Constructing Muslims in France

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Constructing Muslims in France: Discourse, Public Identity, and the Politics of Citizenship.

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Regardless of one’s ultimate evaluation of France’s ban on the hijab (and other ostensible signs of religion) in public schools, the criticism from many Americans sometimes speaks to our ignorance of the important role education plays in French citizenship. While Americans may acknowledge the role of education in civic virtue, it was traditionally the “Republican Mother” that inculcated civic values, such as patriotism and personal discipline (Kerber 1997). Children in the United States could be educated privately or even at home and still receive the benefits of citizen formation (Kerber 1997). This is not understood to be the case in France. Part of France’s *jus soli* tradition is the belief that one is not born French; one becomes French. That process of becoming French is carried out in public schools. It is there that students learn what it means to be French and how to be a good French citizen. As a representative of the NPNS explained, “Unlike in other countries, schools are a pillar of the Republic. When you underestimate schools, you underestimate the Republic. . . . The public school in France is a reflection of the Republic—it will prepare me to do well in my life.”

French schools are also, significantly, an important mechanism for making all French citizens equal. Thanks to obligatory, and free, primary and secondary education for all boys and girls ever since the policies of Jules Ferry in the late 1800s, French citizens theoretically have been ensured an equal chance of success in their professional lives. As the special advisor to Rama Yade, a center-right politician and Muslim of color who was born into an elite family in Senegal and was serving as the secretary of state for human rights, explained, “School is one of the elements of the Republican tradition: free primary school,
laïque, and obligatory—obligatory!” Yves Déloye (1994, p. 16) notes that for all their historical disagreement about secular education, republicans and Catholics both agreed that primary school is a “moralizing instrument” intended to improve “civic mores” and as such is the “essential element in the formation of French national identity.” There could be no better window into the heart of French citizenship—its promise and its peril—than the subject of education.

The French education system is highly centralized, and teachers have little flexibility in the classroom. The primary and secondary curriculum is decided by the Ministry of National Education and is the same across all of France. The uniformity of French education is highlighted in the writings of the novelist Azouz Begag. A prominent French beur who grew up with the Algerian and Muslim cultures of his parents, Begag is known for (among other things) his semiautobiographical novels about growing up in the nexus between the culture and beliefs of his parents and those of his native France. This is the heterogeneous space of many beurs. Here he writes in the voice of the protagonist in his novel Le gone du chaâba (Shantytown Kid):

—We are all descendants of Vercingetorix!
—Yes, sir!
—Our country, France, has a surface area of . . .
—Yes, sir!
—The teacher is always right. If he says that we are all the descendants of the Gauls, then he is right, and too bad if we do not have the same mustaches where I come from. (Begag 1986, quoted and translated in Duffy 2000, pp. 9–10)

In his typical, lightly ironic tone, Begag’s protagonist notes that “the teacher is always right,” even if the lesson seems peculiar. After all, how could he, whose parents immigrated to France from Algeria in the twentieth century, be a descendant of the famous Gaulish leader who fought the Roman Empire? As Michael Dietler (1994, p. 590) notes, the concept of “Nos ancêtres les Gaulois” (Our ancestors, the Gauls) has appeared in many French schoolbooks since the nineteenth century and was taught throughout all of France, including in its colonies. Of course, this is historically inaccurate. The Gauls were not unique to the area that today is known as France, and the “ethnic French” of today are not truly direct descendants of the Gauls (their ancestry also includes Roman and Frankish roots).¹ Those who have immigrated more recently to France from non-European countries are also clearly unrelated to this Gaulish figure (Dietler 1994).

A sympathetic reading of this sort of educational inculcation is that it is meant to produce a sense of commonality and oneness, a national ethos of shared past, present, and future. This sort of reading fits with the republican model of citizenship, where public selves are largely a product of education that is intended to unfetter individuals from the sometimes unchosen ties of private
identities and affiliations. It is thought that this enables republican citizens to better communicate with one another and more readily reach agreement for the common good.

Some French Muslims bristle at “We are all French” sentiments, viewing them as an insincere attempt to placate their frustration. One respondent, a convert to Islam, explained that he was from the Antilles and of course was not a descendant of the Gauls. Not only was he black; he knew that he was the descendant of Africans France had enslaved and sent to the Antilles to labor for the republic. He refused to repeat the phrase when he was in school and was punished for it.

Other French Muslims embrace the republican view of neutral, French citizenship. Even they, however, have concerns and complaints about education in France. Of the three issue areas explored in this book, it was education that prompted the most consistent responses from interviewees. French education, so the interviewees repeatedly reported, is not delivering on its promises. They are laudable promises, but they are as yet unfulfilled. For all their diversity on political, social, and religious issues, French Muslims believe that French schools should provide the formative experiences of good French citizenship, as well as the tools necessary for young people of all backgrounds to succeed. There is disagreement about why this is not happening. But most important, French Muslim discussions of education do not end at the subject of the hijab.

The hijab. This topic has dominated discussion about Muslims and education in France since 1989. There are many reasons for France to reconsider its education policies: the Bologna Process;² the rating of the French education system as merely “average” with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development; the persistent class inequalities that plague all levels of French education; questions about whether the high school exit exam is too easy, given the high failure rate of students in their early years of higher education; overcrowded universities with significant absenteeism; and universities that fail to deliver the kind of education required for today’s new technology (Aghion and Cohen 2004; Green 1990; Reed-Danahay 1996). These various concerns about the state of education in France all but disappear, however, when the subject of Muslims is introduced to the conversation. The discourse of politicians, intellectuals, and the media (not to mention academic research) focuses intensely and nearly uniquely on the hijab, a matter that directly affects only those Muslim girls who would like to wear it, and within that group, only those who are in primary and secondary school.

Chapters 5 and 6 examine the challenges Muslims face when it comes to employment and housing in France. Some of these challenges are logically related to the French education system. A student who does not attend a well-regarded institution of higher education is less likely to be employed. Conversely, geographic isolation in impoverished banlieues can contribute to underperforming
schools. Yet, for all these potential connections between various socioeconomic experiences many Muslims face in France and the arena of education, French elites speak mainly of the hijab when it comes to Muslims and education.

In effect, the subject of Muslims and education in France is doubly removed from the rest of French politics: it is discussed in isolation from contemporary debates about French education in general and in isolation from salient socioeconomic issues that many Muslims face in France as a whole. These insular, elite debates about the hijab reduce Muslims to religious beings, as opposed to individuals who live not in mosques but in French society and who have diverse opinions and concerns regarding education, politics, society, and even their religion. Muslims as whole people, as opposed to abstracted or rarefied religious beings, are erased: both their diversity as individuals and the challenges many face due to shared socioeconomic experiences are ignored.

A Note on the French System of Higher Education

Before continuing with the comparison of elite and Muslim discourse on Muslims and education, it is necessary to discuss the system of higher education in France. It is quite different from the American model, as well as other continental models, and the terminology can introduce additional confusion.

France was one of the founders of the university, but the history of this institution in France has not been straightforward. During the Revolution, the National Convention (essentially the legislative branch at that time) decreed in the law of September 15, 1793, that all universities would be abolished. They were replaced with “special schools” to train elites who would help lead the nation, and these schools developed into the grandes écoles we know today (Aghion and Cohen 2004, pp. 67–68). The French university did not reappear for more than a hundred years—in 1896—and by then the grandes écoles were firmly entrenched in the business of grooming elites (Aghion and Cohen 2004, p. 67). Universities struggle to make up for those lost years. In institutional terms, French universities are young compared with the grandes écoles, and this is a disadvantage for them on its face: the grandes écoles have been regarded as the source of French elites for longer, developing networks and establishing their reputations. In the words of Ezra Suleiman (1978, p. 279), the grandes écoles “not only create the elite, but set the conditions that determine the recognition of the elite.”

French universities face an additional institutional constraint. In what Alain Renaut, a highly regarded philosophy professor and expert in the politics of French universities, calls the “original sin” of French higher education, the Convention’s annulment of universities led to not just a split between universities and grandes écoles, but also between education and research (Aghion and Cohen 2004, p. 68). Research eventually was appropriated by governmental science agencies, such as the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS [National Center for Scientific Research]). While CNRS researchers are often housed at institutions of higher education, and professors at these institutions
may ally with CNRS to conduct a project, permanent CNRS researchers are considered civil servants. Being a professor does not necessarily imply that one is considered a researcher in France, and vice versa. The consequence of this is that French institutions of higher education suffer in world rankings. These rankings are based on the Humboldt model, a measure of quality that includes an institution’s research activity (Aghion and Cohen 2004, p. 67). French universities exist alongside a separate government research agency, the existence of which limits the role of universities in research rather than providing opportunities for increased collaboration. In addition, French universities must compete with a parallel higher education system for funding.

In short, French universities were established as a free higher education option for the masses. Their role has long been seen as separate from the research functions of agencies such as the CNRS and the preparation of elites accomplished by the grandes écoles. This has led to what Aghion and Cohen (2004, p. 68) refer to as the “pauperization” of the French university. Suleiman (1978, p. 92) goes as far as to say that the French university, overshadowed by the grandes écoles, produces “unemployable” graduates. As I show, the French (whether Muslim or not) are doubtful about the merits and respectability of a French university degree. Given the difficulties of getting into elite grandes écoles, this leads some French people to question just how “democratizing” (in the sense of widening access to the halls of power) French higher education is. Not only are grandes écoles seen as serving only those who have had an “easy” upbringing in France; universities are seen by the most pessimistic as distractions or even false promises.

**French Elites on Muslims and Education**

When the media analysis from Chapter 2 is cross-tabulated for mentions of Muslims and education, the data suggest an uneasy, split view of Muslims: 28 percent of the references depict Muslims as good citizens, while 29 percent of the references depict them as problematic or bad citizens. Overall, the question of whether Muslims are “integrated” into France is therefore dominant in all media discussion of Muslims and education, present in 57 percent of all references to Muslims made in news articles on Muslims and education. Of the articles that discuss Muslims and education, there are 171 instances of the word “Muslim” and its variants (singular, plural, feminine, masculine) and fifty-three instances of the French words voile and foulard and their variants (singular, plural). On average, nearly every third mention of Muslims in articles that discuss education is accompanied by one mention of the voile or foulard (the term “hijab” is not used once). A different way to view this is that of the twenty-seven articles that mention Muslims and education, eighteen—67 percent—of them also mention the hijab (though not by that name).

This is just one data set. However, these conclusions are supported by other research. John Bowen (2007) also identifies an excessive interest in the hijab on
the part of the media. He claims that amid all the political uproar over issues surrounding banning the hijab from public schools,

the French news media did their best to inflame the resulting anxieties. By early 2002, many French journalists, intellectuals, and officials increasingly linked the problem of scarves in schools with three other problems of society: communalism, Islamism, and sexism. We can understand the degree of popular and intellectual support for the law banning the hijab in public primary education—including support among some Muslims—only if we appreciate the ways in which television, radio, and print media played up these broad social dangers said to be posed, or represented by the voile, and if we appreciate the important social and philosophical issues raised by the voile. (Bowen 2007, p. 155)

While Bowen illustrates how French elites drew connections between Muslims and communautarisme, sometimes zealously and regardless of facts to the contrary, he also refutes the assumption (common among those who are not familiar with the French republican tradition) that the French are simply racist or anti-Muslim. Ultimately, whether French elites were animated by concern for the mission of republican education, or by multicultural anxiety, or something in between, the majority of them described the hijab as a threat to the republic.

Thomas Deltombe (2005, p. 362) argues that the media in France have created an “imaginary Islam” in which the hijab necessarily and automatically presents a threat to the republic and women’s rights. It is also an Islam whose adherents are all suspected of communautarisme or religious extremism. According to Deltombe, the media’s imagined Muslims are “eternally” depicted as “newcomers,” “immigrants” or “foreigners,” for whom the “necessary integration” can happen only by forced assimilation into an atemporal idea of France. For Deltombe, the focus of the media on the hijab in schools is just one manifestation of this larger trend.

I do not want to go too far into an analysis of elite discussion of the hijab in public schools in France, as this has been done elsewhere. Furthermore, continued analysis might contribute to the worrying lack of research on the non-religious concerns of Muslims in France (a trend that suggests that Muslims put their religion first and foremost in all social and political affairs—a stance that must be interrogated rather than assumed). So in closing, as a final indicator of the elite emphasis on the hijab when discussing Muslims and education in France, let us return to the analysis conducted in Chapter 2 that reviewed the legislative reports of the National Assembly’s Twelfth Legislature, noting all of the legislative reports that made any mention of “Muslims.” In that time frame, there were forty-three reports. Of these reports, thirty-seven discussed Muslims but not primarily the hijab (except for three references). There was,
significantly, no discussion of Muslims and education (or of housing or employment, although there were four mentions of discrimination). In these thirty-seven reports, “Muslims” were mentioned a total of eighty-one times. In the remaining six legislative reports, “Muslims” were mentioned as few as forty times and upward of a hundred times per report. These six remaining legislative reports were specifically about the hijab in public schools. This suggests that the Twelfth Legislature thought of Muslims and education together only in terms of the hijab.

French Muslims on Muslims and Education

Muslims did bring up the subject of the hijab in interviews about education. But it was not the only topic they brought up, or the predominant one. And while some Muslim respondents claimed the first thing they would do if appointed minister of education would be to repeal the 2004 law, most cited other goals that had little to nothing to do with religion. Muslims discussed wide-ranging topics in education, always with mild to great disappointment in the French education system. Nevertheless, French Muslims continue to believe that education should be the “great equalizer” for all French citizens.

Mixité

An illustration of the faith that French Muslims have in public education is found in their concern for mixité in today’s school. The notion of mixité—the mixing of social classes, genders, races, and ethnicities—maps well onto the jus soli tradition of French citizenship and has long been praised by French equal rights associations. Regardless of whether schools actually perform the function of increasing mixité is unclear. A non-Muslim at the NPNS expressed concern that mixité is becoming a thing of the past. While her left-leaning parents insisted on keeping her in a diverse school near her home, she saw more and more of her fellow students with privileged parents pulled out and placed in different schools in less diverse neighborhoods. Muslim respondents expressed similar concerns for the fate of mixité, something they understand to be a positive value of the republic.

A former representative of Dynamique Diversité echoed this sentiment that schools do not provide the mixité they ought to and suggested that this has lasting effects: “The grandes écoles are for the rich, the white. Overall, there is no social diversity, and the big businesses always recruit from the same schools.” The homogeneity of the French elite, he argues, traces back to school days.

When asked what he would do if he were the minister of education for a day, one of the journalists at Respect Mag replied, “I would break the ghettoization of schools. More mixité, even if it is hard at first, because you are meeting people from different cultures for the first time. Otherwise, we live in a parallel manner. All schools need to be mixed.”
Two members of the EMF debated with each other about whether Muslim and Arab students take the initiative to mix freely with students of other backgrounds in school. One of the members, a white woman born in France who converted to Islam and who wears the hijab, stated that people of Maghrebian descent tend to stick together—that there is a slight “communitarian reflex.” “You know, people tend to gravitate toward others who look like them.” She went on to describe how in her experience, in university classes, “You will see a line of five veiled girls, then a line of five blonde girls. Some people do not have this reflex to mix.” This student was commenting more on those with an immigrant background than Muslims specifically. Her comment also seems to have connotations of race (i.e., “people tend to gravitate toward others who look like them”).

The other student, a man and an immigrant from Algeria, did not agree. “I propose a Marxist analysis,” he said. “I would say that is according to class. . . . I did one year of law at Paris II, the most right-wing university in France, and because I come from a wealthy background, no problems. . . . When they see a rich Arab, or a rich African, they are all friends.” The second student, who came from the Maghreb, disagreed with the notion that people with his immigrant background tend to spend their school days with other Maghrebian immigrants. For him, students tend to stick with those from the same social class, regardless of race, origins, or religion. Given the unique financial and social challenges many immigrants face, this may mean that immigrants tend to seek out one another’s company in school. The second respondent shifts the causality from one of a theoretical inter-race comfort zone to class.

A member of the JMF in Lyon expressed religious and nonreligious concerns with education in France. He said that school can be difficult for girls who wear the hijab and those who wish to avoid meat in the cafeteria that is considered haraam (forbidden). He also expressed disappointment, however, that mixité is on the decline in French schools. He stated that it is becoming more and more difficult for people in France to meet and spend time with those who are different from them and attributed this to the “déreglement des cartes scolaires” (which translates into American educational terms loosely as “deregulation of school districts”). From the early 1960s until recently, parents had little choice regarding which French public schools their children would attend: students attended schools on the basis of where they lived, or cartes scolaires (lit. school maps; it is roughly the same idea as school districts in the United States; Sobocinski 2008). The districting was intended to ensure that students of all backgrounds would have the opportunity to meet one another. Such mixing was considered to be part of the duty of a French republican education. This system has been loosened in recent years, which may, as the JMF member complained, have undermined school diversity. In November 2009, the cour des comptes (the court of audit, more of an auditing institution than a court) presented its findings on the loosening of the carte scolaire to France’s Senate Finance Committee: in their view, it was leading to the “ghettoization” of
those schools in the most difficult academic situations (Dupuis 2009). Parents with the means to do so were pulling their students out of underperforming schools, leaving those schools to decline further, and separating students of different class backgrounds into different schools. It is reasonable to assume, given France’s recent immigration history and the extra economic and social challenges immigrants face, that there are some implications for nonwhites and Muslims in this separation of rich and poor students.

School Counselors

Muslims also expressed disappointment with the career preparation provided in secondary schools and sometimes downright disgust with the individuals entrusted with this task, the guidance counselors. Behind these complaints is an implicit assumption that French schools should prepare students for success—or, at the very least, put students on a path that could lead them to the careers they want. The interviewees’ responses suggest that this is far from what really happens in the guidance counselor’s office. For example, a member of the EMF who plans to become a teacher shared her opinions of the guidance counselors:

Oh, they are stupid.

Why stupid?

Because you speak to them in your third year, when you are fourteen years old. Already you need to choose.

Choose what?

Choose a path—if you are going to continue with high school. Already.

In the third year. You do not know a lot. You say, “Oh, I did this. I did not like this.” Often, you are poorly defined. I think we need to do it later, leave the door open a bit, so students can choose to continue a bit longer.

I hear that the counselors push students of certain origins to paths that are not as good.

Yes. It is true. That happened to me. . . . “Oh, but you need to do a technical path,” [the counselor said]. Sadly, there are orientation counselors that are a bit—inequality, it is there. . . . [Those with origins meaning “the descendants of immigrants”] cannot lead; it is not in their nature, and they are not made for school: “But you cannot. . . . be a lawyer. . . . You know, it would be good if you did a manual trade.” Fortunately, it is not obligatory, so you can listen and say, “OK, but I’m going to do this instead.” Happily, I have that freedom. Happily, there are some [counselors] who listen. . . . I know my children will never go to the counselor. If my son decides he wants to repair cars, and that is his passion, I will say, “Go ahead, my son. Do what you want. I just want you to do things that are in accordance with your choices, with what you want.” Otherwise, I will say,
“Oh, reflect a bit!” We need to push students, children, to decide for themselves. The more you construct your liberty, your confidence, the more you permit children to become strong, to decide for themselves. It is the same with society, with religion. . . . You inculcate religion in a child, but you do not oblige them to remain in that religion. Afterward, they make the choice. My parents gave [me] this religion, then [I] had the choice to continue with it or not.

This interviewee’s dissatisfaction with, even downright distrust, of school counselors is clear. She believes not only that the nature of their role is problematic—that fourteen is simply too young for a child to know what kind of career he or she wants—but also that the way the job is performed can be discriminatory. Other Muslim interviewees similarly complained that school counselors give different advice to students based on race or ethnicity or immigration history. This particular woman, who was counseled to go to a technical school, went on to earn a master’s degree and conduct compelling research into the sociolinguistics of France’s immigrant communities.

This respondent continually emphasized the notion of choice: that individuals should be able to freely choose to pursue the career they want, as well as other elements of personal identity, including religion. School counselors, in her view, curtail students’ liberty to make their own choices. Freedom, in her view, is associated with being given options and the skills to choose among those options as best serves the individual. This interview excerpt not only reveals the prejudices of some school counselors but also provides another example of how traditional norms of French citizenship—in this case, liberty and equality—make their way into the discourse of French Muslims. I never asked about freedom. I merely asked whether school counselors push minority students into technical schools.

Curious about whether non-Muslims would express similar views, I asked a non-Muslim representative of the NPNS whether she felt that school counselors give different guidance to students based on prejudiced assumptions. Her response was clear: “I totally agree. If you are black, they will send you to a technical career.”

The journalists for Respect Mag also had difficulties with school counselors and spoke about a pervasive sense of discrimination at school. One of the journalists said he had very few problems but related this to his exceptional performance in school—the conclusion being that only the exceptional Muslim and minority students will experience few problems with discrimination at school. When they spoke about their experience in journalism school specifically, the statistics they offered were stark: “There were three of us—two Arabs and a single black.” When I asked why there were so few minority students, one of the journalists responded, “A lot of people are told that doing two years and then getting work is better for them, so they think, ‘Oh, if it’s better for me, I’ll do it.’ There is a psychological barrier. People need to be able to say, ‘I can go
to a journalism school. I can etc., etc., etc.’” In other words, minority students are steered away from journalism school and toward inferior degrees, and they rarely have the resources to overcome this “psychological barrier.” But what does this barrier look like, and why is it so powerful?

One of the journalists recounted an experience he had had with a school counselor. He had attended a university immediately after high school rather than a journalism school:

I already knew that I wanted to be a journalist. The counselor said, “Why do you want to do that? It is not a job for you.” I just wanted him to explain where to go, what schools I should do, what path I should follow to be a journalist. He knew nothing about that. Instead of telling me, “I cannot counsel you on that,” he said, “That is not made for you.” Basically, that’s how it went. It ended after fifteen minutes with him saying that kids like me go to the fac. It was not so bad. I learned things. But the orientation . . . even the orientation in France is awful, especially in the quartier. People there have a tendency to send kids to the fac, to places that they think are “made for us.”

If there is a psychological barrier that prevents students from pushing back against the advice of guidance counselors and pursuing the careers and education they want, it has a number of causes. Not discussed by this respondent but alluded to in the earlier interview with the EMF member who said she would refuse to let her children go to a guidance counselor is the inherent hierarchy between a young student and an adult employed specifically to tell that student what to do. As she stated, it requires “confidence” on the part of a student to tell a counselor that she knows what is best for herself. In a different part of the interview, the interviewee explained that she had been able to do this because her parents raised her to have a strong “character,” to be confident and to stand up for herself when necessary. Not all children benefit from this kind of parenting. Furthermore, the students sometimes do not realize that what they are being told is poor advice, considering their goals. As the journalist explained, he did not know which schools he needed to attend or what path he should take to become a journalist. He believed the counselor would provide that information. When the counselor directed him toward an unrelated two-year degree instead, he followed the advice. He did not know what else to do.

Knowing what to do is not always enough, however. Another journalist at Respect Mag related the story of a friend who wanted to become a cartoonist: “The counselors told him, ‘No. No one does that. That job does not exist.’ So [my friend] went to a technical school. I wanted to do film school, to become a director. I even knew which school I wanted to go to—École Lumière—but I got the same answer: ‘that job does not exist.’ This individual knew exactly what he wanted to do and which school he wanted to attend, so he was well aware that the counselor was incorrect and that, in fact, jobs in filmmaking do
exist. But he did not attend the École Lumière, possibly for a number of reasons that he did not discuss in the interview. But his comment suggests the lack of regard some school counselors have for the career ambitions of the students with whom they work.

An additional part of this psychological barrier may be the internalization by students of low expectations that others—including school counselors—have of them. If students are repeatedly told, “That is not for you,” they may eventually believe that there are certain jobs that are “for them,” and that there is little choice otherwise. This is a complicated situation, since this sort of influence does not take place on the individual level alone. The journalists at Respect Mag spoke about a sort of generational influence: children see their older siblings or older kids in their neighborhood, their role models, go to inferior schools or become unemployed and assume they will have a similar fate. If the children notice that this tends to happen to other people who look like them, or who have a similar background, this may further reinforce the expectations. This is similar to what Michael Dawson (1994) describes as “linked fate”: the belief that an individual’s destiny is tied to that of a group she considers her own. Many interviewees, Muslim and non-Muslim, underscored the school counselor’s role in forming these expectations. It is little wonder, then, that many Muslims focused on this issue in education in the interviews, sometimes without any prompting.

**Tracks**

A special counselor to Rama Yade (who is not a Muslim or member of a racial minority) explained the track system in France:

> In France, we have primary school, from six to eleven years [old], then middle school, eleven to fifteen years [old].9 Then, after, high school. . . . We had . . . tracks according to skill level: you are in sixth-one, sixth-two, sixth-three. Then after, at fourteen years old, we could put you in professional or general education. In France for about twenty years we have had what we call the “collège unique.” This means that everyone is mixed together. But the results are—lukewarm.

The *collège unique* was introduced in 1975 to “democratiz[e] access to education” (“La collège unique de 1975 à 2001” 2001). Rather than ranking students by abilities and separating them in middle school, schools would bring all students together in a more heterogeneous classroom. Former Minister of Education Jack Lang has described the promise of the *collège unique* as unfulfilled: “It is not sufficient to democratize access to middle school, we need to also democratize success in middle school” (“La collège unique vu par . . .” 2001).

While the track system is gone (though debate concerning it certainly is not), informal methods for obtaining more elite education are still possible. As
Yade’s counselor described, “Because the state has decided to be egalitarian, those who are privileged seek out ways to get around the system.” Expensive private schools, for example, allow parents to ensure that their children go to a school with others in their same privileged socioeconomic class. Certain choices for language study (such as German and Chinese) tend to ensure that students will be in more rigorous courses with fewer struggling students.

In addition, while there are no tracks within schools, there are different kinds of schools. Students in high school may study in “general,” “technical,” or “professional” schools. The general and technical schools are geared toward students who will go on to higher education, while the professional schools are directed toward students who will pursue a trade or profession. The journalists at *Respect Mag* saw this as an early opportunity for discrimination to creep into the education system, as minority students are often steered by counselors and teachers to the professional schools: “There is discrimination even before higher education. As early as middle school, there are general and technical middle schools—very quickly and very early, you can be put in a box. You end up doing what you have not chosen, being a mechanic, whatever. The discrimination starts very early, in school. As early as school!” While the school as the privileged site of “national unification” may be “an important part of French cultural mythology,” as Deborah Reed-Danahay (1996, p. 24) observes, it can still “create difference among social classes through different types of training.”

**Grande École versus Université**

Not all institutions of higher education are made equal. Even in the United States, a degree from Yale means something different than a degree from a California State University (CSU) school. Even within the California system, a degree from CSU, East Bay, is not considered as enviable as a degree from CalPoly-CSU, San Luis Obispo. But these rankings are relative: a bachelor’s degree from CSU, East Bay, is still respected and will help the degree holder find a job. Differences between institutions of higher education in France, as alluded to earlier, are more striking, and they are a sticking point for many Muslims in this study.

One of the most pointed descriptions of the inequalities between the two kinds of institutions came from the non-Muslim counselor to Rama Yade:

The problem in France is that the educational system is a barrier to entry into professional life, which is very corporatist and elitist compared with the United States. You have your Ivy League schools. In France, we have our *grandes écoles*. And so if you are not from a *grande école*—if you enter the workforce and you have, I don’t know, uh, a master’s degree in sociology from the University of Poitiers . . .

*(Trails off)*
It does not count?
Yes. Everyone knows what it means. Everyone knows except the person with the diploma, because he thinks he has a diploma, but he does not fool anyone. That is a problem in France—that people judge you more on your studies than on what you show following them. I exaggerate. If you are very talented, you have a chance to get yourself out. But people will judge you first, will put you in a box, and normally, afterward, you will remain within it.

This individual notes not only the unequal value of a grande école and a université diploma but also the false hopes individuals in France have for the opportunities a université diploma might provide. This is a theme that many respondents echoed, but from a different point of view: they had hoped a université degree would put them on track for success, only to find it was viewed as meaningless by others. This was a source of frustration for many interviewees. The editor-in-chief at Oumma.com elaborated: “In France, if you attend a grande école, it is easier for you to find work afterward. When you attend a grande école, you make connections. There are networks. If you do not go to a grande école, you do not have those networks.”

The journalists from Respect Mag pointed out with dissatisfaction that students from families with few resources for higher education are forced into the universités: “Money is given to parents with low incomes but not specifically directed toward kids with diverse origins. And even if you get a scholarship, it is to go to the fac.” As opposed to the more diffuse racism and assumptions that may push disadvantaged and minority students into the less respected universités, according to this journalist, an actual policy exists that obliges those with less money to attend universités. A representative of the Centre Regional des Oeuvres Universitaires et Scolaires (CROUS [Regional Center for Student Welfare]), the organization that provides assistance (particularly financial aid, housing, campus dining, and extracurricular events) for students in France, stated in a separate communication that each institution gets to choose whether it will respect need-based government scholarships. So either the journalist is sensitive to an unofficial bias against students with need-based scholarships to which CROUS is not or he is assuming that one exists. Without further data about family incomes and college admissions, the correct answer cannot be determined, but either possibility is important to the story about education and privilege told here. The former possibility would point to institutional discrimination against poverty, and the latter would be important as an insight into how stigmatized populations self-censor their actions, predicting rejections based on previous experiences.

A member of the EMF and her boyfriend, both Muslim and the children of Algerian immigrants, agreed that the universités and grandes écoles do not provide the same opportunities for post-graduation success. The boyfriend began, “It is not like the United States. We have a system of grandes écoles. It is like
your universities, but . . .” At this point, the woman joined in: “If you want to do well, you do the grandes écoles. Universités in France are a bit common.”

Their discussion of universités versus grandes écoles spilled over, of its own accord, into a critique of what they saw as the overly rigid French career system. The boyfriend explained that this begins early in France, in the early years of higher education:

In the United States, no one does law upon entering his first year at the university. It is not allowed. First you do a bachelor’s in . . . philosophy or math, whatever, and then you start. In France, not at all! In France, if you want to do law, you enter the fac, you start in law, and you finish in law. I did not do it like that, and that caused problems for me. The only time I did not have problems was when I stumbled on someone who had come from Canada.

He described this as cloisonnement, a term indicating insularity and exclusivity. The boyfriend again provided his own experience as an example: since he held a degree in social science and not finance, it would be “impossible” for him to get a job in banking in France. In London, however, “no one was shocked” when he applied for banking jobs.

Related to this, several Muslim respondents complained that French education in general does a poor job of preparing students for employment. One of the journalists from Respect Mag stated, “School is too theoretical. There needs to be more links with business. There needs to be more internships, but the interns should not be exploited.” Other Muslim respondents expressed similar desires for more practical learning experiences, with the hope that such internship experiences would help students get jobs after graduation—whether they were lucky enough to attend a grande école or not.

Strategies for addressing this problem are varied. Some Muslims simply want degrees from their universités to be respected. They feel that the distinction between the kinds of higher education institutions is artificial, a product not of different educational experiences but of unearned reputations. Others are hopeful about a number of grandes écoles opening up their doors to very small-scale affirmative action measures (although this term is most certainly never used), such as Sciences Po Paris. Fadéla Amara has supported such policies. She wants to promote, as she says, “an elite from the banlieues” by encouraging more young adults from difficult suburbs to attend grandes écoles (Chocas and Kerchouche 2008). When asked which policy Amara was proudest of, her special counselor replied that she was very proud of her efforts to increase access for the poor to the grandes écoles. Note that the emphasis here is on class (not surprising, considering Amara’s otherwise difference-blind republicanism) and on improving access to the grandes écoles—not improving the universités. The policy also relies on an elite leadership strategy: bring a select few of the underrepresented into the halls of power and politics will change. This policy
seeks to “democratize” elite education, rather than reduce the gap between the grandes écoles and the universities.\textsuperscript{10}

\textit{The Hijab and Laïcité}

When a representative from the PMF was asked what he would do first if he were made minister of education for a day, his response was “I would change lots of things. I would ask for the abolition of the law forbidding the hijab at school. First thing.” His other suggestions included reestablishing a more hierarchical relationship between student and teacher and toughening the requirements for earning a baccalauréat.\textsuperscript{11} But note that he ranked allowing the hijab into the classroom as his first priority.

Another interviewee, a member of the EMF, agreed but offered a specific reason—and one that did not solely relate to the hijab itself:

First, I would get rid of this laïcité law, because laïcité does not mean anything. I think we need to include diversity, even at the level of religion, and we need to trust people, tell them that liberty starts . . . where they start. Liberty is defined by you. As long as my religion remains mine, and it is my affair, no one can take it away from me. Whether I have my voile or not, I can talk to you, I can teach you. That does not impede me.

This interviewee wore the hijab and was acknowledging that when she begins teaching schoolchildren, she will be required to take it off. Thus, for her, “laïcité” is not synonymous with freedom. In fact, she was not sure what it means, since as she saw it her religion would not prevent her from performing her duties as an instructor. Nor did she believe that her religion would prevent others from enjoying their freedom of belief and non-belief as long as she did not proselytize (i.e., “as long as it remains mine, and it is my affair”). Again, we see fundamental disagreement concerning whether the hijab is “inherently” proselytizing. For this woman, the law of 2004 is distasteful because it is perceived as an attack on religious diversity that is masked in a vague republican language that impedes discussion of what freedom is and ought to be.

Representatives from the legal action group CCIF were also suspicious about the meaning of laïcité in public school policies. They brought up the inconsistencies of its implementation in France: state-paid religious instruction in Alsace-Moselle,\textsuperscript{12} fish (a Lenten accommodation) in cafeterias on Friday, and state holidays that align with the Christian calendar. If so many accommodations are made for Christians, why should there be so few for those of other religions, such as Islam? Such observations about the continued but overlooked presence of Christian traditions in the French public sphere highlight the “invisibility” of dominance: How, these representatives of the CCIF asked, could politicians talk about the strictly secular nature of the public sphere when so many accommodations were being made for the Christian tradition?
Another inconsistency they pointed to seems equitable on the surface, but they maintain that the ultimate effect is discriminatory: private religious education. While it is legal for any religion to establish religious private schools in France as long as the schools conform to certain statewide educational requirements (which are rigorous), more Christian and Jewish schools exist, by default, as the Christian and Jewish communities have been in France longer and have more funds than many other religious groups to create the schools. The CCIF members elaborated:

**Member 1:** In France, if the door to religious education is closed, the Christians and Jews can turn to their private schools, but . . .

**Member 2:** The Muslims do not have any.

**Member 1:** In Lille, there is a Muslim middle school/high school, but it is under threat of closure because, at the level of finances, it does not have any—so there are really three Muslim schools officially for all of France. For the second religion of France.

So while there is no legal discrimination vis-à-vis private religious education, the respondents felt that the lack of state assistance for the newer religion of Islam amounted to de facto inequality. The respondents also noted how, beyond financial issues, some in France fear Muslim private schools: “‘Muslim schools? That’s where they teach fundamentalists, extremists!’ It is that, unfortunately.”

Yade’s counselor also acknowledged the minuscule number of Muslim private schools in France.

> It is a bit unjust, because concretely, what does that [the 2004 law] mean? If you are Muslim and you want to continue to wear the *foulard*, you need to go to a private Muslim school, and there are [very few]. The community is not a sufficiently wealthy to have the funds necessary [to establish its own schools]. So that means [a girl who wears the hijab has to] stay at home and take correspondence courses, and staying at home often means staying under parental authority that is often traditionalist.

His comment includes an assumption that young women and girls who wear the *hijab* are often from traditionalist households with parental authority that limits their freedom. The “injustice” that he depicts in his explanation is not the same injustice that was described by the members of the CCIF. They identified the paucity of Muslim private schools in France as an unjust denial of religious freedom. The counselor identified it as an unjust denial of education outside the home—of the liberating experience of separation from one’s parents’ authority and tradition. These are two very different readings of the injustices that stem from the 2004 law and the practical nonexistence of Muslim private education in France, and they are particularly emblematic of the larger rift that can be found between Muslim and elite discourse on education in France.
One respondent, a member of the JMF, attended a school where teachers protested against students wearing the hijab. This came out when he was asked whether he had ever experienced discrimination at school. “Nothing really happened at school,” he said. “Because we were mostly Arabs, there was no one to bother us, really. I was at the school with the affaire du voile. The teachers were really attached to their convictions—they were not talking about laïcité; they were talking about Islam, the Qur’an. And they did not know anything about it, either.” When I asked the respondent to elaborate about the teachers’ concerns (as he understood them), he added, “They talked about us as barbarians—the exact same discourse as Sarkozy.” At this point, another member of the JMF joined in to clarify: “During his presidential campaign, [Sarkozy] said we cannot accept people cutting lamb throats in their bathtubs any longer.”

For the respondents from the JMF, complaints about the hijab are understood to be an alternative way to attack Muslims for their faith. They focus on how some teachers and politicians have associated Islam with barbarism and ritualistic sacrifice performed illegally in the bathtubs of apartments. This image of the “sheep in the bathtub” is used to evoke a sense of incompatibility between Islam and France: one is “backward,” one is “modern.” To allow Islam into France is to allow Muslims to practice their “backward” ways, which is unacceptable. The hijab, according to these JMF members, is just another example of what some people in France believe is “backward” about Muslims, and their ire over the hijab has more to do with that sense of superiority—or perhaps even fear?—in the face of supposed “barbarians” than with concerns for republican education and equality.

One student member of the EMF joined the organization because of this kind of hostility from a university professor. Another member of the EMF, who believed that women of all ages have the right to wear the hijab in public schools even though he personally did not like the hijab, asked questions of the student as she explained her story:

**Student 1:** There was a professor at university who insulted me in class.

**Student 2:** In sem, or in TD?²³

**Student 1:** In the amphitheater. In seminar.

**Student 2:** Whoa!

**Student 1:** So I didn’t know what to do. . . . I called different unions. No one wanted to take on the case, but a student union and the EMF wanted to defend me.

**Student 2:** So? (sarcastic) Did he go to prison?

**Student 1:** So the day that this union and the EMF came to talk to the professor, some girls I didn’t know and who weren’t even Arab or Muslim wrote a letter to denounce the professor.

**Student 2:** Was he sent away?

**Student 1:** No, because he was a director. . . . But at any rate, he had his scare.
The male student found the professor’s behavior unacceptable but was nevertheless ambivalent about the hijab. These two students sparred a bit before the interview began during a meeting of another association they had just started (a student association that brings together students from the Arabic and Hebrew language department at their university in Paris). They were trying to decide who would be the president of the association. It was suggested and agreed that a third woman who also wears the hijab would be the president. This made the man uneasy. “But, she’s veiled,” he said with some discomfort. “Yes?” “And?” came the icy responses from both women. He then asked, “A veiled woman as president of our student association—that is a bit cliché, isn’t it?” The women felt it should be irrelevant, but the man was considering the expectations of others. His comment suggests that struggles over the hijab have become so common and frequent that to put a hijab-wearing woman in the position of president of a students’ association might be read as yet another political statement about the hijab in schools, a statement that risks sounding tired and unoriginal. The president-to-be, who did not seek to make such a statement, was angry that her hijab would automatically be perceived as anything and that her personal decision to wear it might be seen as rendering her a “cliché.”

Another member of the EMF described how she also faced problems wearing a hijab at the university, where it is legal to wear: “I wore the scarf for ten years. During all that period, I was at university and I wore it, except my last year at university when I did my master’s. It was very difficult. At the Sorbonne, . . . I had a professor who in a one-on-one meeting said, ‘I would throw you all out of the Sorbonne.’”

Not all Muslims are happy with how the question of the hijab has played out in French politics. I spoke to a representative of the humanitarian organization Muslim Hands France (the international headquarters is in the United Kingdom) about the work of her association. She described its role as “helping people to live, and well,” and that this was just “part of the Muslim faith. It is not all prayers and fasting, we are not all fundamentalists.” She then expressed some annoyance about the subject of the hijab. It had, she felt, made it so that all people think of when they encounter Muslims is the hijab. She also insisted that Muslim Hands France had signed on to the Red Cross Charter as a way to refute the notion that the group was religiously conservative or somehow opposed to human rights. For this individual, the issue of the hijab led to misconceptions about Muslims that make it harder for her association’s messages to get across.

“It Is Complicated”: Discrimination in Education and Intersectionality

Rarely did respondents attribute challenges they faced in life to their religion alone. Muslim respondents often noted that discrimination or challenges were sometimes tied not just to their religion but also to their class, race, ethnicity, or immigrant background. As one Muslim respondent put it when describing
similarities he, as a child of working-class Algerian immigrants, had with others in the working class, “When you realize there are social problems that we share, because you are from the working class . . . and, when you are also a foreigner . . . it adds something. It is a ‘plus.’ It is a complexity.” While there may be certain similarities across marginalized groups, the situation gets undeniably more complex for those who are a minority, or part of a disadvantaged group, in more ways than one. What feminists might identify as intersectionality, respondents identified simply as “complex.” Even among those Muslim respondents whose outsider status came primarily, if not solely, from their conversion to Islam, there was an awareness that for many other Muslims in France, religion was not the sole factor in their everyday struggles for equality.

Elite discourse in France also occasionally recognizes the intersectionality of Islam with other factors, such as immigration, race, ethnicity, and class. But this recognition is sometimes based not on social observation but on social assumptions—that is, stereotypes. At a meeting with UMP members in September 2009, then Interior Minister Brice Hortefeux was shown in a video filmed by the television station Public Sénat making a series of comments about a party adherent, Amine Benalia-Brouch that some journalists (e.g., at Le Monde and Rue 89 [see Ternisien 2009; Haski 2009]) have since condemned as racist. As he is being approached by Benalia-Brouch, Hortefeux is heard to say, “Ah, yes, that is integration” (quoted in Leprince 2009). Because Benalia-Brouch is of Arab descent, Hortefeux was assuming he must have required integration into France—which in turn suggests that Hortefeux was assuming a history of immigration based solely on Benalia-Brouch’s appearance. Hortefeux then added, “And he speaks Arabic, eh!” (Leprince 2009). Hortefeux again was making an assumption—this time, that all people of Arab descent have ties to Arab culture, such as language. But many people of Arab descent in France do not speak any Arabic. Mediators with the organization Femmes Relais in Seine-Saint-Denis described this as a significant problem for some immigrant mothers in France who are expected to do all of the parenting but cannot communicate effectively with their francophone children. The education director at the Grande Mosquée de Lyon also acknowledged the uniquely francophone Muslims of France when he pointed out that the demand for imams who speak French and for copies of the Qur’an in French is increasing. Among those who attend the mosque in Lyon, he estimated, more than half do not speak Arabic.

Marie Apathie, the UMP’s secretary for the Department of Landes at the time of the incident, was also captured on film saying about Benalia-Brouch, “He’s Catholic, he eats pork, and he drinks beer.” Normally such details would not be provided when introducing people in France. Here, they were meant to highlight that Benalia-Brouch is not the “average Arab”—that is, Arabs are not Catholic but Muslim, and Muslims abstain from pork and beer, or so the assumptions go, piling up one on the other. Of course, not all Arabs are Muslim—some are indeed Catholic—and plenty of Muslims consume pork and beer. “He does not correspond to the prototype at all then,” Hortefeux exclaimed (quoted
in Leprince 2009). For Hortefeux, then, there is a “prototypical Arab,” and since Benalia-Brouch does not correspond to the prototype, he must be “integrated.” At this point, Apathie also claims Benalia-Brouch as property of UMP—“He’s our little Arab”—to which Hortefeux responds, “There always needs to be one. When there is one, it is OK. It is when there are many that there is a problem” (quoted in Leprince 2009). This final exchange implies a sort of patronizing acceptance: this man can be part of the UMP because he is like “us,” and there is only one of him, so he cannot greatly influence the party.

In this exchange between two UMP leaders, we see recognition of the overlap among the categories of Arab, immigrant, and Muslim. But this recognition is predicated on stereotypes—what else is a “prototype”? This sort of uninvited collapsing of categories and identities, done not to better understand the social reality of an individual or group but, rather, as a lazy attempt to assume what people are like on the basis of appearance, frustrates many Muslim respondents. Such assumptions, they repeatedly said, lead to further misunderstandings—such as the common elite assumption that Muslims are somehow incompletely French and need to be further integrated. Benalia-Brouch (2010) later quit the UMP and wrote a book accusing UMP leaders of lying (and encouraging him to lie) about the true, discriminatory nature of Hortefeux’s comments.

How do Muslims talk about intersectionality, then, if their reflections on overlapping identities are different from the elite assumptions they so often criticize? What follow are some examples of how Muslim respondents consider the effect of occasionally overlapping minority categories on the experience of discrimination and how this overlap may shape one’s social positionality.

The journalists at Respect Mag were asked the open-ended question about whether they had ever experienced “any problems” in school:

**Journalist 1**: In middle school, I knew a lot of immigrant students. If there was a little prank in class, we Arabs would instantly be accused, before the others. It would get fixed afterward, but there was a feeling of injustice. We were not treated like the others. *What did you do?*

**Journalist 1**: When we had tough situations, we [the other Arabs and I] would stick together. We were solidary. Solidarity, it is natural. Normal.

**Journalist 2**: I did not have the same experience with teachers, because I was a good student, and that helps. But despite that, I experienced injustice at school, [in] how fellow student[s] would treat me, and so on. . . . It is not necessarily the teachers’ fault. . . . Some parents help their kids with their homework, and immigrant parents cannot always do that. It is not fair.

In this response, we see an awareness that “Arab” and “immigrant” are two identities that sometimes coexist. Neither of the respondents in this conversation,
however, had personally immigrated to France. We also see recognition that racism alone is not to blame for all the difficulties Arab students face. If a student’s parents immigrated to France, then the student might not have had the same advantage of receiving help with homework from them, because immigrant parents might not have had the necessary French-language skills or education. But these comments are nuanced—for example, “some parents help their kids with homework”; “immigrant parents cannot always do that.”

Compare these comments with the experience of a leader at the JMF in Paris who immigrated to France from Morocco with his parents when he was ten. He explained that he had never had a concrete experience of discrimination at school but instead had encountered unwarranted assumptions in everyday public life based solely on his appearance: “In middle school, there was the cruelty of adolescents, but, honestly, I did not have experiences where it was clear. It was in everyday life. I was reading a book on the train, and a woman asked me if I was doing my studies in literature. She saw a foreigner who was reading a book, so surely it was because he had to, not because he chose to. It was never something really clear, never an—Islamophobic experience.” This respondent believed that an assumption that foreigners do not read and that someone with an Arab appearance must be a foreigner led the woman on the train to ask him, a French citizen, if he was a literature student. Regardless of the woman’s original intentions, which are potentially unclear, we can see that the respondent was keenly aware of assumptions others may make about him based on his appearance—the “everyday” kinds of subtle experiences that he was reluctant to identify as discrimination but that add up over time to unequal treatment.

**Teacher Evaluation**

One respondent from *Respect Mag* stated that if he were the minister of education, the first thing he would do would be to “re-do the system of teacher evaluations. Teachers today work on a point system. At the beginning of their career, they start in schools in difficult quartiers. They gain points, and then they leave to go to nicer schools.” One of the other journalists interjected, “It is the teachers with the least experience in the difficult quartiers. You should have the teachers with the most experience in the difficult schools.” Other Muslim respondents expressed dissatisfaction with teachers, as well—from strident comments such as “Throw them all out!” to more circumspect calls for ongoing teacher training to help instructors improve their skills.

French educators themselves acknowledge the limitations of teacher evaluation. As Marlène Isoré (2009, p. 37) writes, “The current teacher evaluation system is often described as ‘not very fair,’ ‘not very efficient’ . . . because it is based on administrative procedures rather than a comprehensive scheme with a clear improvement purpose.” The evaluation process is not connected to continued training to help teachers develop the skills they lack; nor do the
evaluations affect one’s career progress. When French Muslims complain about teachers’ performance and evaluation, they are addressing a secular concern others have in France, as well.

**Halal Meat**

Apart from a passing comment by a member of the JMF in Lyon, only one group brought up the subject of halal meat in the school cafeteria: representatives of the CCIF complained that school officials “either want to serve the kids non-halal meat or make them taste it, which is against the desires of the parents. It is the parents who are responsible, who are the principal educators of their children. . . . [This is covered by] Article 2 of Protocol 1 of the European Convention on the Rights of Man. And there are other texts, like the New York Convention on the rights of children.” The European Convention on Human Rights and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child do indeed have protections for children to be raised within the culture and religious views of their parents. It is unsurprising that a legal action group would refer to international law in its pursuit of what it perceives to be rights. Then again, it is surprising, considering the tendency of the French to pursue activities outside the courts for social change, and given that the majority of Muslim respondents seemed startled or wryly amused at the thought of going to court over discrimination. The CCIF is rare in that it reads all social conflicts through the lens of the law. And other Muslim interviewees did not place halal meat highly among their concerns about education in France.

**Conclusion**

The subject of education demonstrates how the opinions of French Muslims are shaped by many affiliations and interests. Their concerns with education speak to many different issues in French society and politics and are not limited to matters of faith. When asked what she would do if she were appointed minister of education, one woman who wears a hijab replied, “I would put more emphasis on English. Personally, it is something that I find very difficult to learn. I have been taking lessons for ten years, but . . . three hours per week, it is not very much.” Another woman in a hijab replied, “That is a big question. I would make university free.” While French elite discourse often portrays Muslims as solely interested in religion and hijab-wearing women as the epitome of this, the reflex responses of these two hijab-wearing French Muslim women when asked about changing education in France spoke to issues other than religion. As another Muslim jokingly responded to the comment about making universities free, “Ha-ha, gauchiste!” (Ha-ha, you leftist!). *Gauchiste* indeed: her response aligns with other leftist statements she made, including her belief in a strong state to provide an equal footing for all in society. Her fellow Muslim student who made
the *gauchiste* joke identified what many French elites seem incapable of doing: a Muslim woman’s nonreligious political engagement with France.

When a third female Muslim respondent who also wears the hijab was asked what she would do if she were made minister of education for a day, she replied, “Open schools in all towns.” She explained:

Open schools is a concept where the parents enter into the schools. *So parents can enter even if they are wearing hijabs or bearded?*

Yes, but that is of little importance. Open schools. The schools are closed these days. It is national education that teaches. And why are we experiencing educational failure? It is because they think that state education should have a monopoly on education. State education transmits academic knowledge; parental education transmits a type of knowledge; sports transmit a type of knowledge; theater transmits a type of knowledge. Knowledge is cross-disciplinary. I would take off these locks. I would start cross-disciplinary education.

Notice that this respondent is not ranking these different kinds of educational experiences. She is not saying that parents can teach children better than public schools can (something that some French elites fear Muslims do believe and would be willing to take their children out of public school for). The respondent is simply saying that different experiences provide different kinds of education or teach students different lessons. Rather than seeing state education placed in an inferior position to the lessons of parents, sports, or art, this respondent wants to see state education work in tandem with other kinds of education. This response is quite different from the common elite depiction of Muslims who wear the hijab as single-mindedly religious, willing to sacrifice the republic for the hijab. If all life experiences offer different kinds of lessons, and no single life experience provides the most desirable lessons, then state education does not sit in a place superior to that of religion—and, importantly, vice versa.

Indeed, education provides the clearest example of how elite discourse about a group can entirely drown out the voices of that group. Why might this be? The hijab in public schools has been interpreted by many elites to epitomize an affront to each of the five characteristics of normative French citizenship: sexual liberalty, secularism, republicanism, abstract individualism, and (though only a minority of French politicians openly claim this) no immigrant background. It should come as no surprise, then, that other discussions about Muslims and education should somehow fall by the wayside. Emphasis on the hijab crowded out all other discussion about Muslims and education among elites, as demonstrated by the lopsided media coverage and National Assembly discussions, even though many Muslims are in a place to speak to the complex intersections of various marginalized identities and how this affects the experience of education in France.
Of the three subjects Muslims were asked to speak about—education, employment, and housing—the strongest criticisms, deepest frustrations, and most eager, unprompted responses came when discussing education. Yet the level of disappointment these French Muslims have in some aspects of French education would make no sense if they did not believe that the French school system should be doing better. We see that hope in Muslims’ concern for the fate of mixité in public schools, in their sense that schools should prepare children for their desired career paths, and in their frustration with the reproduction of inequality in schools. For many of these French Muslims, public schools are where fraternity, equality, and liberty are meant to be fostered. According to Muslim interviewees, there are reasons to suspect that these values are not being fostered—and those reasons are not limited to the 2004 law on secularity and religious symbols in public schools.