Race in France

INTRODUCTION

Laura Frader
Northeastern University
Harvard University Center for European Studies

An American scholar is often struck by the absence of race in France as a category of analysis or the absence of discussions of race in its historical or sociological dimensions. After all, “race” on this side of the Atlantic, for reasons having to do with the peculiar history of the United States, has long been a focus of discussion. The notion of race has shaped scholarly analysis for decades, in history, sociology, and political science. Race also constitutes a category regularly employed by the state, in the census, in electoral districting, and in affirmative action. In France, on the contrary, race hardly seems acknowledged, in spite of both scholarly and governmental preoccupation with racism and immigration.¹

Until recently, French scholars and the state have avoided discussing race, or even analyzing it as a socially constructed category, for reasons that have much to do with the particularities of French history. The founding myth of the Republic as “*une et indivisible*” emphasized the unitary, universalist, and inclusive nature of the Republic with little if any room for the recognition of difference. In legal terms as well, the Revolution established the irrelevance of national or racial difference in the exercise of rights. As Gérard Noiriel has argued, “Alors qu’aux Etats-Unis, cette question est indissolublement liée, dans les textes, dans les pratiques, dans les structures mentales, au problème raciale et à l’ethnicité, en France, la Déclaration des droits de l’homme marque le triomphe (au moins juridique) du refus de toute ségrégation fondé sur la race, la religion, l’origine ethnique.”² Additionally, the use of racial and racist categories by fascist groups under the Third Republic and the racist policies of Vichy made it virtually impossible to talk about race without being associated with one of the most devastating episodes of modern French history. Even his-

torical studies of immigration have assumed “race” as a given, while condemning the “racism” of policies and popular attitudes towards immigrants.³ The state, moreover, has made it difficult for scholars to study “racial” difference, even as a socially constituted category, because since Vichy it is illegal to keep statistics on racial or ethnic distributions. Even now, there is no category of “race” or “ethnicity” in the French census, although place of birth can provide a clue to national origins.

Recently, however, scholars on both sides of the Atlantic have begun to investigate the historical and contemporary meanings of race in France. Anthropologists and feminist scholars have turned their attention to the instability of the term “race,” have pointed to the arbitrariness of racialization, and have emphasized the cultural and social construction of racial difference.⁴ Historians, sociologists, and political scientists have also begun to question the “color-blind” republican model, challenging received wisdom about the absence of a consciousness of race in France during the Revolution. They have illuminated how race became a significant social marker during World War I, and they have shown how French authorities made race a salient social reality by distinguishing colonial subjects from the French and different colonial subjects from one another.⁵

This issue of *FPC&S* contributes to this rich new scholarship across the disciplines by pointing to the importance of race in marking the boundaries of citizenship, in shaping social policy, and influencing legal perspectives on social difference. Laurent Dubois shows how the consciousness of racial difference asserted itself in debates over the citizenship status of Caribbean colonial subjects at the time of the Revolution. He argues that in the founding moments of the Republic these debates influenced the meanings of race, colonialism, and citizenship in the metropole. The granting of citizenship to Martiniquais and Guadeloupeans helped to produce the erasure of race as a distinct category of difference in France. The contradictions between the formal discursive silence about race and race’s salience as a marker of difference in practice are also the subject of David Beriss’s examination of the status of race among Antillais in metropolitan France. Does race matter and how do the French understand identity and difference? Beriss tries to make sense of the observation that whereas race is a significant marker of difference in Antillean culture, Antillean activists in France rarely refer to race and refer more frequently to culture. He examines the problem of why there is apparently little interest in race, while at the same time there is substantial discussion of racism.

Erik Bleich likewise questions the absence of race thinking in France and points to the ways that race has entered the production of late-twentieth-century antiracism legislation, specifically the antiracist laws of 1972 and 1990. He argues for the presence of race thinking in France historically—at least since the nineteenth century—and shows how the consciousness of race has underpinned the debates over legislation and recent policies in spite of a formal, “color-blind” stance. Gwénaële Calvès and Alec G. Hargreaves fill in this

story for the last ten years. Calvès shows that the “color-blind” republican model is changing. Since the late 1990s, diversity *à l’Américaine* has become a criterion for the formulation of affirmative action policies in France, as ethnic and racial distinctions are being introduced into antiracist, antidiscriminatory *action positive*. Hargreaves takes this theme even further in arguing for a major shift in French antidiscrimination policy since 1997, under the current Socialist government. He argues that policy makers have backed off from focusing exclusively on integration, have begun to confront racism directly, and have thus turned their attention to combating discrimination. This heightened awareness of race, however, has not led to durable antiracism measures. Hargreaves offers an explanation for why this is the case.

With this stimulating collection, *FPC&S* launches an ongoing series on the theme of “Race in France.” An important new study examining perceptions of racial difference by Michèle Lamont will appear in our next issue, with additional essays to follow.

Notes

1. Racial taxonomies and categories entered French discourse in the nineteenth century in the work of Joseph-Arthur de Gobineau, Ernest Renan, Maurice Barrès, and others. For twentieth century examples of how racial distinctions were linked to the development of French ethnography, see Herman Lebovics, *True France: Wars Over Cultural Identity, 1900-1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), especially pp. 28-50; and William H. Schneider, *Quantity and Quality: The Quest for Biological Regeneration in Twentieth Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
2. Gérard Noiriel “Français et Etrangers” in Pierre Nora, ed., *Les Lieux de mémoire* Part III. *La France*. Vol. 1 *Conflits et Partages* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), p. 278. The myth of the universal Republic has, indeed, made it difficult to recognize difference, as the “*affaire des foulards*” demonstrated in 1990. See David Beriss, “Scarves, Schools, and Segregation: The Foulard Affair,” *French Politics and Society* 8,1 (Winter, 1990): 1-13; Judith Vichniac, “French Gaullists and Droit à la Différence: A Changing Dynamic,” *French Politics and Society* 9,1 (Winter, 1991): 40-56; and William Safran, “The French and their National Identity: The Quest for an Elusive Substance,” *French Politics and Society* 8,1 (Winter, 1990): 56-67. See also Noiriel’s discussion of the French model of immigration in “Français et Etrangers.”
3. Gary Cross’s excellent study of immigration, *Immigrant Workers in Industrial France* (Philadelphia: Temple, 1983) and Ralph Shor, *Histoire de l’immigration en France de la fin du XIXe siècle à nos jours* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1996) barely discuss race, although they discuss the mobilization of colonial workers and reactions to them. But see Noiriel, *Le Creuset français. Histoire de l’immigration* (Paris: Seuil, 1988) and Noiriel, *Population, immigration et identité nationale en France* (Paris: Hachette, 1992); Schneider, *Quantity and Quality*, pp. 230-55. Among contemporary studies of immigration and racism that do tackle “race” as a category are Pierre-André Taguieff,

"Mixophobie et xénophobie. Théorie des races, eugénisme et nationalisme xénophobe: croisements d'argumentations," *Sexe et Race* 8 (1993): 77-132; Taguieff, *Le couleur et le sang. Doctrines racistes à la française* (Paris: Editions Mille et Une Nuits, 1998); Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Classe. Les identités ambiguës* (Paris: La Découverte, 1988); Maxim Silverman, *Deconstructing the Nation: Immigration, Racism, and Citizenship in Modern France* (London: Routledge, 1992) and Alec G. Hargreaves, *Immigration, "Race" and Ethnicity in Contemporary France* (London: Routledge, 1995).

4. See Colette Guillaumin "Race and Nature: The System of Marks. The Idea of a Natural Group and Social Relationships," *Feminist Issues* 8 (1988): 24-43; Guillaumin, "Race: Question de Terminologie," *Sexe et Race* 8 (1993): 5-16; Taguieff, "Mixophobie et Xénophobie"; Schneider, *Quantity and Quality*; and Georges Condominas et Simone Dreyfus-Gamelon, eds., *L'anthropologie en France: situation actuelle et avenir* (Paris: 1979). See also the discussion of how race figured in the emergence of French anthropology as a field, in Lebovics, *True France*.
5. See Tyler Stovall, "The Color Line Behind the Lines: Racial Violence in France During the Great War," *American Historical Review* 103 (June, 1998): 737-769; Stovall, "Color-Blind France? Colonial Workers During the First World War" *Race and Class* 35 (1993): 35-55; Sue Peabody, *There Are No Slaves in France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Patricia M.E. Lorcin, *Imperial Identities: Stereotyping, Prejudice, and Race in Colonial Algeria* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1995); and Alice L. Conklin, *Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).