

“Imaginary Islam”: an ideological weapon in the French public debate

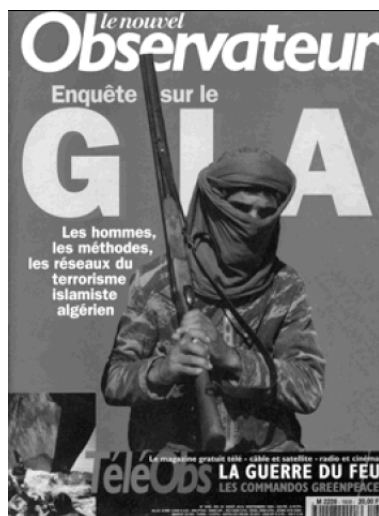
Thomas Deltombe

This presentation is the result of an investigation on contemporary representations of “islam” in the French mainstream media. The initial idea of this work was to understand the historical process that led to the current representations of “islam”. Although this investigation was restricted to the last three decades, it has to be remembered that the French representations of “islam” are very much influenced by three historical and national particularities. The first one is the fact that the 1789 revolution has always been, and remains, a structuring element in the French public debate. The second French historical particularity is the traumatic aspect of its decolonization process. One can especially think of the Algerian war (1954-1962), an episod which remains vivid in French memories and has decisive consequences on the way the French society regards immigrants of North African origins. The thrid specificity which has to be underlined, a specificty which historically interferes with the period studied in the book “L’islam imaginaire¹”, is the fact what is called “islamic” or “islamist terrorism” nowadays – we are not talking about “terrorism” itself – had struck the French national territory well before the other european countries (i.e as soon as the mid-1980s).

These three particularities makes the French contemporary perceptions and representations of “islam” quite unique. In studying these contemporary reprintsations, of which this presentation tries to trace the evolutions, one discovers that these representations has been intrumentalized by various segments of the French elite in order to reassert a certain conception of the national identity. To put it bluntly, an “imaginary islam” has been forged in the past three decades to reassert a mythical conception o the French identity. But what is also interesting is the fact that, in the process of creating this “imaginary islam” the same elite used islamophobic arguments

¹ Thomas Deltombe, L’islam imaginaire. La construction médiatique de l’islamophobie en France, 1975-2005, Paris : La Découverte, 2005.

to find their way and secure their positions in the ideological and political arena. In short, what I would like to illustrate in this presentation is the fact that what I call “imaginary islam” has become an ideological weapon of which Islam, as a faith, and the Muslims are not the only target.



Islam and the anti-“totalitarian” assault

To understand contemporary islamophobia in France, we have to go back to the end of the 1970's and the beginning of the 1980's. At that time, a sector of the French media and political elite was undergoing a major ideological shift². While in the

² See : François Cusset, *La décennie. Le grand cauchemar des années 1980*, Paris : La Découverte, 2006.

aftermath of May 1968, a great deal of people, including eminent intellectuals, had been ardent supporters of communism, in its Soviet, Chinese or Cuban versions, many of them started in the mid-1970's to renounce their past political commitments and to denounce the totalitarian nature of communism. In the wake of Soljenitsin's books on the Soviet gulags, a group of young intellectuals – known as “new philosophers” – began to depict communism in all its forms as the equivalent of nazism. Denouncing “totalitarianism” became the main preoccupation of this section of opinion makers³. Soon included in this definition of totalitarianism, third-worldism which was particularly popular in France since the end of the long and bloody Algerian War in 1962, was now declared an irresponsible movement driven by self-hatred and guilt of France's colonial past⁴. As boat people were fleeing Vietnam, the new anti-third-world movement denounced the oppressive regimes set up by “communists” and “revolutionaries” in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Islam as such was not the original target of this discourse. But it was soon integrated into the denunciation of third-worldism after the 1979 Iranian Revolution. While some in France were quite enthusiastic at first, they changed their minds when Khomeiny took charge of the revolution. In the eyes of the anti-third-worldist movement, the Iranian Islamic Republic, which rendered the islamic veil compulsory, was yet another illustration of the totalitarian tendencies of the Third-World, and another example of the foolishness of those who, in the West, and particularly in France, had supported the overthrow of pro-western dictatorships such as that of the Shah of Iran⁵.

The most significant example of this ideological evolution in the influential book the “new philosopher” Pascal Bruckner published in 1983, *“The tears of the whiteman - Third-world, guilt and self-hatred”*, which synthesised all the reproaches that had recently been made against third-worldism, and against the Third-World itself. If some

³ See : Michael Scott Christofferson, French intellectuals against the left: the antitotalitarian moment of the 1970s, Berghahn Books, 2003.

⁴ Jean-Pierre Garnier et Roland Lew, From the retched of the earth to the defence of the West: an essay on Left disenchantment in France, The Socialist Register, 1984.
< http://socialistregister.com/socialistregister.com/files/SR_1984_Garnier.pdf>

⁵ See : Nochine Yavari d'Hellencourt, *Les otages américains à Téhéran*, Paris : La Documentation Française, 1992.

arguments of this all-out assault might seem acceptable, they nonetheless appear rather questionable when one considers the conclusions drawn by the anti-third-worldists. Because we have spent too much time self-flagellating, anti-third-worldist said, it is time now to take pride in ourselves. Because we have supported Third-World liberation movements for too long, we should now change tack and support the movements backed by the “free world” – the West. Such a discourse resulted in incredible declarations of self-satisfaction as well as the systematic exclusion of “others” from “our” philosophical heritage. “There is nothing beyond democracy, Pascal Bruckner wrote in 1983. If the peoples of the Third World are to become themselves, they must become more Western⁶.” In this context, such words as “exploitation”, “oppression” and “domination” which were once so popular among this section of the French intelligentsia, were suddenly eradicated. Racism itself is not what we once thought, argued Bruckner who asked this intriguing question: “when will the UN consider anti-westernism and anti-white racism as a crime against Humanity⁷?”

This ideological shift was not as radical as Bruckner’s and others’ among the rest of the elite, but these kind of arguments began to slowly penetrate the public sphere. Paradoxically, the Left’s accession to power in 1981, after two decades in the opposition, favored this evolution. For two main reasons. First, because the socialist party abandoned the remnants of its traditional marxist rhetoric soon after coming to office, adopting an economic liberalism that appeared so successful, at the time, in the US and the UK. The second reason lies in the emergence of a so called “immigration problem”, loudly proclaimed by the right wing opposition and by the flourishing extreme right led by Jean-Marie Le Pen. Threatened on its right, the socialist government began to incorporate the philosophy of the anti-third-worldist current into its own policies and discourse, and to apply it to that segment of the immigration originating from the former French colonial empire.

The most famous example of this tactic took place in 1983 when the government,

⁶ Pascal Bruckner, *Le sanglot de l’homme blanc. Tiers-Monde, culpabilité, haine de soi*, Paris : Seuil, 1983.

⁷ Ibid, p 246.

now ready to publicly embrace its conversion to economic liberal orthodoxy, was confronted with a massive strikes in the car industry. Taking advantage of the fact that the industry was employing many immigrant workers, President Mitterrand and several of his Ministers described the strikes as a manipulation by underground agents of Ayatollah Khomeiny. The strikers were “fundamentalists, muslims and shi’ites” following “an agenda with little connection to French social realities”, claimed the government without the slightest evidence to support such an allegation⁸.

This example is quite interesting as it clearly shows how “islam” can become an instrument used, not by Muslims, but by public authorities taking advantage of the terminological (and visual) confusion between immigrants, muslims, shi’ites and fundamentalists, in order to shift blame. Here, it is not the workers who are victims of industrial restructuring and unemployment, it is “us” – the government and “our” country at large – who are the victims of a destabilisation originating from elsewhere. The cynicism of the government was of course denounced by a part of the opinion makers, but the same kind of logic became so common in the following years that even the more reluctant began to accept the idea that there was indeed an “immigration problem”. A few months after the 1983 strike, the new socialist prime minister Laurent Fabius claimed that Jean-Marie Le Pen, the successful leader of the French National Front, was “asking good questions but giving the wrong answers”⁹.



⁸ Gilles Kepel, *Les banlieues de l'islam. Naissance d'une religion en France*, Paris : Seuil, 1987.

⁹ See: Yvan Gastaud, *L'Immigration et l'Opinion publique en France sous la Ve République*, Paris: Seuil, 2000.

Integration, laïcité, islam

In formulating this “immigration problem” and the subsequent “islam problem”, the whole French political and media elite put aside the socio-economic problems that embarrassed both the left-wing government and their right-wing predecessors to focus quasi-exclusively on “cultural” and “identity” issues – namely the “good questions” raised by extreme right activists. The vocabulary used in public discourse evolved: the Algerian, Tunisian and Moroccan “workers” as they were called in the 1970’s became mere “immigrants”. And the debate soon focused on their offspring who were given a specific label, “beurs”, as if this entire category of people ought to remain outside the rest of the society even though they too were French citizens. The alleged “specificity” of these citizens was further symbolically marked by the constant use of a term which had disappeared since the colonial era: “integration”. Extensively used during the Algerian war, especially by the supporters of French Algeria, the term “integration” became highly ambiguous when applied, in the 1980’s and since then, to the descendants of the colonised ¹⁰.

The word “integration” becomes even more dubious when one realizes that it re-appeared exactly when the question of “islam in France” was beginning to be publicly and loudly raised, especially by the media. This sudden interest in “islam” in the French context, coupled with the slippery concept of “integration”, clearly indicates that a certain part of the elite, if not the majority, remained reluctant to regard people of North African origin and/or with an Islamic background as fully French. One might think that the sudden media interest in “islam” simply reflected a renewed interest on the part of the muslims themselves in their own religion. This is partly true, but when one studies press articles and television reports it becomes apparent that an “islamic” identity was frequently imposed upon a population that was regarded as undeniably “muslim” even though this population had not yet felt the necessity or had the time to think out what was the exact meaning of such an identity in a transplanted context. The following example illustrates this fact quite clearly: journalists often claimed there were

¹⁰ See : Abdelmalek Sayad, *La double absence. Des illusions de l'émigré aux souffrances de l'immigré*, Paris : Seuil, 1999.

3, 4, 5 or even 6 million muslims in France, extrapolating these figures from the “ethnic” or “national” origins of immigrants. In other words, the media and many intellectuals converted a segment of the population to a religion they called “islam” without asking what the supposed “muslims” had to say about such categorisation. This was not necessarily done in bad faith and many journalists had good intentions, but the outcome was that this imposed “islamic” identity, “good” or “bad”, worked – and continues to work – as a stigma indicating the supposed “lack of integration” of a culturalised and ethnicised segment of the population.



The renewed interest in “islam” in France was further favoured by a media industry that underwent major changes in the mid-1980’s. The emergence in particular of a private television sector, with the creation in 1985 of a fifth channel (partly owned by the Italian mogul Silvio Berlusconi) as well as the privatisation in 1987 of the first public channel (sold to a French giant of public works), had serious short-term as well as long term consequences. Now financed by advertising and driven by ratings, the media industry tended to ignore “boring” issues like unemployment, social inequalities and international affairs, and turned to more “sexy” subjects like “immigration”, “suburban violence” and “islamic fanaticism”. In this new market-oriented context, the traditional images of “islam” with its fearsome veiled women, bearded men and

praying crowds could not leave TV programmers insensitive¹¹.

The rise of verbal and visual references to a fantacised islam – what I call “imaginary islam” – is interesting because it shows a more or less conscious attempt to address the “good questions” raised by the extreme right without being accused of downright racism. The “wrong answers” of the National Front, which used ostensibly racist arguments, were simply reformulated by traditional political forces and mainstream media along “religious” lines in order to make the answers more “acceptable”¹². This explains the famous 1985 cover of the Figaro Magazine showing a bust of Marianne (the Republican symbol par excellence) draped in an “islamic” headscarf, with the title: “Will we still be French in thirty years?”¹³. As sociologist Pierre Bourdieu will put it a few years later, the “explicit question” – formulated in “islamic” terms – always overshadows the “implicit question”: “should we accept immigrants of North-African origins in France?”¹⁴.

The last but not least advantage of the flourishing references to “islam” is that it allowed the more militant section of the French elite to establish a radical opposition between the culture of immigrants and their descendants and “our” political and philosophical tradition, of which “*laïcité*” [secularism] has long been a pillar in France. While the anti-third-worldist movement considered “democracy” as belonging exclusively to the West, “universalism”, supposed to be naturally contained in the republican and *laïque* ideal, was claimed as belonging exclusively to France. Hence arose the idea of an evident contradiction between the very nature of “islam”, described as a frozen political religion from which “muslims” could barely emancipate themselves, and “France”, presented as the avant-guard of history and the natural land of freedom and universalism.

The depiction of “laïcité” as the ultimate bulkwark against an “islam” described in

¹¹ See : Pierre Péan et Christophe Nick, *TF1, un pouvoir*, Paris : Fayard, 1997. The same process is remarkable for the former left wing daily *Libération*. See: Pierre Rimbart, *Libération de Sartre à Rothschild*, Paris : Liber-Raison d’agir, 2005.

¹² See : Said Bouamama, *L’affaire du foulard islamique. La production d’un racisme respectable*, Roubaix : Editions du Geai Bleu, 2004.

¹³ *Figaro Magazine*, 25/10/1985

¹⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, « Un problème peut en cacher un autre », in Charlotte Nordmann (Ed.), *Le foulard islamique en questions*, Paris : Amsterdam, 2004.

essentialised terms favoured the emergence of a dangerous political consensus in the late 1980's. On the one hand left-wing leaders, who had given up part of their economic and social ambitions a few years earlier, proudly waved the substitute flag of *laïcité* which they had long considered their own private hunting-ground. On the other hand conservative politicians, traditionally more reluctant to embrace a concept which had long been aimed at catholicism, joined their left-wing opponents in rallying behind “*laïcité*” when it became clear that “islam” was the sole target.

Reactivation of colonial imaginaries

This new political and media consensus appeared with stunning clarity in 1989 when the world was shaken by the Rushdie Affair (in february) and France was rocked by its first so-called “islamic veil” affair (october). The Rushdie Affair convinced the elite that the very principles that France prided itself as exemplifying were under attack. The French *laïque* republic was described as the only solution to resist the assault of Khomeiny's *islamic* republic. On television, the philosopher (and ex-guevarist guerilla) Régis Debray called for “the defense of our civilisational genetic capital, namely the Enlightenment, Rationalism, Republic and *Laïcité*”, suggesting yet again that “islam” had a different “civilisational genetic capital¹⁵”. A few months later, just after France had grandiosely celebrated the bicentenary of the 1789 French Revolution (july), the “defense of our civilisational genetic capital” turned into an aggressive counter-offensive when three young girls of Moroccan origin wearing an “islamic veil” in a suburban state school became the pretext for an astonishing concert of contempt and self-satisfaction. “The *laïque* compulsory school gave Gallic ancestors to generations of Blacks and Arabs. They even became perfect French people. That used to be the strength of Republic”, explained the nostalgic editor of the conservative daily *Le Figaro*¹⁶. “I believe that *laïcité*, a notion of Christian origin, is a decisive step in the progress not only of Western Civilisations but also of Humanity as

¹⁵ “Océaniques”, *FR3*, 4/04/1989

¹⁶ *Le Figaro*, 23/10/1989

a whole”, echoed an editor of the left-wing *Nouvel Observateur*¹⁷.

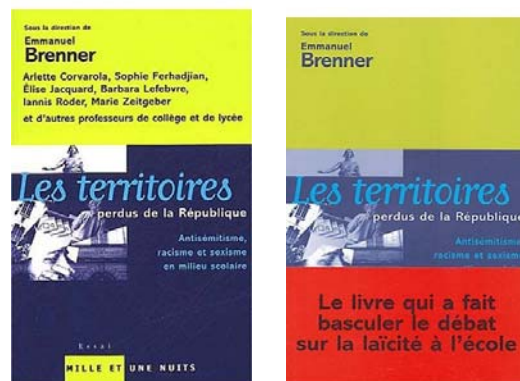


What is particularly striking in this process is the reactivation throughout the 1980's and 1990's of old imaginaries inherited from France's colonial past – a phenomenon made possible by the consistent repression of the French colonial past, as shown by the historian Benjamin Stora¹⁸, and by an increasingly competitive media eager to flatter the largest audience possible with a partly mythical account of national history. The long-lasting debate surrounding the “islamic veil”, which arose in 1989 and was revived in 1994, 1999 and 2004, is reminiscent not only of the first wave of French colonial expansion, when France subdued indigenous populations in the name of Christianity, but even more so of the second step of colonialism in the late 19th century, when the Third Republic undertook colonisation in the name of Modernity, Rationalism and Enlightenment. The old argument of bringing “civilisation” to the backward masses, used in the past to give the colonial conquests a human face, has been reintroduced in contemporary public discourse to justify the particular treatment applied to that category of French citizens whose parents migrated from the former French colonial territories. In any case, it was this civilisational argument that

¹⁷ *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 26/10/1989

¹⁸ Benjamin Stora, *La gangrène et l'oubli. La mémoire de la guerre d'Algérie*, Paris : La Découverte, 1991 ; and Benjamin Stora, *Le transfert d'une mémoire : de l'« Algérie française » au racisme anti-arabe*, Paris : La Découverte, 1999.

convinced the French legislative assembly to pass a law banning “conspicuous signs of religion” (i.e the islamic veil) from state schools in 2004. One of many examples of the revival of colonial concepts in contemporary discourse is a book entitled “*The Lost Territories of the Republic*”, which describes French suburbs almost as “Muslim lands” that ought to be swiftly “reconquered”. Published one year before the 2004 law to much media publicity, the authors proudly claimed afterwards that they had “tipped the debate about laïcité in state schools”¹⁹.



Behind the “islamist” mask: the clash of civilisation

The emergence of “the islamic threat” in media and political discourse was further favoured by the fall of the Soviet Union in the early 1990’s and by the rise of so-called “islamic terrorism” (which, in France, appeared well before Septembre 11, 2001). The perception of “islam”, which could only appear as a secondary target in the Cold War context, changed after the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, and “islam” became the prime enemy on the international scene, loosing the remnants of its attractive potential as a political phenomenon. For the rare remaining third-worldists, “islam” definitively lost the anti-imperialist promise it held during the decolonisation era; for the pro-american elements of the French intelligentsia, “islam” lost the anti-soviet potential attributed, for example, to the afghan “freedom fighters” who resisted the soviet invasion of their country in the early 1980’s.

In this context, the rise of “political islam”, which seemingly excluded any non-

¹⁹ See : Alain Gresh, *L’islam, la République et le monde*, Paris: Fayard, 2004.

muslims, was felt by the French elite not only as an assault against “Western” principles and values but also as a betrayal of those who had once showed solidarity with the so-called “muslim world”. This became especially apparent with the Algerian civil war which began in the early 1990’s. It has to be remembered that this war particularly affected France not only because Algeria used to be a French colony and is still remembered as a land of national trauma, but also because the war opposing the Algerian authorities and so-called “islamist activists” soon crossed into France itself with the Armed Islamic Groups’ terrorist campaign in the mid-1990’s, which killed dozens of people in Paris. By the mid-1990’s, “islam” is depicted as both an “interior” and “exterior” enemy²⁰.



This new international context gave birth to new representational schema. The struggle is not Islam vs. the West, opinion makers now explained, but rather a war taking place “within islam”. From there, “islam” was described as divided between two camps: “islamists” on the one hand, and “moderates” on the other. This could be seen as an improvement in the sense that it refrained journalists from blunt statements such as that of that TV presenter opening his news bulletin in the course of the Rushdie Affair by this statement: “Good evening. This time, all of islam is in flame. A

²⁰ See : Mathieu Rigouste, *L'ennemi intérieur. La généalogie coloniale et militaire de l'ordre sécuritaire dans la France contemporaine*, Paris : La Découverte, 2009.

little book written by Salman Rushdie, a British man of Indian origin, has been sufficient to comprehend the gap that separates two worlds: on the one hand the Western world, our world, on the other hand the world of Islam, a billion people led by a rigorist religion²¹”.

With the new “war-within-islam” scheme, journalists tended to be more cautious and put the blame solely on “islamists”. And now that things seemed to have been clarified, the intellectuals who led the anti-totalitarian crusade against communism in earlier decades recycled their arguments and unleashed their hatred against “islamist movements” they now felt free to describe as “green fascism”, an “islamic kominten” and the “third wave of totalitarianism”. In doing so, they reproduced Bernard Lewis’ theory of a clash of civilisations, presented in his famous 1990 article “The Roots of Muslim Rage”. Lewis explains in this article that what he then called “islamic fundamentalism” learnt a lot from the “german philosophy” in the 1930’s and 1940’s, from the “Soviet version of Marxism” in the aftermath of World War II, and finally from “the new mystique of Third Worldism, emanating from Western Europe, particularly France” in the 1960’s²².

Despite the terminological evolution, however, the perception of islam has not changed radically. While rhetorically rejecting any idea of “clash of civilisations”, the French elite does indeed share this idea and continues to propagate an essentialised vision of “islam”. In fact, the radical-moderate divide, which has become unavoidable in the media treatment of “islam” since the early 1990’s, is largely fictional. In studying the way French public discourse uses the term “islamism”, one discovers that it puts together phenomena of such varied nature that one can legitimately wonder what “islamism” really means. For example, one finds under that same “islamist” label individuals as different as Tariq Ramadan and Ossama Bin Laden, or movements as different as the AKP party currently in power in Turkey and Al-Qaeda. In other words, the “islamist” label puts together democratic and terrorist movements, religious beliefs and social practices, etc.

²¹ Journal de 20 heures, Antenne 2, 23/02/1989.

²² Bernard Lewis, *The Roots of Muslim Rage, Why so many Muslims deeply resent the West, and why their bitterness will not easily be mollified*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, September 1990.

Presented as a solid “reality”, but never clearly defined, “islamism” becomes a perverse but effective ideological instrument. The main advantage of this concept is that it creates and maintains a continuity between security and identity issues, merged together into a single “threat”. “Islamism” thus allows opinion makers, influenced by the “zero tolerance” and “pre-emptive war” models, to depict even the slightest sign of “islamic” belonging (identity) as a potential drift towards terrorism (security)²³. In other words, the idea arose that the roots of “islamist terrorism” have to be found in social and religious practices such as, for example, the wearing of an “islamic” veil. An example of this logic is the following statement made on television by the former minister of the Interior Charles Pasqua: “The situation can be summed up with a few figures: in France, there are 5 million Muslims, 1 million who practice, 50.000 fundamentalists, and probably 2000 radicals²⁴”. The gradation is quite clear: the more “Muslim” you are, the more “dangerous” you are. It is thanks to this logic that the respected “new philosopher” André Glucksmann comfortably claims that “the [islamic] veil is a terrorist operation. In France, the zealous high-school girls know that their veil is stained with blood. (...) In our schools, as a question of honour, we have never taught pupils wearing uniforms, except during the time of the nazis²⁵”. It is quite clear, in the end, that what was simply qualified as “islamic” a few years earlier can be fought much more efficiently and violently now that it is called “islamist”.



²³ Didier Bigo, « Identifier, catégoriser et contrôler. Police et logique proactive », in Laurent Bonelli and Gilles Sainati, *La Machine à punir*, Paris : L'Esprit frappeur, 2004.

²⁴ “Sept sur Sept”, *TF1*, 8/12/1996

²⁵ *L'Express*, 17 novembre 1994.

The role of the “moderate muslim” media clergy

What about the “moderate muslims” then? Although many opinion makers genuinely think that their interest in “moderate islam” – also called “enlightment islam”, “laïque islam” or “republican islam” – will provide a “better image” of islam, one can consider this categorization as largely (self)deceitful in the sense that it actually further legitimizes the “islamist” label and the blind criticism of those muslims who are not considered “good” enough. Indeed, it is clear that opinion makers, oblivious to the fact that islam is a clergyless religion, especially in a transplanted context, tend to lend the “moderate” label exclusively to those who fit their own conception of “good” islam. Instead of trying to understand what could “moderation” mean from a “muslim” perspective, which would imply a sound historical, political, sociological and theological consideration of the people or societies they are talking about, most journalists, politicians and public intellectuals tend to offer the label of “moderation” as a reward to a category of people who share and herald their own views and opinions. Thus has emerged a sort of media clergy of so-called “moderate muslims” – also known as “reformist muslims” – who keep brandishing their love for the “homeland of Voltaire” and for the “land of Human Rights” on various TV shows. Oddly enough, these “Enlightened muslims” seldomly question the Arab dictatorships, “laïque” or not, with which France frequently signs lucrative commercial deals. Their role on the media scene entails focusing exclusively on the ugly “bearded fascists” of whom they claim to be “the first victims”.



Because the labels of “good muslims” and “bad muslims” are distributed from the outside by people who hold influential positions in the media or political arena, some of these chosen muslims tend to spread suspicion upon all their fellow muslims who do not share the exact same conception of “islam”, an attitude that is sometimes rewarded with, for example, juicy television contracts or even ministerial positions. The most striking illustration of this process is Fadela Amara. A member of the Socialist Party in the late 1990’s, she was largely unknown until she became the spokeswoman of a feminist movement that focused all its attention on the so-called “lost territories of the republic” and accused suburban muslim males of being the most dangerous threat to France. Thanks to intensive and sympathetic media coverage, she was first offered a position as a presenter on a television show and then became a junior minister in Nicolas Sarkozy’s current right-wing government.

“Imaginary islam” as an ideological weapon

The outcome of the promotion of such a “moderate” media clergy is of course a dangerous, yet invisible, censorship. Content with the friendly “moderate muslims” whose discourse comforts collective imaginaries and stereotypes, mainstream journalists do not bother listening to the great number of muslims who do not recognise themselves in either of the two categories supposed to be fighting each other. As a result, the fictional radical-moderate divide functions as a conservative symbolical instrument that prevents French society from understanding the full implications of its evolution over the past two or three decades.



Indeed, what is remarkable, behind the bombastic proclamations of abstract principles and values and the creation of an enigmatic “islamist” enemy, is the willingness of a part of the French elite to safeguard and glorify the myth of an eternal French identity. The debate on the Danish cartoons in 2006 is one more illustration of this²⁶. Those who refuse to publish these cartoons are national traitors, openly argued the more militant journalists and politicians at the time. Why? Because, as a well-known “left-wing” journalist explained, “what the islamists demand is that we surrender ourselves²⁷”. An argument confirmed by a successful Algerian journalist systematically presented as a “moderate muslim” by his French television employers: “Those who rise up against the cartoons would, thanks to the same logic, forbid catholics from eating pork, atheists from blaspheming or Western banks from charging interests on loans²⁸”. Note that we are not very far from Jean-Marie Le Pen’s argument when he declared twenty years earlier that “If my ideas do not triumph, France is all washed up. The immigrants will be the kings and the French Stock Exchange will quote in Arabic. In twenty-five years France will be an Islamic Republic²⁹”.

²⁶ See : Thomas Deltombe, « Les médias français et les représentations du Prophète », contribution to the conference organised by the *Institut Français des Relations Internationales* (IFRI), « Médias et construction des identités collectives en Méditerranée », Novembre 2006, Casablanca (to be published).

²⁷ *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 9/02/2006

²⁸ Mohamed Sifaoui, *L’Affaire des caricatures. Dessins et manipulations*, Paris : Privé, 2006. p. 165.

²⁹ *Le Figaro magazine*, 16/04/1988, quoted in : Christian De Brie, *Le terreau de l’extrême droite*, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, mai 1988.

Fortunately Le Pen himself did not triumph. But, unfortunately, some of his ideas undoubtedly have triumphed, as the creation by Nicolas Sarkozy of an Orwellian “Ministry of National Identity and Immigration” demonstrates. Such an outcome might not have been possible without the emergence in the last three decades of a fantasised Islam.

Moreover, this “imaginary Islam” does not only cast suspicion on supposed “Muslims” but also on anyone who does not share the now dominant viewpoint on “national identity”. The old arguments used in the past to discredit “communists” are now being recycled to fight those accused of supporting the penetration of “Islam” and “Islamism” in France. That is why, for example, the term “useful idiots”, which once referred to Soviet sympathisers in the West, is now systematically used to stigmatise those who try to problematize the deceitful “Islamism” label³⁰. Sociology itself, one of the branches of academia that was flourishing in the 1960’s and 1970’s, is now being discredited. Both the right-wing President Sarkozy and the left-wing Mayor of Paris Bertrand Delanoë, for example, recently claimed that trying to “explain” what Islamism is, at least in its terrorist version, meant trying to find “excuses” for it. A successful media expert on security issues went as far as to call sociology (which he calls “sociologism”) a “dogma” which, he claims, is “to social sciences what Islamism is to Islam”. Given the evolution I have tried to describe in this presentation, it is no wonder that the media tend to prefer the “clear, simple and common sense” analyses of these kinds of security experts over the more complex – and more disturbing – explanations offered by genuine sociologists, anthropologists and political scientists³¹.

³⁰ See, for example : Le Monde, « N’abandonnons pas Mohamed Sifaoui », 13/08/2008.

³¹ See : Thomas Deltombe, *Armer les esprits : le business des « experts » à la télévision française*, in Didier Bigo, Laurent Bonelli, Thomas Deltombe (dir.), *Au nom du 11 septembre... Les démocraties à l’épreuve de l’antiterrorisme*, Paris : La Découverte, 2008. pp 302-319.



To conclude, I would like to stress again on the fact that France has been the theatre, over the past thirty years, of the creation of an “imaginary islam” which is less the result of an honest observation of economic, social and political realities than an ideological weapon. As I have tried to illustrate, “islam” as a product of public discourse is less a target than one instrument (amongst others) that has been forged more or less consciously. This “imaginary islam” does not simply help various categories of people satisfy immediate professional, financial or electoral ambitions. It has also been moulded for a more profound purpose, which some people in France now describe as a “conservative revolution³²”. The generation in power since the early 1980’s has instrumentalized an “islam” they have collectively defined in order to exorcise past political commitments they now regard with shame. Thanks to “imaginary islam” and the subsequent glorification of a mythical national past, this generation can rally around the conservative ideology they once fought against and combat those who remain faithful to their past commitments. It is now up to the French to decide whether this conservative revolution, which continues to cast suspicion on, and exclude and stigmatize large segments of the population, will last, or not.

[Paris, 21 Sept. 2008]

³² Didier ERIBON, *D’une révolution conservatrice, et ses effets sur la gauche française*, Paris : Editions Leo Scheer, 2007.