academic freedoms, and research integrity from potential foreign interference.

In the context of these debates, recent changes in the French cabinet have seen the appointment of two new ministers: Sylvie Retailleau, Minister of Higher Education, and Pap Ndiaye, Minister of Education. Ndiaye, a scholar specializing in colonialism and the history of race relations, has been associated with left-wing politics. On the other hand, Retailleau, a prominent figure within French academia, has not yet taken any significant steps regarding the contentious issue of “Islamofleftism.”

This paper examines the implications of the “Islamofleftism” debate, and foreign state influences on French academia, focusing on their impact on the study of race and racism, the positions of key political figures, and potential consequences for academic freedom in France. It will also draw comparisons with the experiences of other countries, such as Australia and the United Kingdom, grappling with similar allegations in recent years. In addition, the author will highlight the moral pressure attempted to be established by preparing reports on academic studies and research in higher education institutions in France. In this context, the author will first discuss the report prepared by the French Senate.

The Report

The French Senate, has published a report titled “**Non-European state influences in the French university and academic world and their impact.**”² As per the information provided by the rapporteur of the Senate fact-finding mission, Senator André Gattolin, “[the] long preserved French research and higher education is no longer immune to attempts at influence from foreign states.” In this respect, according to Gattolin, some countries have been employing systemic strategies that sometimes turn into interference in the French system. To investigate the issue, a fact-finding mission was set up in July 2021 at the initiative of the “*Rassemblement des Démocrates, progressistes et indépendants (RDPI)*” group under the chairmanship of Senator Etienne Blance, with André Gattolin as rapporteur.³ As per Gattolin, during the fact-finding mission, about fifty French and foreign personalities, all higher education establishments were interviewed, and investigations were extended to several countries reportedly affected by this problem, such as Australia, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Canada. In this context, it is stated that the report formulates 26 recommendations grouped into five objectives to prepare France and its institutions for the struggle to preserve and better protect the French scientific heritage, academic freedoms, and research integrity.

2 André Gattolin, “Rapport d’information fait au nom de la mission d’information sur les influences étatiques extra-européennes dans le monde universitaire et académique français et leurs incidences” (Paris: Le Sénat, September 9, 2021), http://www.senat.fr/rap/r20-873/r20-873_mono.html.

3 Gattolin.

The report notes that foreign influences and their impact on the values of the French university and academic world do not yet appear as priorities in France. However, certain countries, such as Australia or the UK, have in recent years become aware of the acuteness of the problem, mainly because they were the first victims. For several years, these states have recorded an increase in manifestations of foreign influence, or even interference, in their universities and have launched parliamentary inquiries into practices such as the funding of chairs, the recruitment of researchers, the instrumentalization of research for ideological or political ends, or even on the pressures exerted on their student nationals and potentially on teachers. The report claims that France is already an essential target for these operations, particularly in certain areas where France is at the forefront.⁴

Which Countries are Identified as “Non-European” by the Senate Report?

At the very beginning, the report explains its leading target country as China. As per the Report, China appears to be the state most able to conduct a global and systemic influence strategy due to its power and capacity to conduct long-term policies. It adds that China could be joined by other countries already deploying more offensive policies, such as Russia, **Turkey**, and some countries in the Persian Gulf.⁵

Regarding the exciting report title, no matter which party they voted for, a Turkish citizen will probably ask the following questions: “Is Turkey a non-European country?” If Turkey is not a European country, how did it become one of the founding members of the Council of Europe and all-encompassing European institutions established in 1949 to uphold human rights, democracy, and the rule of law in **Europe**? Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union or Maastricht Treaty states that “**any European country** that respects the principles of the EU may apply to join.” If Turkey is not a European country, why was its EU membership application accepted in 2004?

We can multiply these questions by referencing the history of Europe and the long history of Turkish-French relations. When such questions are raised, lofty members of the French Senate or the French diplomats may give rhetorical and superficial answers that the report references non-European countries in the context of “European values.” The following point should be clearly stated: the Turkish people, or anyone with self-respect, will not accept such a deceptive explanation. Moreover, they will find such expressions and descriptions offensive.

What are the claims of the Report about Turkey?

As stated above, the report was prepared mainly by targeting China, Russia, and Turkey. Although there is a phrase called “Persian Gulf” countries in the report, there are limited references to this region. In the Report, China is mentioned 357 times, Turkey 87 times, and Russia only 36 times. Furthermore, only two of the three target countries in question, Turkey and China, are discussed at length under a single main title of “Focusing on Two Different Strategies Executed in France: Turkey and China.” Following this sub-title, Turkey is discussed under the sub-title of “A Sectorial Example: Turkey with Limited Resources but Targeted Actions.”⁶

4 Gattolin, 11.

5 Gattolin, 13.

6 Gattolin, 61–65.

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The section about Turkey shows that long references are made to the information given by two individuals. These are the French historian Claire Mouradian of Armenian origin (Research Director of French National Center for Scientific Research-CNRS) and Dorothee Schmid (Doctor, head of the Turkey and Middle East program at the French Institute of International Relations-IFRI). The claims concerning Turkey were examined under the following sub-headings: 1. A limited institutional presence in Higher Education⁷, 2—targeted actions, a) Pressure on Researchers, and b) The role of think tanks.⁸

As per the claims of Schmid, which were included in the “Pressure on Researchers” sub-title, “in 2015, a student had to write a thesis on the recognition of the Armenian genocide by the Americans. As a result, ultra-nationalist Turks hacked the IFRI site”, and “in 2017, during a television broadcast, the director of IFRI had said that ‘Recep Erdogan could meet a dire fate,’ so IFRI subsequently faced numerous threats and a smear campaign on social media.”⁹ Under this sub-title, Mouradian claimed, “The first degree of ‘pressure’ is the restriction for researchers of access to Turkish territory as well as to the archives... (and) stressed to the mission that Turkey widely practiced these restrictions.”¹⁰ Upon the discussion of the issue under this heading, the French Senate fact-finding mission formulated the following Recommendation:

“Recommendation 13: Extend the benefit of functional protection to the entire academic community (researchers who are not public officials, institutions).”¹¹

Under the sub-title of “The Role of think tanks,” we witness the non-sensical claims of Mouradian. For a better understanding of the groundlessness of her claims, we present this section of the Report in full below:

“b) The role of think-tanks

Funding and creating think-tanks that promote theses favourable to the regime’s positions is the second aspect of Turkey’s strategy of influence in higher education. The advantage of think tanks is that the line between research and lobbying is in some cases difficult to draw, and their regulation is weaker.

It is possible to cite the example of the Bosphore Institute, created in 2009 in Paris, in the form of a 1901 law association. According to its site, its ‘main mission is to be one of the active engines of debates on Turkey in France, in particular through the organization of leading events. It is financed and supported by Turkey, and it develops theses which are favourable to it. As is often the case, these are seldom “untruths”, but more theses and notes that present only one point of view, or that intentionally omit aspects of a problem.

In addition, according to Claire Mouradian, the Bosphore Institute monitors authors of articles on Turkey, which it interprets as a form as ‘spotting’, but also as a form of bullying.

It emerges from our hearings that several think-tanks have supported openly negationist theses, which have given rise to legal proceedings. We can cite the ‘Maxime Gouin’ [*Gauin*]

7 Gattolin, 61–62.

8 Gattolin, 62–65.

9 Gattolin, 63.

10 Gattolin, 62.

11 Gattolin, 63.

case, the author of which is known for his positions denying the Armenian genocide. (1 Source: Paris Court of Appeal, press release of March 28, 2019).”¹²

The Turkish Industry and Business Association (TÜSİAD) issued a press release on 11 October 2021 titled “Statements Regarding the Work of the Institut du Bosphore in the Report of the French Senate Are Inconsistent with the Facts and Aim to Restrict Freedom of Expression” regarding these allegations.¹³ In this context, we would like to underscore that the allegations against Dr. Maxime Gauin are as baseless as the accusations against the Bosphore Institute. Those who have worked with Gauin know he is a historian who bases his arguments on meticulous archival research and shows zero tolerance for factual inaccuracy. Unfortunately, to this date, no one has been able to offer a proper rebuttal of Gauin’s analysis, forcing his opponents to instead engage in bizarre attempts at character assassination. In our judgment, the statements in the French Senate report reveal a complete eclipse of reason and a desperate attempt to besmirch Turkey, regardless of how one looks at the subject.

Which International Activities of Turkey Are Annoying French Senators?

Statements and comments interspersed in various parts of the French Senate report reveal that French Senators are particularly disturbed by the presence and activities of Yunus Emre Institutes in France and other countries. Similarly, the opening of schools by the Turkish Maarif Foundation, especially in Africa, seems to make the French authorities nervous. For example, there are sections in the report on these issues that include the following statements:

- Also heard by the mission, Dorothee Schmid, a French Institute of International Relations researcher, believes that “other cases less systematic and protean than China” use these tools more discreetly for political ends. This is the case, for example... for Turkey, which in recent years has been deploying its Yunus Emre Institutes (named after a 13th-century mystical poet), especially in Africa.¹⁴
- Turkey has strongly developed the network of schools in Africa. These schools have built their reputation on their competitive exam preparation programs, which allow their students to enter the best African universities. The objective is thus to ensure that future African elites promote cooperation with Turkey and the Turkish model. Therefore, Turkey’s involvement in Africa remains important, and in this regard, Campus France said that Turkey “has indicated that they will have as many scholarships as necessary” for the continent.¹⁵
- Neo-Ottomanism is not just about Turkey’s attempt to build up an area of influence beyond its borders; it also designates a desire for cultural influence on a global scale. The Ottoman Empire was indeed headed by the last Caliphs of the Muslim world, and unlike the Emirates, the influence of the Caliphate is intended to extend to the entire community of believers (the Umma). It is not, however, a direct religious authority, like that of the Pope for Catholicism,

¹² Gattolin, 64–65.

¹³ “Fransa Senatosu raporunda Institut du Bosphore’un çalışmaları ile ilgili ifadeler gerçeklerle bağdaşmıyor ve ifade özgürlüğünü kısıtlamayı hedefliyor,” October 11, 2021, <https://tusiad.org/tr/basin-bultenleri/item/10849-fransa-senatosu-raporunda-institut-du-bosphore-un-calismalari-ile-ilgili-ifadeler-gerceklerle-bagdasmiyor-ve-ifade-ozgurlugunu-kisitlamayi-hedefliyor>.

¹⁴ Gattolin, “Rapport d’information fait au nom de la mission d’information sur les influences étatiques extra-européennes dans le monde universitaire et académique français et leurs incidences,” 27.

¹⁵ Gattolin, 38.

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but a form of cultural and civilizational influence. On this aspect, Turkey is thus in competition with Saudi Arabia, which is home to the two greatest holy places of Islam. However, as Dorothée Schmid pointed out to the fact finding mission, the most important benchmark is actually the nationalist benchmark. Neo-Ottomanism also refers to nostalgia for the empire as a major political power, straddling Africa, Asia, and Europe. It is about giving Turkey back its “rightful place” in terms of its history and culture.¹⁶

In this context, it is mentioned in the report that several embassies in Paris, most probably upon the request of the French authorities, sent written contributions to the Senate fact-finding mission relating to their public policies of influence and international cooperation in education. These embassies are mentioned in the second footnote of the report as “The embassies in Paris of Germany, Australia, the People’s Republic of China, Great Britain, and Turkey.”¹⁷ In addition, the contribution of the Turkish Embassy with comprehensive content is included as an annex to the report in full text.¹⁸ In this context, the answer to Question-6 included in the Turkish Embassy contribution, which eloquently explains Turkey’s policy and politely reminds French authorities of their historical activities in the cultural and political field worldwide, is as follows:

“Question 6 - What is your position on the criticisms that could target Turkey in its practices of influence in France or elsewhere in Europe or the world?”

Turkish Embassy’s Reply- Academic exchanges with France derive in large part from a history of the Francophonie that is well established in Turkey and a pragmatic approach by the Turkish authorities to offer our academics quality training in France. In general, Turkey’s efforts to increase the influence of Turkish language and culture abroad are comparable to the efforts of many other countries, including France, in the same field. Therefore, these efforts do not elicit any justified criticism.”¹⁹

Several statements and comments in the report show that the courtesy and polite response of the Turkish Embassy was either ignored or pretended not to be understood by the French authorities. Therefore, it appears to be necessary to remind the authors of the report in a nutshell of the following:

The origins of the globally familiar presence of *the Institut Français* lie in the *mission of civilisatrice* of French colonialism. As remembered, the *mission civilisatrice* is one of the bywords of French colonial expansion.²⁰ Without going into more detail on this subject, we would like to only remind our readers of the following evaluation of an academic source on French colonialism of the nineteenth century:

“French foreign policy attempted to compensate for the decline of France as a major world power and used the foreign cultural policy to secure political and economic supremacy over the areas once belonging to the Ottoman Empire. As a result, the *Alliance Française* and the *Mission Laïque Française* were established, and they began to function as tools to increase the usage of French language and knowledge of French culture in the Middle East.”²¹

16 Gattolin, 43.

17 Gattolin, 8.

18 Gattolin, 228–37.

19 Gattolin, 236.

20 Teoman Ertuğrul Tulun, “German-French Joint Cultural Institutes: Transformation of the ‘Civilizing’ Mission of West European Colonialism.,” *Center For Eurasian Studies (AVİM)*, February 26, 2019, sec. Analysis, 2019 / 2, <https://avim.org.tr/en/Analiz/GERMAN-FRENCH-JOINT-CULTURAL-INSTITUTES-TRANSFORMATION-OF-THE-CIVILIZING-MISSION-OF-WEST-EUROPEAN-COLONIALISM> , 10.31219/osf.io/2tgmv.

21 Somogy Varga, “The Marketization of Foreign Cultural Policy: The Cultural Nationalism of the Competition State.,” *Constellations* 20, no. 3 (October 20, 2013): 442–58.

Attempts to Silence the Debate on Racism in France

As noted above, Frédérique Vidal, the former French minister of higher education, in March 2021 initiated an inquiry into the purported phenomenon of “Islamism-leftism” in French academic institutions. The minister has accused scholars working with critical and postcolonial perspectives of promoting a divisive agenda and reducing all issues to a simplistic prism of race and colonialism. Critics view this line of attack as an attempt to silence essential conversations about racism, white supremacy, and the enduring legacy of colonialism, thereby perpetuating a self-serving myth of France as a post-racial and egalitarian society.²²

The current debate surrounding the phenomenon of “Islamism-gauchisme” or “Islamism-leftism” in French universities has prompted a wider critique of academia, with some arguing that it has strayed too far from the principles of French universalism. In particular, scholars working in the field of race and racism have become the focus of criticism, despite their marginal position within the academic landscape.²³

The expression “Islamism-leftism,” known in France as “Islamism-gauchisme,” has gained significant traction among certain factions of the academic community and right-wing politicians. It refers to a purported political convergence between radical Islamist movements and the far left, united in opposition to imperialism and neoliberal globalization. In today’s context, the term is used pejoratively by the French government, conservative media, and scholars to criticize left-wing anti-racist intellectuals for their intense focus on racism and Islamophobia, insinuating that they endorse Islamism and terrorism. State officials’ extensive use of this label may inadvertently stigmatize Muslims and progressive scholars by generalizing their views and suggesting ties to extremism.²⁴

Despite the assignment of the investigation into “Islamism-leftism” to the National Center for Scientific Research by Minister Vidal, the center has acknowledged that the term is inadequately defined and lacks any substantive grounding in scientific reality. Furthermore, the center has cautioned against the potential misuse of scientific research for political ends and has expressed concern regarding the possible infringement upon academic freedom within France.²⁵

Sarah Mazouz, a sociologist and race and racism researcher associated with the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS), contends that general ideas of color-blindness and race-blindness prevail in France, often used to deter or weaken efforts to address issues related to race. The initiation of such an argument, according to Mazouz, rests on the assertion that France is already a society free of racial prejudice and thus renders superfluous any further inquiry into questions of race and racialization.²⁶

Recent Changes In The Cabinet and Possible Effects on France

Two new Ministers came to the cabinet last year. Sylvie Retailleau currently serves as the Minister of Higher Education, and Pap Ndiaye was appointed Minister of Education. Ndiaye, born

22 F. Zehra Colak and Erkan Toguslu, “France’s Attack on Academics Is an Attempt to Silence Debate on Race - ECPS,” *Populism Studies*, March 1, 2021, sec. Commentaries, <https://www.populismstudies.org/frances-attack-on-academics-is-an-attempt-to-silence-debate-on-race/>.

23 Sarah Elzas, “Academics under Fire for Studying Race and Racism in Colour-Blind France,” *RFI*, March 25, 2021, sec. france, <https://www.rfi.fr/en/france/20210325-studying-race-and-racism-in-universalist-colour-blind-france-islamism-leftism-islamism-gauchisme-academia-paris>.

24 Colak and Toguslu, “France’s Attack on Academics Is an Attempt to Silence Debate on Race - ECPS.”

25 David Matthews, “France to Investigate Academics over ‘Islamism-Leftism,’” *Times Higher Education (THE)*, February 19, 2021, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/france-investigate-academics-over-islamism-leftism>.

26 Elzas, “Academics under Fire for Studying Race and Racism in Colour-Blind France.”

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in a Parisian suburb to a Senegalese father and French mother, rose to national prominence by publishing his 2008 book “The Black Condition: A French Minority.” As a scholar specializing in colonialism and the history of race relations in Europe and America, Ndiaye has been associated with left-wing politics and was the director of France’s Museum of Immigration.²⁷

Sylvie Retailleau, a prominent figure within French academia and former president of the highly regarded Université Paris-Saclay, has drawn significant attention in light of Professor Vidal’s campaign against “Islamism” within the academy. Despite her elevated status and visibility, however, Retailleau has not thus far taken any significant positive or negative steps regarding this contentious issue.²⁸

The Difficulty In Addressing Racism And Different Types of Discriminations In Today’s French Academia

Some academics argue that while researching discrimination in France, researchers make severe distinctions between types of discrimination, creating thick barriers between them. In this context, while using some techniques used in research for some minority groups is not a matter of criticism, using the same methods for another minority group may be the subject of the complaint. For example, using simulation to educate people about the impact of stigmatization is an effective and widely used strategy to raise awareness about disability. However, using the same technique to raise awareness against discrimination against Muslim women wearing headscarves can provoke strong political and media backlash. Similarly, while organizing an internal network to challenge one’s company from the inside was an effective strategy to address homophobia and transphobia in the workplace, doing the same thing to address Islamophobia or racism would be perceived in a negative light, dismissed and framed as a scandal in the press. It is claimed in this respect that “straightforwardly addressing racism and Islamophobia was difficult because the current French colorblind and secularist context makes monitoring and addressing discrimination challenging.”²⁹

On the other part, particular research focused on addressing racism in France, with some organizations succeeding indirectly by addressing “diversity” issues or “underprivileged neighborhoods.” In contrast, those directly addressing racism or Islamophobia failed and disappeared.³⁰

Conclusion

Upon analyzing the aforementioned French Senate report, one can say that the information primarily targets China. However, to avoid being totally anti-China, it defames Turkey and attempts

27 Angelique Chrisafis, “France: Black Historian Pap Ndiaye Appointed as Education Minister,” *The Guardian*, May 20, 2022, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/20/france-black-historian-pap-ndiaye-appointed-as-education-minister>.

28 Ben Upton, “New French Minister Urged to Look beyond Research Elite,” *Times Higher Education (THE)*, June 3, 2022, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/new-french-minister-urged-look-beyond-research-elite>.

29 Lisa Buchter, “Why Is It So Hard to Address Racism and Islamophobia in France?,” *Social Science Space* (blog), March 20, 2023, <https://www.socialsciencespace.com/2023/03/why-is-it-so-hard-to-address-racism-and-islamophobia-in-france/>; Lisa Buchter, “Escaping the Ellipsis of Diversity: Insider Activists’ Use of Implementation Resources to Influence Organization Policy,” *Administrative Science Quarterly* 66, no. 2 (June 1, 2021): 521–65, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0001839220963633>; “Educating the Sighted: When Activists Reorganize Solidarity by Prefiguring New Social Scripts of Help and Interaction - Lisa Buchter, 2022,” *Organization* 29, no. 2 (March 14, 2022): 247–70, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13505084211051051>.

30 Buchter, “Why Is It So Hard to Address Racism and Islamophobia in France?”; Lisa Buchter, “‘Companies Can Do Better than the Law’: Securing Rights for Minorities as an Insider Activist in French Corporations,” in *Legal Intermediation*, vol. 81, Studies in Law, Politics, and Society (Emerald Publishing Limited, 2019), 11–44, <https://doi.org/10.1108/S1059-433720190000081002>.

to exclude it from the Western world by denying its European character. It is becoming increasingly visible every day that this approach targets Turkey and Turks in general and is not confined to its administrators. Therefore, we can say that this enmity has become very stale and creates weariness and anger among the Turkish people, interpreted by some as a provocation to instigate countermeasures

It would be helpful to evaluate this anti-Turkey attitude in the report of the French Senate and the criticisms of academics about the obstruction and defamation of academic studies in France on racism, xenophobia, and anti-Islamism in the same frame. In this context, it is possible to say that there is a serious inconsistency between the allegations against Turkey in the report of the French Senate and the attitude taken against racism and Islamophobia studies in France. This contrast brings to mind the Turkish proverb “Know your own faults before blaming others,” which essentially says to look at your own mistakes before unjustly criticizing others.

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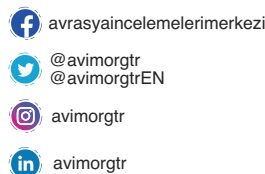
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