Constructing Muslims in France

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On the evening of February 10, 2011, President Nicolas Sarkozy participated in the televised interview program *Paroles de Français*, where he was peppered with questions from the French public. One questioner asked, “Do you think that multiculturalism is a failure and that it is the cause of many problems in our society?” Sarkozy replied, “My response is a clear: yes, it is a failure. The truth is that in all our democracies, we have been too preoccupied about the identity of those arriving and not enough with that of the countries that welcome them.”

Sarkozy’s comments distinguish between the search for national identity and the investigation of immigrant identities. This book complicates this division, suggesting that French elites have tried to define national identity through a rejection of the “other within”—North African immigrants, their children, and, more recently, Muslims—and that French Muslims have had to develop their own definitions of Frenchness while contending with this elite discourse. In other words, French elites and Muslims in France have shaped one another’s view of what it means to be Muslim and to be French, and the search for Muslim identity and French identity are often intertwined.

This study has interrogated the exclusionary nature of citizenship, examining its role as a contested normative ideal that French elites and Muslims struggle to define. Thus, the study has two aims: to analyze how French elites have discursively created a Muslim “public identity” that is depicted as un-French and to interrogate how French Muslims respond to these elite claims and either reaffirm their support for or subtly redefine elite articulations of the French values of liberty, equality, and fraternity. The difference between elite depictions...
of Muslims and the political activities of Muslim activists themselves illustrates the power of public identities and the challenges of creating a counternarrative to oppose elite discursive attacks on a group’s citizenship. This concluding chapter summarizes contemporary elite and Muslim interpretations of citizenship in France and explains why it is so difficult to challenge discursive attacks on a group’s citizenship in general and in France in particular.

Elites and French Citizenship

There are four elite models of French citizenship today: racial and religious; “cultural”; difference-blind abstract republicanism; and what Cécile Laborde (2010, pp. 7–8) calls “critical republicanism,” which is concerned by how de facto inequality thrives alongside difference-blind abstract republicanism.

The Racial and Religious Model of French Citizenship

The racial view, which implicitly includes religious assumptions, is perhaps best summed up by a statement from Charles de Gaulle:

> It is very good to have yellow French people, black French people, brown French people. They show that France is open to all races, and that it has a universal calling. But on the condition that they remain a small minority. Otherwise, France would no longer be France. We are above all, after all, a European people, with a Greek and Latin culture, and the Christian religion. Do not let anyone tell you otherwise. The Muslims, have you gone to see them? You have seen them, with their turbans and their djellabas? You see well that these are not French people. Advocates of integration are birdbrains, even if they are researchers. Try to mix oil and vinegar. Shake the bottle. After a bit, they will separate once again. Arabs are Arabs; the French are French. (Quoted in de Villiers 2006, p. 216)

Here we see that “to be French” means to be white, which means to be Christian and to not wear turbans or djellabas—more directly, to not be Arab or Muslim. Some might counter that this is outdated and that de Gaulle was simply echoing the common sentiments of his time. But it is not far from President Jacques Chirac’s “noise and smell” speech in the 1990s or the current discourse of far-right politicians such as Marine Le Pen. Furthermore, while Philippe de Villiers himself acknowledges that de Gaulle’s comment might be liable to legal sanction today, it is not clear that he personally disagrees with the sentiment. When imagining what a contemporary response to the comment would be, de Villiers (2006, pp. 215–216) chooses to refer to de Gaulle with the weighty honorific “the founder of Free France.” Few things legitimate the words of a speaker like attributing to him your nation’s stand against Adolf Hitler.
In short, whether it is espoused by contemporary or historic French elites, this racial and religious model of French citizenship embodies the Orientalist “dichotomous thinking” described by Edward Said (1979): they will never be like us. It is no surprise, then, that Muslims would be depicted as the radical other in elite discourse: they are incapable of integrating into France because they doubly lack the fundamental essence of French citizenship. They are frequently not white, and they are all not Christian.

This model of citizenship cannot respond to the needs and concerns of France’s increasingly diverse population. Nevertheless, it has its adherents. Marine Le Pen, the leader of the FN, won nearly a fifth of votes cast in the first round of the presidential election of 2012 (Willsher 2012). While Le Pen has worked to distance her party from overtly racist and anti-Semitic politics, the FN remains xenophobic. Le Pen herself has likened seeing Muslims praying in the street to living under Nazi occupation (Shorto 2011).

**The Cultural Model of French Citizenship**

In this view, being French is not about race or religion but a shared culture in which all can choose to partake. Regardless of his or her background, anyone can learn about French culture and learn to appreciate and participate in it. Beyond this, however, the cultural view becomes vague and amorphous. What counts as culture? Does one really just have to speak French, know the Maximes of Rochefoucauld, and eat certain food to be a good French citizen? When Assemblywoman Nadine Morano asked Muslim youths to “act French” (see Chapter 1) and defined that in opposition to wearing baseball caps and using slang, was she implying that a certain mode of dress and way to speak are cultural hallmarks of Frenchness?

De Villiers proposes a vision of French citizenship as a cultural engagement. He argues that immigrants and their children must adopt French “culture.” It also is not altogether clear what he means by the word, however. De Villiers (2006, p. 216) offers a rather limited definition of French culture: a shared history, language, heritage, and similar hopes and dreams. If that were truly the bar for good French citizenship, then it is unclear why he is worried about Muslims. The Muslims interviewed here all spoke French perfectly, were deeply interested in French history (some even majored in it at the university level), and did not express any hopes or dreams that the average French person would find offensive.

When de Villiers (2006, p. 216) attempts to clarify what French culture is, the definition becomes even murkier: “If we choose not to leave outside the national community multiple enclaves of transplanted populations that form in our home bits of the Sahara, extensions of Africa, miniatures of the Maghreb, there is only one way, but it is achieved through a formidable effort of stripping former identities. This . . . is Frenchification.” Being French, then, means forsaking all identities that are not French. But this is circular and answers
nothing. The existence of “enclaves” of immigrants and their children and grandchildren in France has typically been a legacy of government housing policy, not necessarily an instinctual tendency of immigrants to congregate together. The fact that so many respondents with a family history of immigration want to see more mixité in schools also suggests that if there is an instinct to stick together, it is not universally found among immigrants and their descendants. In the cultural model of French citizenship, “culture” remains elusive. France’s increasingly diverse population will not find connections to or meaning in this model of citizenship, either.

**Difference-Blind Abstract Republicanism**

This study found difference-blind abstract republicanism to be the predominant model employed in elite discourse. Without appreciating the importance of this model of citizenship, one cannot understand why French President François Hollande proposed eliminating the word “race” from the beginning of Article I of the French Constitution, which states, “France shall be an indivisible, secular, democratic and social Republic. It shall ensure the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of origin, race, or religion” (“Hollande propose de supprimer le mot ‘race’ dans la Constitution” 2012). It is not that Hollande wants to legalize unequal treatment on the basis of race. Rather, he wants to fight racism by further eliminating the recognition of race in France. If there is no race, there cannot be racism. In his words, “There is no room in the republic for race” (“Hollande propose de supprimer le mot ‘race’ dans la Constitution” 2012). This view of republicanism also typically includes what Ahmet Kuru (2009, p. 11) refers to as “assertive secularism,” or the idea that religion, as a particular affiliation, ought to firmly remain in the private sphere.⁴

The French elites who express this view tend to focus on principles more than outcomes. For example: the freedom of conscience includes freedom from the presence of religion in public schools. This ensures that young minds have the greatest possible latitude for developing their own ideas and choosing their own beliefs. If we take this abstract idea and push it to its limits, it seems reasonable to eliminate all signs of religion in public schools, including the garments students wear. In this light, the ban on conspicuous religious symbols of 2004, which includes the hijab, is philosophically consonant with French citizenship.

Such a policy enacted in the context of today’s France, however, limits potential gains in students’ freedom in a number of ways. Wearing the hijab may be a student’s choice. Or a student might choose to interpret the hijab as having more than a religious connotation and dislike being told by others that it is a solely a religious symbol. If a student is forced to wear the hijab by her family, then such a policy may result in her being taken out of school and losing the freedom she had enjoyed within the republican walls of the French school. For all students, regardless of religion, the ban on the hijab to eliminate school bullying (whether it is for wearing or for not wearing the garment) does not
eliminate prejudice. The state misses two opportunities to inculcate republican values: first, to discuss in educational establishments the meaning of freedom, and second, to promote respect for the freedom of others.

Finally, as France has a specific social and historical relationship with Muslims and Arabs, this policy, intended to protect freedom, is easily perceived as singling a group out for discrimination. The law is neutral on paper, but it does not affect all religions equally. Targeted at “conspicuous” religious symbols, it does little to hamper the freedom of Christians to wear crosses and crucifixes (which are small and can even be worn under a shirt). It does effectively ban wearing the yarmulke, but Jewish students who wish to wear the yarmulke have more options for private religious education than French Muslims do. As for Sikhs, concessions have been made to allow an “under turban” to be worn, as Sikh leaders in France insisted the garment was not religious but cultural (“French Sikhs lambast school ban” 2004; Veronique 2008).

In this way, we can see that the pursuit of difference-blind abstract republicanism can, in its defense of the freedom of conscience, hamper certain articulations of that freedom. Furthermore, its neutrality may be perceived as disingenuous. Some French feminists champion this kind of rarefied, idea-based version of republican values. Take equality and the hijab as an example. The hijab, they argue, means women’s submission. Some members of the NPNS (including Fadéla Amara) and intellectuals (such as Caroline Fourest) say this. But in attributing one sole meaning to the hijab, these feminists deny those who wear it an equal chance to define for themselves what they think it means and what their religion means to them. The Muslim women interviewed in this study who wear the hijab, and those who do not, routinely expressed annoyance with being told “the hijab means X.” These French feminists (I say this with some hesitation, as not all French feminists agree on this issue, and some Muslim women who wear the hijab passionately describe themselves as feminist), seeking to support the rights and equality of women, routinely deny religious women the ability to speak for themselves and form their own interpretations of Islam.

This absolutist stance is similar to what Chandra Talpade Mohanty critiques in “Under Western Eyes”:

A homogeneous notion of the oppression of women as a group is assumed, which, in turn, produces the image of an “average third world woman.” This average third world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being “third world” (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.). This, I suggest, is in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of Western women as educated, as modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions. . . . These distinctions are made on the basis of the privileging of a particular group as the norm or referent. (Mohanty 1991, p. 56)
The “norm” here, of course, is the non-hijab-wearing Frenchwoman or, even more so, the nonreligious Frenchwoman. Compared with this norm, Muslim women in France are seen as “victimized,” as “tradition-bound.”

But the Muslim women interviewed here were often dynamic advocates for themselves and other women. What we have is the image, or even simulacra, of the “oppressed Muslim woman” informing some French feminist understandings of Islam and Muslims, as opposed to meaningful interactions with a diversity of Muslims. This leads not only to a homogeneous representation of a diverse group but also to an imperialistic French feminist discourse: one that speaks for certain women and ignores their rebuttals. This staunch defense of equality leads to the unequal treatment of French women, as female Muslims find their voices unappreciated—unless, that is, they speak out against Islam as an oppressor of women and Muslim men as tyrants. Those Muslim women who interpret Islam in ways that are not opposed to women’s rights and equality, as was the case among all of the female Muslim respondents in this study, do not appear in the discourse of many elite feminist thinkers in France. Nor are their complaints that some French feminists should perhaps think twice about assuming that sex appeal—tight clothes, high heels, makeup, immaculately coiffed hair—necessarily means freedom and equality for women. There is a moment of missed solidarity here, as these feminists who are suspicious of Islam and many women who wear the hijab could perhaps have fruitful conversations about how to fight the continued policing of women’s bodies in France and throughout the West.

France’s increasingly diverse population is likely to find it difficult to sympathize with this difference-blind abstract republican model of citizenship. This is already being foreshadowed by divisions within the French left, where proponents of difference-blindness are at loggerheads with those interested in how domination plays out on the ground in everyday life. The alliances that supported the left for much of the twentieth century—alliances with workers, immigrants, minorities, and women—are threatened by this difference-blind articulation of republicanism. Some on the French left today even express dismay over immigration, and the left has proposed policies to limit immigration a number of times (Guiraudon 2001). More pertinent to this study, Muslims are being told by some on the left that they are bad citizens for being unwilling to leave their religion in the private sphere. Muslim women are to be pitied and protected but evidently not listened to. The French left excels at promoting difference-blind equality and meritocracy, but when people do not want their differences to go unacknowledged or want the pervasive discrimination of their differences to be acknowledged, the left does not seem to have a response.

Azouz Begag (2007, p. 35) passionately explains his frustration with the left:

Leftist activists stop me in the street, during public gatherings, and insult me. “What the hell are you doing in a right-wing administration with Sarkozy?” They are sickened by my involvement. Me, the writer,
the artist, the free man, I tell them that the left has done nothing for twenty years now for diversity, for the banlieues, that I will never forgive this treason. But the socialist activists do not give a damn about minorities in politics. They scream in my ears that my government fuels précarité.6 I tell them about diversity, they respond to me, “Précarité!” They have only this word in their mouths.

Begag’s frustration is clear. He blames the left for not doing more to improve diversity in politics or to help the banlieues. The hypothetical leftist responds to Begag by insisting that the problem is instability and that the solution must be to fix the instability. Begag (2007, p. 35) rejects this, stating that real insecurity is found in developing countries where there is no rule of law and not enough food. France, he says, does not know true précarité. Here we see Begag’s deep appreciation of France, even alongside his disappointment in its inability to realize its ideal of equality. There is perhaps a second reason that Begag is frustrated by the cries that “précarité” must be ended: What causes it? If the left does not want to talk about diversity when racial, ethnic, and religious differences fuel so much inequality in France, then what will the left do to fix this “précarité”?

At base, difference-blind abstract republicanism presents a puzzle. Is it possible to believe in equality without first acknowledging difference? Both are articles of faith, but equality without the acknowledgment of difference is faith in an idea: that of the abstract person, as opposed to faith in the embodied individual. As the discussions of freedom and equality above illustrate, it is possible to reach discriminatory outcomes when one is focused on principles as opposed to people: the effects of those principles on actual people are not investigated. Outcomes are merely presupposed to be optimum if actions strictly follow the principle. While this model of citizenship has some Muslim adherents, it is unlikely to answer the concerns of all of France’s increasingly diverse population.

Critical Republicanism

While critical republicanism shares meritocratic principles and the republican triad with the difference-blind abstract republican model of citizenship, it enjoys far less currency in elite French discourse. As such, its proponents have not been able to undermine the predominant elite discursive trend of questioning Muslim citizenship. There nevertheless are elites in France who express ideas along this model of citizenship, even if they do not use Laborde’s language of “critical republicanism.”

Critical republicanism, according to Laborde (2010, pp. 11, 13), faults difference-blind abstract republicanism (which she refers to as “classical republicanism,” or “official republicanism” in the English translation) for its “sociological deficit.” In other words, difference-blind abstract republicanism neglects to take note of how its principles, when applied in reality, may not be
sufficient to meet the goal of equality. For Laborde, it is important to investigate patterns of social inequality, even if this means speaking in terms of particulars such as race, gender, or religion, because inequality frequently relates to persistent group-based social hierarchies. As such, it is impossible to fight inequality while maintaining a difference-blind view of republicanism.

Without adopting all of Laborde’s theory of critical republicanism (which includes such features as a nuanced theory of non-domination and a distinction from multiculturalism), we can use this expression and this basic vision—that difference-blindness covers up social inequality—to summarize a minority trend in elite French discourse today.

Chapter 2 listed examples of French elites who work to delegitimize the dominant elite discourse on Muslims in France, who worry that difference-blindness impedes the fight against inequality, or who at the very least are troubled by the tone of suspicion often used in elite discussions about Muslims in France. In this way, they articulate a critical view of republican citizenship and identify (along with Marx) where political equality fails to secure social equality.

Similarly, there are feminists in France who denounce the laws against the hijab and the niqab as neocolonialism masquerading as feminism. A petition titled “We, Feminists” that circulated among French academics and activists claims, “It is time that we gather and fight those politics that systematically destroy our political community, our rights, our democratic freedoms, social link and solidarity, and dare to do so in our name.” It goes on to accuse some people of using women’s rights, gay rights, and gender equality instrumentally “to serve neocolonial and freedom-restricting ideologies and practices.” The goal of the petition was partly to inspire feminist solidarity across nations, beliefs, and origins, and to highlight how fights for “women’s rights” are sometimes used to divide (and conquer) women of different backgrounds. It closed with 1,235 signatures, speaks freely about the history of domination and difference, and provides a very different account of feminism that would not sit well with feminists who espouse difference-blind abstract republicanism.

It should also be noted that, although it remains illegal for the state to collect data on ethnicity and race in France, there are instances in which state administrations speak in difference-conscious terms. For example, the Conseil Supérieur de l’Audiovisuel (CSA [High Council for Broadcasting], which is somewhat analogous to the U.S. Federal Communications Commission, has researched diversity and discrimination in television and radio and proposed that programming should better reflect the reality of France’s increasingly diverse population (Conseil Supérieur de l’Audiovisuel 2008). Thus, we should avoid the assumption that the predominance of difference-blind abstract republicanism in elite discourse concerning Muslims in France today means that it is impossible for French institutions or leaders to discuss diversity and inequality. This perhaps makes the predominance of that view of republicanism more curious. Alternative French discourses on difference and understandings
of republicanism do exist, and more and more French citizens may find it easier to locate themselves in these articulations of citizenship.

**Muslims and French Citizenship**

Some French Muslims articulate the common elite model of difference-blind abstract republican citizenship, while others introduce subtle modifications that mitigate the difference-blind approach of that model. But all of the Muslims interviewed for this study articulated visions of citizenship that are premised on the celebrated French values of freedom, equality, and fraternity.

French Muslims embrace secularism. They favor aspects of *laïcité*, such as the freedom of conviction and disestablishment. But for them, this also means the freedom to acknowledge their belief in a god and practice religion as they choose in public, so long as it does not infringe on the rights of others. For many Muslims, particularly young generations, “infringing on the rights of others” consists of active proselytism. These Muslims disagree with the notion that wearing a beard or the hijab is necessarily proselytizing. Meanwhile, some French Muslims articulate the same view of *laïcité* as the one that is dominant among non-Muslim French elites. They believe that all outward manifestations of religion must remain at home; thus, the hijab has no place in public school, and the burqa has no place in the public sphere.

Similarly, some French Muslims espouse the traditional difference-blind version of republican equality. Yet even among these Muslims, one finds the desire for more affirmative action-like programs in France. Meanwhile, other Muslims reject the idea of difference-blind equality as shallow. That said, they do not reject French norms. Their criticism of difference-blind equality is closely tied to their revision of the French concept of fraternity. One of the members of the EMF argued that schools could be improved by allowing students to “share where they come from, their different origins, in the space of a dialogue.” When asked whether such things are discussed at school, she replied:

> We talk about them, but it is in our private lives. There is not a class where we can talk all together about these ideas—“I am like this. Allow me to present myself. This is what I do.” . . . [There is no place to] really make a space, one day a week, where you communicate with others . . . a dialogue between milieus. The more people know each other—and you spend 90 percent of your time at school—why not try to know each other more on an individual level? It is true that it is difficult to implement [this idea], but I think it would fix these problems of violence and intolerance, and it would be an improvement, because we do not have the same religion; we do not have the same lives; and we do not have the same perceptions.

The respondent notes that there are indeed differences among citizens in France and blames violence and intolerance on ignorance of those differences. Instead
of learning about people from all kinds of different backgrounds, at the individual level, students are left to assume what groups believe and how they behave. She wants to see discussion as opposed to assumptions and privileges school as the place for this kind of multicultural dialogue because it is, at least supposedly, where French people of all origins come together and can meet and learn about one another. In her view, schools are missing out on this opportunity to build solidarity and fraternity.  

This desire for open dialogue about identity was present in another interviewee’s unexpected response to a question about how she described herself. Nearly all of the Muslim respondents said they were “French and Muslim,” together. Some said “French” first. A small minority suggested that being Muslim came first, but that it did not eclipse their other identities. Some other terms were occasionally sprinkled in, such as “woman,” “feminist,” or “humanist.” This particular respondent, the daughter of Algerian immigrants who once wore the hijab but took it off to find work, described herself as a human being, Muslim, European (not in the sense of the European Union but in the sense that Europe has a culture she feels she shares), French, Algerian—and curious. “Curious, like the adjective,” she said. “Curious about other cultures, other places, and so on.” The spirit of curiosity is not foreign to France. Nor is it necessarily a friend to equality: the Exposition Coloniale was an effort to capitalize on French curiosity about colonized peoples. But there is a distinct lack of curiosity among French elites today about the opinions and desires of Muslims in France. These are, supposedly, known already. There is no need to interrogate something that is “common sense” (Haltom and McCann 2004). Thus, stereotypes and assumptions live on, as opposed to genuine conversations with Muslims. In this sense, some Muslims articulate a version of fraternity that includes curiosity coupled with a willingness to listen, to allow people to speak for themselves.

Finally, tolerance is not the same thing as respect. Some French Muslims believe it is no longer time to fight to be accepted as French, since they already know they are French. Instead, they say it is time to fight to be accepted as French and Muslim. These sentiments are claims for respect. These Muslims did not want their religious identity to be tolerated, merely allowed to exist. They wanted due regard for that aspect of their life. They wanted not to see a ban on criticisms of Islam but to be free to practice their faith without social, legal, and political discrimination, provided that this did not infringe on the freedom of others to make their own choices of conscience. They also wanted to be respected as French—not to be assumed to be bad French citizens on the basis of stereotypes about their religion alone.

The Particular Perniciousness of Discursive Attacks on Citizenship

Many French elites continue to depict Muslims as a homogeneous group that puts its religious identity before the needs of the nation, despite evidence to the
contrary. There are two reasons for this. First, French politics are centralized and elitist, making them especially unreceptive to oppositional claims. Second, Muslims have had a difficult time developing such oppositional claims. This is in part because of the diverse nature of the Muslim population in France, but also because of the primarily discursive nature of the challenges to Muslim citizenship. French politicians question Muslim citizenship primarily through political speeches and national debates, aided by the discourse of those who are further removed from lawmaking (i.e., the media and intellectuals). The discursive as opposed to statutory nature of these challenges to Muslim citizenship robs French Muslims of the opportunity to draw on “legal arguments” for “oppositional frames” (Barclay, Bernstein, and Marshall 2009, p. 1). This is compounded by the weakness of rights claims in France to begin with, which are not typically used for the kind of oppositional politics that question the validity of legal articulations of justice and equality.

Centralized French Politics

As discussed in Chapter 2, many scholars have long noted that political culture in France is marked by elitism and a tendency toward centralization. It would be superficial to argue about whether such a political culture is “good” for a nation and its people, and comparisons between political cultures should be premised on the understanding that no human invention, including political institutions and cultures, can be flawless. There are clearly some advantages to a centralized, elitist political culture. Achievements such as France’s high-speed rail service—the Train à Grande Vitesse (TGV) is the fastest in the world—as well as its extensive system of nuclear power (an impressive feat even if one has reservations about nuclear power) and the Minitel (an ultimately doomed Internet device that was the first of its kind and gave every French household Internet access before advent of the World Wide Web) were made possible largely by France’s centralized political culture.

That said, in examining how French Muslims struggle to project their public identities and shape the political agenda in France today, this study highlights some of the challenges introduced by centralized and elitist political culture. We find that it can limit the responsiveness of elites to claims by those outside circles of power, and it can make access into those circles difficult to achieve.

The interviewees repeatedly used a term to describe this kind of political culture: cloisonnement (which can be translated as “compartmentalization,” but the emphasis seems to be on the isolation of French elites from the rest of society). A former member of Dynamique Diversité used the term to describe political and business elites in France; a leader of Club XXIème Siècle used it to describe French political elites who are anxious to keep their power; the editor-in-chief of Oumma.com used it to describe the media in France; a young man with Algerian parents used it to describe the rigidity of career training
in France. That the term should have come up in four different interviews, all while the interviewees were discussing vastly different subjects (ranging from education to hiring practices, media bias, and political representation), suggests that there are cultural and institutional barriers to elite entry that are, if not unique to France, then of particular importance to one’s public life in that country. The interviewees’ discussions of *cloisonnement* indicate that there are few scripts for academic and employment success in France and that they must be followed to the letter. This is made even more challenging when one considers that these scripts are not readily known by everyone. The children of immigrants I interviewed repeatedly pointed out that they do not have the same advantages as those whose parents grew up in France.

The result of *cloisonnement* is that French elites are often speaking to, not with, Muslims. This is best illustrated by the French national identity debates of 2010. Run under the auspices of the Ministry of Immigration, Integration, and National Identity, the debates were described by Prime Minister François Fillon (2010, para. 4) as “but one step” in the direction of “strengthening our national pact.” Fillon stated that he learned from the debates that the French want “national unity, and even national pride”; that this desire expresses “anxiety” over the loss of the nation’s bearings “but also a hope to build the future together”; and that French “identity is intimately tied to our republic” (Fillon 2010, paras. 7, 12, 16). A poll by the international consulting group Obéa-IntraForces (2010, p. 3), however, found that 63 percent of the French believed the debate was “not constructive,” while 62 percent believed it did not establish a definition “of what it is to be French.” Furthermore, Vincent Tiberj (2008) argues that the national identity debates were merely “politically instrumental” in that they shifted the limelight away from contemporary political troubles (the typical nepotism plus lingering banking difficulties) and thereby served the electoral interests of the center right.

In response to the debates about national identity, *Respect Mag* ran a cartoon parodying the concept on several different levels (see Figure 7.1). The cartoon depicts a drunken man complete with a glass of red wine, a *casquette* (a soft, beret-like hat with a bill that Americans might describe as a newsboy’s hat), and full mustache under a generous red nose, asking, “Why this question? Do I seem like an Arab?” (Amiri 2009; Durand 2009). The caption that prompts the man’s comment reads, “What does it mean to you to be French?” The cartoon exploits a series of stereotypes about Frenchmen to insinuate that there is a common assumption in France that Arabs are not French. The man is the personified stereotype of a Frenchman: he has been drinking wine, he has a large nose, he is wearing a hat commonly associated with the French, and he has a mustache. When the stereotypical Frenchman speaks, he jokingly dismisses the question about French identity as unnecessary. Of course he is French, the cartoon implies. The only people one needs to ask this of are Arabs. The cartoon’s use of a patently ridiculous stereotype of a Frenchman also suggests that trying to identify what “makes” a person French is a fool’s errand, as
the reality will always be much more complex, given the diverse nature of an entire citizenry.

An additional limitation of the French elite style of politics is that, without outside input, debates have a way of coming up over and over. The “affaire du foulard” has been around since 1989. Media fascination with it had lessened since the law of 2004 banning the hijab in public grade schools, but in 2009, two related debates cropped up: over the burqini, a full-body swimsuit that resembles wetsuit pants with a long, skirt-like wetsuit top with a sewn-in swim cap, and over the niqab or burqa, veils that in one way or another cover the
face. Then, in the summer of 2013, the hijab returned again: the Haut Conseil à l’Intégration (HCI [High Council for Integration]), a committee that has advised the government on the effectiveness of integrative processes in France since 1989, suggested that the hijab should be banned from higher education, as well (Le Bars 2013). Jean-Loup Salzmann, the president of Université Paris 13 and the Conférence des Présidents d’Université (Conference of University Presidents), criticized the proposal straightaway (Missir 2013). “University is not grade school,” he said. “The students are over eighteen; these are adults, and we cannot limit their individual liberty. We think it is a subject that requires a calmer approach [apaisement], discussion, and certainly not an approach tinged with Islamophobia, such as that of the HCI.” In these debates, one does not hear the wide range of political concerns expressed by Muslims in this study.

While it is well known that the French approach to religion reflects a philosophical commitment to various articulations of laïcité, it must be acknowledged that it also reflects the elitist and centralized style of French politics. France recognizes religions through the interlocutor of a single representative organization, which in the case of Islam is the CFCM (Laurence 2005). Prior to the creation of the CFCM, the institutional needs of Muslims in France were served largely by the patronage of foreign countries or groups associated with those countries (Laurence 2005, p. 1). Gilles Kepel (2004, pp. 253, 261), for example, notes that the UOIF has a connection to the Muslim Brotherhood via the Federation of Islamic Organisations in Europe, an umbrella organization for Islam in Europe based in the United Kingdom, and how the formerly prominent Tablighi Jamaat had connections to India and Pakistan. Jonathan Laurence (2005, p. 4) describes the creation of the CFCM (and the institutions that preceded it) as an attempt to create an “Islam of France”: the CFCM would be more independent from foreign countries and therefore, theoretically, ready to embrace the values of republican citizenship.

Unsurprisingly, there has been disagreement concerning the role and legitimacy of the CFCM. Dounia Bouzar (quoted in Grosjean 2005) complained when quitting her post at the CFCM that the institution ignored Muslim youths and took no interest in the “second and third generations” of Muslims in France who, in her view, have developed their own way to square their religious and French identities. Nancy Venel (2005) similarly draws attention to how unlikely it is that all of France’s Muslims, with very different understandings of Islam and its place in their lives, will see themselves in this organization. Ultimately, however one evaluates the success of the CFCM as a mediator between the state and Muslims, one must recognize that it has been asked to do an impossible thing: it is limited to representing Islam, but it is increasingly called on to speak for all of France’s Muslims. Laurence (2005, p. 4) neatly summarizes this as the “central paradox” of the CFCM, writing, “While the government insists that the CFCM is strictly for questions of religious observance, its national visibility and heavy médiatisation grant it a de facto role in
Islam’s—and Muslims’—public image.” Tiberj (2008, p. 18) has also noted that the CFCM has been asked by political leaders to speak for and to Muslims.

The limitation of this centralized approach to recognition—focusing on Islam as a religion and asking a single organization to speak for the interests and opinions of all Muslims in France—is that it cannot easily handle the considerable diversity among Muslims in France that is shown in this study. For example, representatives to the CFCM are elected by vote, and ballots are cast in mosques. What does this say about the participation of those who self-identify as Muslim but do not attend mosque or may even be otherwise un-religious (Venel 2005, p. 99)?

While the CFCM is to be applauded for its efforts to reduce violent radicalism and welcome Islam into France as a religion of France, it will continue to be plagued by legitimacy concerns because of the gap between its official purpose and the expectations others have of it. As a famous, possibly apocryphal, quotation attributed to Henry Kissinger while reflecting on the European Union goes, “Who do I call if I want to call Europe?” In other words, can individual member states impartially speak for the whole of the European Union, and if they cannot, what European institution is strong enough to speak legitimately for all of the member states? One can imagine French leaders wanting to reach out to Muslims in France but finding themselves in a similar predicament: uncertain about how to contact a diverse population with such varied interests. The CFCM cannot provide a direct line between political leaders and all of France’s Muslims. The danger lies in assuming that it can provide such a link, and that consultation with the CFCM is the same thing as politically engaging with the diverse opinions and goals of Muslims in France.16

As Mohanty (1991, p. 74) urges, “It is time to move beyond the Marx who found it possible to say: They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented.” French Muslims are tired of elites assuming what they are like and what they want. An institution like the CFCM, while a step forward, still cannot represent the full diversity of Muslim interests and voices. The frequent complaint found in the media analysis that Muslims are “disorganized” may reflect the difficulties centralized and elite political cultures have in engaging with diverse populations that refuse to be defined in one way.

The Difficulties of Creating Oppositional Claims

French Muslims struggle to challenge the elite discourse of Muslims as failed or problematic citizens. As this book shows, Muslims in France are very diverse and do not agree on politics, policy solutions, the definition of the challenges they face, or even how Islam is practiced or relates to their French identity. While all social movements must overcome a host of differences and disagreements to develop a shared narrative that challenges the status quo (and even then, some degree of intra-movement conflict persists), Muslims in France are particularly unlikely to bridge these gaps. This is so because some Muslims in
France are adamantly opposed to the concept of “Muslim” as an identity and to the mere presence of religion in the public sphere and politics. These Muslims, notably, have been the most successful in French politics, as well, and join in as gatekeepers who work to keep out Muslim voices that suggest alternative interpretations of secularism, liberty, equality, and fraternity.

In addition to this, the discursive way in which elites question Muslim citizenship also poses a challenge to the creation of oppositional claims. Not all attacks on citizenship are made in the same way, and the way in which citizenship is undercut affects how activists can challenge denials of membership. Judith Failer (2002), Julie Novkov (2008), and Shane Phelan (2001) examine how the denial of legal rights can exclude groups from full membership in the nation. Phelan’s examination of gays and lesbians in the United States is particularly interesting, because this population is formally denied fewer rights than, say, the mentally ill Failer examines or the African Americans in Alabama Novkov studies. Yet the denial of rights to gays and lesbians, even while comparatively marginal, has served as a rallying point and consciousness-raiser, mobilizing homosexuals and their allies. As Scott Barclay, Mary Bernstein, and Anna-Maria Marshall (Barclay, Bernstein, and Marshall 2009, p. 1) put it, “Concepts enshrined in legal institutions, such as rights, equality, and justice, represent persuasive and powerful symbols for movements for social change. These legal arguments can offer oppositional frames that may eventually resonate with the public in political debates and can have concrete material consequences, as well.” Patricia Williams (1991) similarly discusses how African Americans have tried both needs-based claims and rights claims in the United States and found that rights claims based on legal injustices, for all their limitations, resonate more with the public.

Muslims in France today see their citizenship undercut largely by elite discourse and find official law (the stuff “on the books”) to be, at least arguably, facially neutral. The ban on the hijab is part of a larger law that also targets the Jewish yarmulke, and it directly affects only those Muslims who are young women of primary-school age—and, notably, some Muslims support this ban. The ban on the burqa, according to official estimates, directly affects between 367 and 1,900 Muslim women (Malik 2010), out of the conservative estimate of 3 million to 3.5 million Muslims in France (Brouard and Tiberj 2005, p. 24). Again, some Muslims support the ban on the burqa, as well. France does not have nationwide bans on halal meat, the construction of minarets (unlike Switzerland), or the construction of private Islamic schools. There has, however, been political criticism of the presence of halal meat, minarets, and private Islamic schools as evidence of encroaching “Islamization.” But unlike legal bans on halal meat, minarets, and private Islamic schools, this discourse cannot be taken to court. “Islamization,” after all, is an increasingly common phrase in French politics, and it has not been, and probably cannot be, used as grounds for a discrimination suit.

Discursive attacks on citizenship may be more difficult to counter than attacks based in official law, because the latter are more likely to invite rights
claims, and rights claims can function as a resource that provides, in the words of Michael McCann (1994, p. 48), “normative language for identifying, interpreting, and challenging” sources of discrimination. In short, the absence of a clear, highly publicized instance of official, de jure legal discrimination against Muslims as Muslims, one that directly affects all Muslims or that, at least, is less likely to divide Muslims than the question of the hijab or burqa, deprives French Muslims of an opportunity to challenge the elite discourse of Muslims with a rights-based counternarrative.

Stated differently, rights claims may be a helpful tool for creating counternarratives that can challenge an elite narrative of “unfit citizenship.” But as Chapter 2 points out, formal rights claims made in a court of law are not equally effective at addressing all kinds of challenges to citizenship. In potential disputes that involve social indignities, courts are rarely involved, as most individuals will “lump” these kinds of injustices and avoid court (Felstiner, Abel, and Sarat 1981). Even in potential disputes that involve the violation of rights, the court still must be activated, and the state and its officials may not be the target of the lawsuit. (Challenging rental discrimination does not necessarily challenge a French official or administration.) It is potential disputes that involve the erasure of rights by the government that are the most likely to produce rights claims. Yet in France today, this opportunity is somewhat mitigated, as the primary challenge to Muslim citizenship is elite discourse—not the kind of de jure discrimination that results in the legislative erasure of rights.

Without trying to predict the future, it is possible to say that this may change. In September 2011, France passed a new law banning prayer in the streets, a practice that has existed for a long time because of inadequate prayer space for Muslims in France. Yet a temporary space was provided before the law went into effect, and there seemed to be cooperation between Muslims and local officials (Bolis 2011; “Paris ban on Muslim street prayer comes into effect” 2011). French Muslims do not choose to pray in the streets, after all. It is conceivable to imagine, however, that the accumulation of laws that are perceived as targeting Muslims—first the hijab ban, then the burqa ban, then the ban on prayer in the streets—may lead to a rights-based discourse that provides an alternative to the state’s discourse on Muslims in France. But this is mere speculation.

Finally, there is another reason that French Muslims have been unable to provide an effective, socially resonant counternarrative to the elite French discourse of unfit Muslim citizenship. It has been discussed numerous times in this book: France has a particularly weak rights culture. The French speak freely about their rights, and rights carry great rhetorical value, yet it is more difficult to use them as a “normative language for identifying, interpreting, and challenging” the injustices of the state in France than in, say, the United States or Britain (McCann 1994, p. 48). Rights are seen as emanating from the state in France, not as liberties with which citizens are naturally endowed and must jealously protect from state encroachment. When Muslims use rights talk in regard to equality, they often mix it in with claims that the state must do more
to promote equality. In this sense, they draw on the authority not of the law but of the state as the creator of rights and freedoms. Thus, rights claims in France are not always as antagonistic to the state as they can be in the United States and Britain.

Even the CCIF, which consists of Muslims who are willing to use legal mobilization to fight against what they term “Islamophobia,” shies away from using the court to make rights claims. As the organization’s lawyer stated:

We do not go to court just to go to court. That is not our goal. Our goal is to generate a solution, and one that is rather quick, for the litigant. That is an issue—I want to say it is a societal problem—where the law does not always resolve things. In addition, it takes a long time. A very long time. So we always bring a friendly face. We talk with the different parties, and we try to find a solution, but respectfully. . . . Mediation works in about 80 percent to 90 percent of the cases.

The CCIF is the closest thing to legal mobilization among France’s Muslims, and even it concentrates more on resolving the dispute of the individual litigant than on challenging the larger context of Islamophobia in court. Its work sounds a bit like “cause lawyering” (Scheingold and Sarat 2004) in that the CCIF is aware that the law can be used for political purposes, but its mobilization of the law remains somewhat traditional in its focus on solutions for the individual litigant.

Broader Lessons about the Politics of Citizenship and Difference

We know that France is not unique in its struggle to find a logically coherent and equality-oriented narrative about difference. What can other nations learn from considering the experience of Muslims in France?

The Limits of Difference-Blindness

In the United States, “color-blindness” continues to gain ground as an alternative to race-based policies intended to disrupt systemic discrimination and long-standing legacies of inequality. Michael K. Brown and his colleagues (2003) provide a compelling account of how average Americans and scholars across political backgrounds have come to champion color-blindness as a more appropriate path to equality in the contemporary, “post-racial” society. This belief is reflected in the comedian Stephen Colbert’s television character, meant as an amalgam of right-wing politicians and pundits, whenever he attests that he is so color-blind that he is unaware of the fact that he is white.

We find color-blind arguments in the Supreme Court’s decisions, as well. Chief Justice Roberts’s majority opinion in the decision Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1 of 2007 was argued largely
in terms of race-blindness. Writing for the majority, Roberts stated that Brown v. Board of Education (1954) ruled that the differential treatment of students on the basis of race was unconstitutional; therefore, limiting the number of white students who can attend a school, even if it is to promote racial diversity, is unconstitutional. This commitment to color-blindness in the law dismayed a number of Roberts’s colleagues, who felt it would take away policy tools that school districts have been using for decades to fight for equality.\(^\text{17}\)

The case of Muslims in France ought to give Americans pause when they consider race-blindness as a solution to inequality. As we have seen, difference-blindness can lend social inequality a sort of invisibility. Furthermore, in masking social hierarchy, difference-blindness makes economic and educational inequalities appear to be the fault of individuals. Further, for those who locate part of their identity and sense of self in a racial, gender, religious, or cultural affiliation, or in a sexual orientation, difference-blindness can be perceived as an intolerant rejection of something they value. Not all who embrace aspects of “particularism” in their lives are engaged in zero-sum identity politics, willing to sacrifice their role as citizens for the sake of a single affiliation. The French Muslims interviewed for this book spoke to the multiplicity and fluidity of their identities (or affiliations for those who deny that religion can be an identity). While they sometimes articulated different ways to balance being French and being Muslim, not one believed that those two memberships come into conflict.

In this way, many interviewees ultimately cast doubt on the nature of a unitary public or political identity and, more fundamentally, on the viability of an impregnable wall between the public and private sphere. American arguments for color-blindness either ignore this evidence about the multiplicity of identity or (purposefully or not) trivialize particular identities and affiliations as distracting, socially disruptive details that should be jettisoned for the sake of social harmony and equality.

**The Dreaded Multiculturalism**

New challenges in “doing difference” can be seen throughout Europe, as well. President Nicolas Sarkozy’s declaration that multiculturalism had “failed” was also expressed by Germany’s Chancellor Angela Merkel. Germany long resisted being labeled a nation of immigration, and its Turkish immigrants were seen merely as *Gastarbeiter* (guest workers) for many years. Now that there is a large Turkish community in Germany (including many Muslims), new problems have arisen. Some resemble those that immigrants and their children face in France—for example, students of Turkish origin report feeling marginalized in German schools, and teachers struggle to communicate with parents who do not always speak sufficient German.

Furthermore, there is some resistance to the presence of Islam in Germany. This became clear following the publication and record-breaking sales of the
politician Thilo Sarrazin’s 2010 book *Deutschland schafft sich ab* (Germany Does Itself In). In the book, Sarrazin argues that multiculturalism is a doomed project and that Muslims are unwilling to integrate and violent by nature.\(^{18}\)

There is already uncertainty and anxiety about German identity and citizenship, given Germany’s history with National Socialism and the challenges of reunification. How does Islam fit into this already complex picture? The Deutsche Islam Konferenz (German Islam Conference), which puts Muslim and state leaders in conversation with one another, has worked to increase communication and cooperation between the government and Muslims in Germany. In 2009, participants in the conference identified an overwhelmingly negative depiction of Islam in the media (Guschas 2009). As the French case shows, a negative public identity in the media can affect how accepted Muslims feel and how effectively they can make their own voices heard. If Germany wants its Muslim and Turkish population to further integrate into the nation, as leaders frequently say, German media coverage of Muslims must be addressed.\(^{19}\)

If Germany decides to abandon multiculturalism, the question becomes: What will take its place? The same question applies to the United Kingdom, where David Cameron has claimed that multiculturalism is dead. The French case tells us that basing national membership on a monoculture is exclusionary, no matter how universal and open to all that culture is in theory. But more broadly, it also suggests that one should be suspicious of political leaders who argue that multiculturalism has “failed.” It is difficult to say that multiculturalism performed poorly in France because France never wholeheartedly pursued multicultural politics. Irene Bloemraad (2010), along with the Multiculturalism Policy Index at Queen’s University, came to a similar conclusion about Germany, grouping it with France and Norway as a nation with few multicultural policies and little cultural recognition of difference.\(^{20}\)

Today’s trend of “blaming multiculturalism” when there never was a leading coalition of politicians dedicated to the principle, or consistent policy to support it, should give us pause. If the culprit is not multiculturalism, why do some European leaders point fingers at it? It is more likely that multiculturalism represents a different “failure”: the inability to “assimilate” new groups without seeing the nation change, as well. But nations—their cultures, models of good citizenship, cherished narratives—are always contested and changing. The fear that a group will change France, Germany, or the United Kingdom forever has already been realized—in the women’s movement, for example, and in the fight for rights for gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people. The question is whether Muslims are so radically different that they refuse to change along with their countries. The story in France suggests that this is not the case.

**Closing Thoughts**

It is easy to critique France for failing to meet its lofty goals of universal inclusion and equality. But it is worth taking a moment to recall that France is
experiencing very real challenges that make radically inclusive politics a tough sell. The intensity with which French elites question Muslim citizenship draws attention to the anxieties that surround the meaning of “Frenchness.” Media claims of a French “identity crisis” may be overwrought, but it remains true that French elites’ inquiry into Muslim citizenship has been used simultaneously to define what good French citizenship is. The previous chapters investigated why French elites persistently question Muslim citizenship. But why do French elites seek to clarify what it means to be French at the same time? Why, for example, did France host national identity debates in 2010? Why, when condemning multiculturalism, did Sarkozy bemoan the nation’s neglect of its own identity? Is it just a way to criticize Muslims, or is it possible there are also genuine concerns about French identity?

There are long-standing and more immediate causes for concern about French identity. They can be summarized as tension in the French model of citizenship, economic crisis, and uncertainty about France’s place in the world.

*Tension in the French Model of Citizenship*

The French model of citizenship faces two important challenges, the first being itself. As discussed in Chapter 2, several scholars have pointed out that French republicanism is premised on a paradox: the universal model of citizenship is based on a particular type of person, so while it is theoretically accessible to all, many find they do not fit the model (Bereni 2007; Camiscioli 2009; Chebel d’Appolonia 2009; Fogarty 2008; Lépinard and Mazur 2009; Scott 2005, 2007; Siim 2000). In this respect, it is simply inevitable that questions about “failed integration” will be raised. The latent particularism of the French citizenship model is self-defeating and engenders recurrent anxieties about its capaciousness.

Richard Fogarty examines how distressing it was to French officials during World War I to find that certain colonial subjects—namely, Muslim North Africans—seemed unable to integrate into the supposedly universal model of French citizenship. These concerns have returned, and we hear them from French elites today. Obviously, the concerns articulated by French officials during World War I and French elites today are different: the discourse on North Africans and Muslims during World War I was deeply marked by the colonial mindset of cultural superiority, and French officials at that time described these colonized subjects as “savage, primitive warriors” (Fogarty 2008, p. 134). But while the colonial tinge has largely left today’s elite French discourse, in both periods, the same suspicion exists that Islam is a jealous institution that interferes with national identity and that Muslims are simply too different to integrate into the nation. The universal model of French citizenship was not designed with Muslims in mind, and their presence worrisomely draws attention to the limits of that universality. Importantly, the most common political response has been to criticize Muslims for failing to integrate, not to question how capacious French universality is.
The second challenge to the French model of citizenship is its homegrown competition. French scholars have highlighted important inconsistencies in the application of republican universalism. Both Fogarty and Elisa Camis-cioni (2009) powerfully argue that difference-blind republican universalism in France has always coexisted with racial hierarchy, ethnic preferences, and religious prejudice. Difference-blind republicanism, then, struggles with the legacy of long-standing racial, ethnic, and religious views of the nation. This internal conflict between national narratives of neutrality and prejudice exacerbates difficulties with increased immigration from non-European, non-Christian nations. As the population of France becomes more diverse in racial, ethnic, and religious terms, national narratives of prejudice find increased cause for complaint.

In a cartoon published in 2010 in the far-right magazine Rivarol, a white family is depicted on a couch, watching a television program together. They appear distressed; the father has a scowl and crosses his arms across his chest. Two text bubbles emanate from the television: “My dear citizens...a new world has begun... Welcome those who immigrate.” Meanwhile, a mob of what appear to be angry-looking foreigners—with dark skin and clothing associated with Islam—sneak up behind the family, teeth bared, through an open window. One man’s right leg is seen thrown over the sill, mid-break-in; even more foreigners wait outside, seen as inky splotches of indeterminate number. Only the family dog sees, but he does not bark out in warning. The cartoon demonstrates how racism, religious prejudice, and xenophobia combine with fears about increased immigration to create the impression that France is being invaded and attacked by those who would do the nation harm.

But it is not just the far right that sees danger in Islam. The way in which some French feminists have associated Islam with misogyny makes it difficult for leftists to feel justified in defending the rights and interests of Muslims. Thus, socialists who support gender equality are finding that they have become strange bedfellows with conservative xenophobes who wish to punish Muslim behavior.

Some have argued that the solution to the problems of exclusion in today’s difference-blind republican citizenship could be more openness to difference, as long as it is in the name of pursuing equality. There are legitimate concerns about the limitations of claims for recognition, however. The French are often astute critics of the shortcomings of identity politics. It is possible that Muslim claims for recognition will lead some people to believe that all Muslims think of their religion as an identity, which they do not. Some French observers point out that identity politics can proliferate stereotypes, in the way that affirmative action has led some Americans to assume unfairly that African American or Latino classmates are scholastically inferior. And some minorities may be uncomfortable with being subsumed under a group with which they do not identify themselves. Should not people have the choice to self-identify however they want and not be forced to identify, for example, by their race? While these
are very real dangers, it would be wrong to assume that avoiding recognition claims means avoiding the proliferation of stereotypes. Also, avoiding identity politics does not ensure complete freedom in self-identification, as some may find those politically mobilized identities empowering.

**Economic Crisis**

France has not escaped the economic crisis unscathed, and this has increased tension. During times of economic stress, France—like any other nation—reduces its financial commitment to equality. As noted earlier, when the French economy slumped in the 1970s, France ended its policy of family reunifications and chose to underfund its efforts to improve the lives of immigrant workers (Freedman 2004). Simon Wuhl (2002, pp. 303–304) suggests that the burdens of an economic crisis fall disproportionately on those who already experience social discrimination. In other words, inequalities between “insiders” and “outsiders” are exacerbated during times of economic insecurity, suggesting that the nation is not all-inclusive.

Steven Erlanger (2013) describes the situation in France today this way: “At stake is whether a social democratic system that for decades prided itself on being the model for providing a stable and high standard of living for its citizens can survive the combination of globalization, an aging population and the acute fiscal shocks of recent years.” France’s economic difficulties began long before the great recession, and these long-standing challenges involving competitiveness, unemployment, and a large and costly civil service apparatus certainly have not improved with the added strain of the economic crisis. It is in this context that we see such developments as Interior Minister Manuel Valls questioning the financial sustainability of family reunification policies (Louarn and Bamat 2013).

**Uncertainty about France’s Place in the World**

Finally, France’s political role on the world stage has been unclear since the end of World War II. As a colonial power, France had control over much of the world and its resources. French politicians saw France as an educator, an enlightened nation with the noble mission of civilizing the world. French politics have long had a visionary nature about them: whether Louis XIII and Louis XIV were working to centralize one of the first and strongest nation-states or French revolutionaries were challenging feudalism with notions of nationalism and political equality, the French have been trailblazers in world politics. This combination of power and foresight is sometimes described as “grandeur,” and it was what Charles de Gaulle (1964, p. 3) saw as the defining feature of France: in his words, “France is not really herself unless she is in the front rank.”

De Gaulle is not alone. Steven Ekovich, an expert on France at the American University of Paris, claims, “The French public still wants their president
to play a very important role on the world stage... The French have, of course, an expectation. The grandeur of France is still very important” (quoted in Beardsley 2011). After World War II, France invested heavily in the European Union, seeing that institution as a way to maintain relevance and power in world politics. Today, France is no longer a colonial power or the economic powerhouse it once was. Furthermore, France is now mired in the political woes of how the European Union will subsidize southern Europe’s economic meltdowns. In this light, it should come as no surprise that there are questions about France’s place on the world stage.

If France is no longer the world leader it once was, and the nation’s identity has long been associated with grandeur, what, then, is to be the defining characteristic of France today? Some French elites seem to be searching for it in what they believe to be the mirror opposite of Muslim citizens. French Muslims seem to be searching for it in traditional values of France: liberty, equality, and fraternity. This search, inexorably tied to increased diversity in France, is likely to be France’s greatest challenge for the twenty-first century.