



On the Cunning of National Reason Genealogy of the Racial Question and French Universalism

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Based on the discussion of a controversy between the French historian of immigration, Gérard Noiriel, and the French sociologist, Eric Fassin, concerning the alleged competition between class and race in the study of inequalities by the social sciences, this article revisits the ambiguities of the relationship between republican universalism and race in the long history of France. It shows the extent to which race marks social inequalities in contemporary French society. Paying attention to the colonial problem during the French revolutionary context, above all it underlines how the very genesis of French republican universalism could have never been colour blind: on the contrary, universalism was constructed from a transatlantic dispute, between metropolis and colonies, over the social consequences of racial inequalities in the French space.

In the controversy he opened on social media with sociologist Éric Fassin,⁽¹⁾ in the Fall of 2018, around class and race⁽²⁾ in the analysis of social domination, historian Gérard Noiriel shrugged off purportedly intersectional approaches. He promotes a sociological thesis and takes a political stand. According to Noiriel, “social class is a more determining factor than gender or origin in understanding the functioning of our societies.”⁽³⁾ Condemning the working classes to an inextricable silence, he adds: “the socio-professional criterion is the most determining factor because it is the one that ultimately controls access to public speech.”⁽⁴⁾ He goes on to make a surprising reductionism, forgetting the constellation of possibilities that make up social and individual identities: “Women, ethnic or sexual minorities have spokespersons who come from their own communities because there are people among them who possess the cultural and/or educational capital to defend their cause in public. This is not the case for the working classes, because they are excluded, by definition, from legitimate political culture.” Thus, women belonging to both ethnic and/or sexual minorities and the working classes, deprived of social existence in such a perspective, would not have a voice!⁽⁵⁾ Sociology of work and working classes, social history of women, feminist studies and gender studies written every day, everywhere in the world, however, provide a scathing denial of such a claim.

Instead of revisiting the analyses by French sociologists Eléonore Lépinard and Sarah Mazouz regarding the pivotal issues around the use of intersectionality in social science research, this article focuses on the narrow thread woven in Gérard Noiriel’s text between the scientific thesis and the political diagnosis of a prominent historian of the present. Indeed, the assertion of an absolute and a priori primacy of class over any other determinant in socio-historical analysis should not be read only through the lens of a para-academic competition launched against Eric Fassin and some fancied researchers who are placed under (presumably ethnic or racial) minority arrest.⁽⁶⁾ This competition is over who gets to be the authorized spokesperson for the working classes. Indeed, Noiriel’s assertion aims to denounce an ideological transmutation at work in the French left, from the language of class struggle to a pandemonium of “identity polemics,” which means that the social question has been jettisoned in favour of the racial question.⁽⁷⁾ All this, through liberalism. The historian marks the beginning of the 1980s as the time for the gradual conversion to “an ethnic vocabulary, breaking with the republican

tradition.”(8) The emphasis on identity, even ethnic, was a turning point for an intellectually and politically disoriented French left.

Gérard Noiriel’s quip should be taken seriously, precisely because it has been acclaimed by many researchers, often male and Paris-based colleagues. The appreciation stems from a peculiarly homogeneous academic community of colleagues specialised in the fields of political and social history, political science and sociology, and hence, must be interrogated. The historian’s statements are indistinguishable from a dominating trend, a real paradigm in French sociology, which asserts that class is the structuring principle of social organization and existence: it trumps gender, age, religion or origins. The latter, routinely and implicitly assimilated to ethnic origins and/or phenotype, is often just another name for “race” as a social construct. The primacy bestowed upon class as the ultimate key to explicate social domination ambiguously suggests an unsurpassable opposition between race and class, while positing that the racial stigma is a symbolic crystallization of class. To put it differently, class is believed to be the truth of race, which is nothing but its hypostasized expression.



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From this, it follows that the whole power dynamic between equals, be it in social or legal terms, is evacuated. This dynamic is nevertheless at the core of what is problematic about the vague and misused “racial question” phrase. For if one is to talk of a “racial question” in a way which is apposite for social science researchers, it is in the sense of the socially constructed interrogation by actors, practices and institutions. The “racial question” must be investigated through the distinct and heterogeneous ways in which the equality principle has failed, which is a political and legal principle that is foundational in societies officially defined as democratic.

This interrogation takes the shape of an interpellation that it behooves researchers to explore and convey. Since the “racial question” is not a derivative of class, it urges the question: to what extent is social class insufficient to make sense of the formation of types of socialization, social links and power relations produced or experienced by social actors?

This question challenges the mythical view of a supposedly abstract “Republican universalism,” and as such of a Republic believed always to have been a-racial. One must practice the epistemic epoché of suspending

one's certainties, or even deprovincializing one's ideological convictions, in order to embrace doubt which is itself at the root of any knowledge enterprise. The practice of *epoché* enables the inquiry of some of the postulates and assumptions in Noiriel's thesis. The inquiry is done on the basis of prior research on the tensions at the crossroads of the social and racial questions. These tensions have shaped the history of French citizenship in post-slavery colonies in the French Caribbean. This article draws from ongoing research on the forms of political subjectivation painstakingly elaborated by young, Afro-feminist militants in several conurbations of continental France.⁽⁹⁾ In doing so, the article invites readers to examine some of Noiriel's postulates and presupposed conceptions. It questions his diagnosis on the present, and a heterogeneous albeit recurrent reluctance to know, masked under some pious invocation of the "republican tradition," a kind of call to order on behalf of the "good knowledge."⁽¹⁰⁾

A Franco-French Debate: Is Class above All Else?

Remarkably, Gérard Noiriel's text is based upon a controversy involving Mark Lila and Eric Fassin. Mark Lila is a U.S. academic who is little-known in France. Eric Fassin is a French sociologist who specializes in gender studies and is very knowledgeable about American scholarship on those issues and has actively contributed to their dissemination in France.⁽¹¹⁾

Gérard Noiriel betrays the influence of the US academic practice in his peculiar re-assertion of a certain way of addressing the racial question in French sociology. U.S. references are central in French discussions on ethnic and racial minorities, whether they be taken as models to emulate or foils to be shunned. However, the reliance on US academic practices of addressing the racial question is paradoxical. A conversation with other international works could justifiably claim an analogous relevance, notably when they dwell upon former European colonial powers (the UK, but also the Netherlands and Portugal). The unavoidable American reference bespeaks both a fascination with American researches on these questions as well as a certain blindness to their very historicity in the French context.

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Such paradoxical positioning is not new. It can be traced to Pierre Bourdieu in an important piece co-authored by Loïc Wacquant and entitled "On the Cunning of Imperialist Reason."⁽¹²⁾ Both scholars were scathing with U.S. academics whose ambition was to define "race" as a new paradigm of sociological analysis and social sciences more generally.

According to Bourdieu and Wacquant, U. S. academics as veritable entrepreneurs of “race” and deal with this category as a “universally acknowledged scientific breakthrough which, at least for a time, is meant to provide a community of researchers with sample problems and solutions.”⁽¹³⁾ The two scholars refer to the way a “Black/White” binary dividing the social order into racial groups has been imposed as an explanatory frame accounting for ethnic or racial inequalities in Brazil. They expose “the diffusion of the U.S. racial doxa within the Brazilian academic field at the level of both representations and practices.”⁽¹⁴⁾

They unflinchingly dismiss the concept of intersectionality, which is reduced to a shallow combinatorics between gender, race and class interpreted as “reified entities.” They refuse to “choose between workers and minorities” (which is itself a way to unwillingly practice intersectionality!). They denounce “the quasi-universalization of the U.S. folk concept of ‘race’ as a result of the worldwide export of U.S. scholarly categories.”⁽¹⁵⁾ Gérard Noiriel, similarly, strives to rehabilitate “everything which is removed from debate,” that is, “the fact that social class is a more crucial factor than gender or ethnicity in order to comprehend the way our societies work.” Therefore, he issues a wake-up call to (French) scholarly reason: working classes must be taken seriously, “class” ought to be inserted back into debate, because it is believed to have vanished from readings of the social world.

This article does not underestimate how important class is in the analysis of social relations, or in the construction of individual and social identities. What ought to be questioned is the “obviousness” of an intellectual posture presented as a token of scientific rigor. This posture, again, consists in shrugging off, in dismissing wholesale any social parameter other than class “in order to comprehend the way our societies work.” In this debate a key scientific question is posed: what is it that we wish to know and understand about our societies? More importantly, what is it that we deem worthy of investigating in order to “comprehend the way our societies work”?⁽¹⁶⁾

The Racial Question: Republican Equality’s Aporia?

This article does not claim that an analysis based on social class is irrelevant to interpret social relations. It claims something altogether different: when setting out to analyse the social world, one cannot postulate a priori that one factor is more decisive than another in the study of social relations and of individual experiences. Only context-dependent analyses through empirical researches make it possible to ascertain what is relevant or not in the lived experience of social actors. Recent events that made the news would seem to suggest that greater caution than Noiriel’s is warranted. For instance, a tsunami of insults was heaped upon French Attorney General Christiane Taubira, a Black woman from French Guyana, during parliamentary debates on same-sex marriage. She was vilified for weeks but neither intellectuals nor those at the State’s highest echelons, the self-appointed zealous custodians of

“Republican tradition,” made any public declaration about this.(17) In an interview about her moral and political ordeal, Mrs Taubira admitted to having been used to racist prejudices since her arrival in continental France but was still astonished that “no influential and meaningful voice was raised as a warning about French society’s worrisome evolution”(18)

Not only does the sexual order still minoritize women in politics but gender- and race-based divides within the political order rear their ferocious face against Black women or women who originate from North Africa when these manage to reach the top of the power structure.(19) In the media and cultural field more recently, the documentary entitled *Trop noire pour être française?* (Too Black to Be French?) by director Isabelle Boni-Claverie has revealed a hankering for a greater democratization of French society. Also, in an effort to demand equal treatment in the accomplishment of their jobs, a collective of French Black actresses, mostly with working-class backgrounds, have put pen to paper in the essay *Noire n’est pas mon métier* (Black is Not My Job) in order to shed light on their intertwined experiences of sexism and racism.(20) This has been a way for them to underline that their upward mobility has not made them immune to power relations. They are gender- and race-branded, in a dog-eat-dog professional milieu where it is “White” men who call the resource and opportunity shots.

Needless to add, there is a body of research that has evidenced that identity checks by the police or custom officers are “primarily based on outward appearance, i.e. not on what people do, but on what they are, or seem to be.”(21) The results from an ambitious 2009 research project led by Fabien Jobard and René Lévy have shown that persons that are perceived as “Black” (of sub-Saharan or Caribbean origins) or as “Arab” do not experience public space in the same way as persons perceived as “White” do. “According to the various observation spots, Blacks were from 3.3 to 11.5 times more likely than Whites to have their identity checked. [...] Arabs were 7 times more likely to have their identity checked than Whites. Overall, depending again on the various observation spots, these were from 1.8 to 14.8 times more likely to be checked by the police (or custom officers). Interviews held with persons just checked suggest that Blacks just as much as Arabs are routinely checked more often than Whites are.”(22) The experience of racist discrimination by the police does not solely affect youths whose dress code (hoodies, denims, sneakers) are associated with the banlieues.



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For this discrimination does not spare “bourgeois” individuals from the posh areas as is testified by the indignant testimony provided by Alex Ursulet, a penal lawyer hailing from Martinique, a lawyer’s son himself and ex-husband of a former minister under president Jacques Chirac, in his book entitled *Pourquoi me tutoyez-vous?* (Why Do You Use ‘Tu’ When Talking to me?) More recently, this statistical reality was corroborated anew by individual stories confided by Black intellectuals and artists (either French or living in France) in the book *Marianne et le garçon noir* (Marianne and the Black Boy) edited by Franco-Cameroonian novelist Léonora Miano. Lastly, no matter the conditions of virtual equality, religious essentialization of Muslims – that has to be labeled anti-Muslim racism or Islamophobia⁽²³⁾ – discriminates between men who have Maghreb origins, i.e. putatively Muslim ones, as opposed to all other groups on the job market. Recent work by economist Marie-Anne Valfort has highlighted that when equally qualified, candidates with Oriental or Muslim sounding-first names⁽²⁴⁾ were four times more discriminated against than analogous candidates with Catholic- or European-sounding first names. In other words, in a situation of mass unemployment someone called Nicolas has to send five CVs to get a job interview whereas someone called Abdel has to send twenty. Beyond social class belongings, the experience of masculinity in France is marked by rifts which can only be called racial ones in the sense that they erect a symbolic fence between an “us” and a fantasised “them.” The fence sustains an absolutization of ethnic or religious bounds made into a social danger, which itself generates “a racism in action.”⁽²⁵⁾

A narrowly materialistic interpretation of race⁽²⁶⁾, which is assimilated to a symbolic translation of class, makes it impossible to appraise its relative autonomy as an abstract category in social relations. It likewise prevents one from questioning its heterogeneous effects in production relations as well as beyond the socio-economic space. Once again, the experience of actors invites one to question the complex ways in which processes of racialization partake of a belief and value system running through the social order and crystallizing social and individual identities. It would be pertinent to share, no doubt in inchoate form, the statement made by an interviewee, which illuminates very neatly the extent to which affects, and social positioning may be interwoven with race-based, social situations. The individual in question is a 34-year-old, blogger and afrofeminist activist. She studied philosophy for two years in college, is currently looking for a job, she is mixed-race, from a single-parent family whose mother is a retired French primary school teacher and whose, now deceased, Congolese father experienced long jobless spells. This woman confides the paradoxical way in which she apprehends her socialization into a lower-middle class, white family who wishes for her to become upwardly mobile. She confesses that since she was a child, she has felt marginalized and excluded within her mother’s family. It comes with a degree of reflexivity which is something of a rarity: “The white parent of



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mixed-race children who grow up in a white society must know that she gives birth to a racialized social subject.” Far from being reducible to a purely psychological dimension, the expression of identity wounds, the young woman's words underline the social conditions of racial consciousness. In some way like Fanon who left a Martinique with a majority of people of colour for a predominantly white France, she reminds us that due to its socialization and minority condition the racialized subject remains branded by the consciousness of being a sensitive body exposed to the dominants' gaze. This double consciousness, intrinsic to the stigma of skin color, is based on the somatic experience of her presence in the world, of her availability as an object for the white gaze. While class belonging does not tell the whole story of social experience, the autonomy of “racial” relations may well over-determine class-belonging itself, sometimes even by thwarting this sense of belonging. This is the reality that is powerfully depicted by Mwasi activists in their Afrofeminist manifesto: “Since we were in primary school, our lives as Black men and women has been demarcated by Negrophobia.

“Other” has always been the identity assigned to us. An Other that is exhibited, exploited, made invisible, murdered. We have to make ourselves as little as possible, although we are over-exposed. We are relegated to the most casual kinds of jobs. Two sectors in which we are not discriminated against in this country are: cleaning and security jobs.”(27) By castigating a “White Left” blind to the fact that “class is racialized,”(28) they are scathing with the conflating power and plasticity of racialization processes running through the affective experience of certain social actors as well as determining their social inferiorization. Race is, therefore, far from being the mere upshot of class domination—its presupposed symbolical reflection or its abstract translation. Instead, race is at the very foundation of class domination, as is illustrated by racialization processes inherent in professional skills as observed in some specific sectors.(29) It follows that to prioritize class over the whole betrays some ideological prejudice and stems from a refusal to apprehend the heterogeneousness of social domination in practice. This is an epistemological decision to remain ignorant, no matter how the phenomena involved in the debate may clash with the values of the scholars as well as with the official values of societies that are purportedly democratic.

The advocates of this dogmatic materialism often like to claim Bourdieu's critical sociology as their own, in an effort to expose the imperialism of

U. S. racial reason over French social sciences. Yet Bourdieu and Wacquant's text does reveal a paradoxical convergence line which is here apposite in the analysis. This convergence line, which is a kind of silent tension running through the text, is based on historicity.

The Republic Tradition and the Racial Idea of France

While Bourdieu and Wacquant's well-known article presents itself as a systematic onslaught against U.S. academic imperialism, it generates frustration among readers wishing to appraise the French situation. Nonetheless, the two scholars unveil some potentially fruitful investigating terrain, which they leave unexplored. Against the sloppy importation of "indigenous" categories that have become hegemonic and to which some have become intellectually submitted, Bourdieu and Wacquant raise careful attention to historicity as a methodological imperative. Uncommonly in sociological writings, the historian vocabulary saturates the dense pages they devote to the globalization of the North American concept of race which is to them consubstantial to the erection of a colour bar in a pro-slavery democracy.⁽³⁰⁾ In other words, the race problem, based on colour in particular, is genuinely a North American problem. But, contradicting their petition in favour of historicity, in Bourdieu and Wacquant's article, it is as though only the United States were a "particular historical society"⁽³¹⁾. Since the critique of a U.S. epistemic domination is theoretically coterminous with the taking into account of the specific historicity of societies, it is pertinent to discuss key moments of French Republican history. In particular, what should be observed is the history of citizenship in France, where the racial question was a real issue in the introduction of legal and political equality among the French. These were historical moments evidencing a complex divide between uncontestable citizens and citizens who were inferiorized or altered, i.e. "other citizens."

To pretend that "racist inequality"⁽³²⁾ was essentially a U.S. phenomenon or belonged at best to a colonial history that is solidly anchored overseas, is tantamount to making it into some peripheral and outside object. It is deliberately made external to a course of history whose social and political key dynamics, seen as strictly European, are believed to solely rest on hierarchies based upon class belonging. Similarly, to assert the way Gérard Noiriel does that an "ethnic lexicon breaking with the republican tradition" was ushered in Republican discourse in the 1980s is like fuelling a twofold myth, i.e. the myth of some Republican regime which is a-racial and outside any historical conflictuality, as well as the myth of a performative universalism. In this way, tradition itself becomes some kind of dogma. These statements are astonishing from a scholar who published *The Republican Origins of the Vichy Regime* (1999). Against what is claimed here, this article evidences research by French and North American historians who work on the colonial and metropolitan spaces. They take pains to envisage the plural geography of the French national fact, that the racial question, in a complex and

multifaceted way, was part and parcel of the history of the republic both as concept and as political regime.

From the earliest times of the French revolutionary era, some revolutionary actors vocalized the moral and normative constraints inherent in the meaning their action took up in pro-slavery colonies. Upon convening the États généraux, Necker reminded the assembly members of the actual lie that the Transatlantic slave trade and slavery in the Caribbean colonies gave to their ongoing project aiming at establishing a liberty-based political order : “One day, maybe, dear gentlemen, your interests will be kindled further afield [...] You will then have a compassionate look upon this hapless people we have tranquilly made into barbarian objects of trade ; upon these men who are akin to us, who think like we do and above all who share our sad capacity for suffering ; upon these men whom we mercilessly amass and thrust into the bottom of ships that sail far away and introduce them to the chains awaiting them on arrival.”⁽³³⁾ On August 20th 1789, i.e. a few days before the adoption of the declaration of human rights and citizens, Mirabeau likewise underlined the gap between the legal institutionalization of the Universal and, on the other hand, the social, political and legal reality of slavery away in the colonies: “The Assembly will not tell these woeful victims of our ignoble greed that they share equal rights with those that buy them, sell them, mistreat them, enchain them, cut their private parts, and leave them altogether nothing from the rich produce of the lands that their sweat fertilized. [...] What this Assembly will tell Negroes, what it will tell planters, what it will tell Europe as a whole is that there simply cannot be, either in France or in any other country ruled by French law, men that are not free men, men that are not equal to one another ; any man that keeps another man in servitude against his will violates the law, affronts the great national charter, and cannot expect either support or protection.”⁽³⁴⁾ Upon being informed of the violent feuds opposing the pro-colonist lobby and the Society of Coloured Citizens on whether to apply the Declaration in the colonies, Condorcet wrote an ironic note in the Journal de Paris in which he asked that “be added to the first article of the Declaration of Rights: that all white men are born free and equal in rights.”⁽³⁵⁾ He then asked the colonists to devise “a method whereby to



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determine what is deemed the necessary degree of whiteness.” We learn from these struggles of the oppressed that, far from any abstraction or any "color blindness," the very content of the universality of rights finds its most consistent definition by confronting with the social and political consequences of the color bar (better known at this time as "color prejudice"). Quite dialectically, the Republican discourse of natural rights defines its tangible political meaning not by denying what contradicts its principles, but by facing head-on what is denied socially and legally.(36)

It is indeed the “forgotten” sons and daughters of Universalism themselves, those “uncounted when it came to sharing rights”(37), i.e. the rebelling slaves of Saint Domingue, and certainly not some Paris-based Assembly, that gave life to the petition on the universality of rights. This was a veritable “bound Enlightenment”(38) mobilizing through violence their “right to rights,” slaves who compelled the republican and colonial authorities to abolish slavery and to proclaim the equality of civil and political rights between August 29 and October 31, 1793.

Upon a proposal by a delegation of representatives from Saint-Domingue led in Paris by Gorée-born soldier and former slave Jean-Baptiste Belley(39), the national convention ratified and proclaimed the abolition of slavery on February 4, 1794. Taking a realistic view of the dynamics which had unfolded between metropolis and colonies since 1789, Danton confessed: “As representatives of the French people, until today we have been content to selfishly proclaim liberty only for ourselves. But today we proclaim to the face of the universe, and future generations will glorify in this decree, we proclaim universal liberty [...] We had up to now sullied our glory by truncating our work.”(40)

This equalitarian heritage crystallizing in political asymmetry notwithstanding, Victor Shœlcher was still extraordinarily isolated in 1848 as head of the commission on the abolition of slavery, when it came to taking the single decision of granting the franchise to freed slaves. It is worth mentioning that, quite remarkably, one of the fathers of universal male suffrage ushered in by the March 5, 1848 decree was François-Auguste Isambert, a member of the commission who was the fiercest opponent of the “newly freed” from plantation colonies. This is a barely noticed fact of history. While workers were seizing political rights and although a minority of freed males of colour had been enjoying the franchise since 1833, Isambert harnessed against former slaves the well-known argument formerly used against peasants and “proletarians,” i.e. that they were unable to make educated use of the vote. In so doing, Isambert was despite himself giving this capacity-based argument a historical and anthropological foundation: how on earth could it be possible for several generations of men “born and grown old in slavery” to “raise themselves to the level of those who had always lived in freedom”?(41)

At the very core of the civil equalization process, which is the basis of citizenship for men, a barrier erected between two naturalized connections to social and historical situations. This barrier would make all former slaves and descendants of slaves wear a collective stigma, defining them now not so much through colour prejudice alone rather than through their past and genealogy. In so doing, the past times of slavery would morph into a transgenerational, anthropological condition. With this reasoning in mind, which was recurrent in the legitimization of de jure segregation in “old colonies,” colonial authorities would systematically gainsay, as early as 1849 and then under the Second Empire (1851-1870) and during the Third Republic (1870-1945), what Schoelcher’s personal convictions had managed to impose in April 1848. By conferring wholesale to a group, a cohesive identity predicated on the necessary transmission of social habitus inherited by history, this genealogical scheme would deploy to the full a racial logic. Far from being the preserve of the “other citizens” of “old colonies” who were identified with the chains of their descendants, this logic goes to the heart of French liberal thought in the years 1820 and 1830.⁽⁴²⁾ Interspersing the political and scientific spheres of late 19th century France, this logic still undergirds the emergence of what historian Carole Reynaud-Paligot has called the “Republican racial paradigm,” all of which asks one to tentatively draw the hypothesis of a national grammar of racialization on behalf even of the promotion of republican principles.⁽⁴³⁾

Disciplinary Universalism or Containment of the Right to Have Rights?

The chauvinist, ethnocentric and west-centred view of the history of working-classes, and more generally of the history of the democratization of French history, proves an intellectual dead-end. Far from being a hegemonic narrative celebrating a “Republican model” of “abstract universalism,” the chaotic and unfinished history of social emancipation in France finds in the racial question one of its rawest aporias. There is a heuristic virtue in the colonial detour, ultimately in decentring the gaze, which eloquently reveals some of the internal and most structuring tensions of Republican construction, and therefore of French society itself, part of whose contemporary demography hails from the former colonial empire. To claim as a self-evident truth that there is such a thing as a univocal “republican tradition” glosses over an extra-national history of the Republic, both as regime and as philosophical and political ideal, a history interwoven with conflicts. Well established academics recently denounced, in the very name of “republican universalism,” anti-racist mobilizations as simple identity claims, or as racist outbursts by “rabid visible minorities” that blight French society.⁽⁴⁴⁾ Unless one considers the production and conquest of equal universal rights as the exclusive property of the “white man,” the incantatory invocation of “republican universalism” rests on an epistemic chimera. Aiming at alignment and appropriation, this logic makes a political use of history that obliterates the plural and conflict-ridden dynamics which

transformed the ideal of universal equality of rights. Universal equality was supposed to be an emancipatory horizon that was ontologically open and undetermined. This dimension of social and cultural indetermination, which reaches beyond the ethno-national contours of the space wherein it was first enunciated, leaves the concrete content of rights still open to debate. Rival interpretations of social emancipation, in other words to political definitions that are revisable in context-specific situations.

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In many respects, the minority-led anti-racist struggles as political forms of resistance to oppression, the latter being the ultimate right available when protection by law and by society is not enough, are part and parcel of this political, subterranean history as well as actually go beyond it. French Afro-descendants or of Arab origin are today tired of being assigned to the migratory trajectory and colonial subjection of their ancestors. This, either because of the colour of their skin, of their phenotype, or of the consonance of their name or their religion, constructed as emblems of allochtony and illegitimacy on a national soil. Today's oppressed, who often are from the working classes, point the racial question out as a remnant in the unfulfilled promise of an emancipatory egalitarianism. Grappling with the heterogeneous and intersectional ways the social world is divided into, these struggles are an open invitation to deepen the promise of equality. In a word, they commit – French sociologists probably even more – to a renewed imagination of social and political equality. Tackling this intellectual imagination task therefore implies mourning the illusion of centrality, and moreover projecting ones ‘eyes beyond an assimilationist, and ultimately insular, conception of the French nation. If we remember that the first French slave ship left La Rochelle for Angola in 1594 to bring back a cargo of African slaves to the Americas, forever transforming the look of Frenchness, we realize it is high time!

NOTES

1. This article is a revised version of an article previously published by the author in French (<https://mouvements.info/sur-les-ruses-de-la-raison-nationale/>). I would like to thank Olivier Esteves, Professor of English Literature and American civilization at the university of Lille, for his translation of the text into English.
2. On race as signifier and as social construct, and in starkly contrasted epistemological and political perspectives, by French sociologist see Colette Guillaumin, *L'idéologie raciste. Genèse et langage actuel*, Paris, 1972, p. 67 et Dominique Schnapper, *La relation à l'autre. Au cœur de la pensée sociologique*, Paris, Gallimard, 1998, p. 27. One can also note the very recent Sarah Mazouz, *Race*, Paris, Anamosa, 2020.
3. Gérard Noiriel, « Réflexions sur la gauche identitaire », *Le populaire dans tous ses états*, 29 octobre 2018: <https://noiriel.wordpress.com/2018/10/29/reflexions-sur-la-gauche-identitaire/>
4. Italics mine
5. For a problematisation of the notion of 'minority', see Colette Guillaumin, « Sur la notion de minorité », *L'Homme et la Société*, 77-78, 1985, p. 101-109.
6. To understand the issues involved here, see Eléonore Lépinard, Sarah Mazouz, "Cartographie du surplomb. Ce que les résistances au conception d'intersectionnalité nous sur les sciences sociales en France," in *Mouvements. Des idées et des luttes*, February 2019: <https://mouvements.info/cartographie-du-surplomb/> and Audrey Célestine, Abdellali Hajjat, Lionel Zevounou, « Rôle des intellectuel.les, universitaires 'minoritaires' et des porte-parole des minorités », *Ibid.* <https://mouvements.info/role-des-intellectuel%c2%b7les-minoritaires/>
7. In the French language, « la question raciale » has been used in academia since the mid-2000s as a challenging echo to the hitherto hegemonic narrative of « la question sociale ». Scholars such as Didier and Eric Fassin have endeavoured to place 'race' at the heart of the academic and political debate in a country where 'class', for various reasons, has always enjoyed hegemony. Here, the 'racial question' ought to be seen as a synonym for 'race'.
8. Italics mine.
9. Silyane Larcher, *L'autre citoyen. L'idéal républicain et les Antilles après l'esclavage*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2014; Silyane Larcher, « "Nos vies sont politiques!" » L'afrofémisme en France ou la riposte des petites-filles de l'empire », *Participations*. 19-3, 2017, p. 97-127.
10. Although they cannot be compared to Noiriel's more nuanced views, recent petitions, op-ed pieces and editorials in the press do partake of this call to order : Mathieu Aron, « Les « décoloniaux » à l'assaut des universités », *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 30 novembre 2018 ; « Le « décolonialisme », une stratégie hégémonique : l'appel de 80 intellectuels », *Le Point*, 4 décembre 2018 ; Laurent Joffrin, « La gauche racialisée », *Libération*, 4 décembre 2018.
11. Éric Fassin notably prefaced the French translation of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*; he also wrote the afterword to Carole Pateman's *The Sexual Contract* and ran for a long time the "Gender and Sexuality" collection for the La Découverte publisher.
12. Pierre Bourdieu, Loïc Wacquant, « Sur les ruses de la raison impériale », *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, n°121-122, 1998, p. 109-118
13. Thomas Kuhn, *La structure des révolutions scientifiques*, Paris, Flammarion, 2008, p. 11

14. Pierre Bourdieu, Loïc Wacquant, « Sur les ruses de la raison impériale », op. cit., p. 113
15. *Ibid.*, p. 114
16. Italics mine.
17. Stéphanie Guyon, « Christiane Taubira, a Black Woman in Politics in French Guiana and France », in F. Germain, S. Larcher (eds.), *Black French Women and the Struggle for Equality, 1848-2016*, Lincoln, University Press of Nebraska, p. 31-33.
18. *Libération*, November 5, 2013
19. Frédérique Matonti, *Le genre présidentiel. Enquête sur l'ordre des sexes en politique*, Paris, La Découverte, chapter 4.
20. Aïssa Maïga et alii, *Noire n'est pas mon métier*, Paris, Le Seuil, 2018.
21. Indira Goris, Fabien Jobard et René Levy, *Police et minorités visibles: les contrôles d'identité à Paris*, New York, Open Society Institute: Justice Initiative, 2009, p. 10. See also Fabien Jobard, John Lamberth, René Lévy, Sophie Névanen, « Mesurer les discriminations selon l'apparence: une analyse des contrôles d'identité à Paris », *Populations*, 67-3, 2012, p.423-452.
22. *Loc. cit.*
23. Although the concept of Islamophobia has gained legitimacy within Anglophone academia, it is a fact that now a few French academics still resist it, regardless of their political leanings. Cf. Houda Asal, « Islamophobie: la fabrique d'un nouveau concept. État des lieux de la recherche », *Sociologie*, 5-1, 2014, p.13-29. On racism without races, cf. Etienne Balibar, « Y a-t-il un néoracisme? », in E. Balibar & I. Wallerstein, *Race, nation, classe. Les identités ambiguës*, Paris, La Découverte, 1998, p. 27-41; George Fredrickson, *Racisme, une histoire*, Paris, Liana Levi, 2007.
24. Marie-Anne Valfort, « La religion, facteur de discrimination à l'embauche en France? », *Revue économique*, 68-5, 2017, p. 895-907.
25. Véronique de Rudder et alii, *L'inégalité raciste. L'universalisme républicain à l'épreuve*, Paris, PUF, 2001, p. 30..
26. I am less concerned here with the plethora of literature on the connections between capitalism and racism (routinely labelled "materialist") than with an interpretation of historical materialism which makes the class struggle into the actual driver of history and finds in class relations the ultimate truth of the social world.
27. Collectif afroféministe Mwasi, *Afrofem*, Paris, Syllepse, 2018, p. 39-40..
28. *Ibid.* p, 48
29. Caroline Ibos, *Qui gardera nos enfants? Les nounous et les mères*, Paris, 2012; Julien Scheepers, *Logiques, formes et enjeux de l'ethnisation des compétences professionnelles. Les cas comparés des éducateurs dans le travail social et des agents de sécurité privée*, PhD dissertation in sociology, Nice-Sophia Antipolis university, 2013.
30. The vocabulary of historicity ("historical condition," "historical context," "specific historical society," "dehistoricization") is used 9 times in 3 pages.
31. Pierre Bourdieu, Loïc Wacquant, op. cit. p. 110
32. Véronique de Rudder et alii, op. cit.
33. Quoted in Aimé Césaire, *Toussaint Louverture. La Révolution française et le problème des colonies*, Paris, Présence Africaine, [1961] 1981, p. 37.

34. *Le Moniteur Universel*, 21-23 août 1789, in Archives Nationales, *Doléances des peuples coloniaux à l'Assemblée nationale constituante. 1789-1790* (choix de textes par Monique Pouliquen), Paris, Archives Nationales, 1989, p. 18, note 2
35. Quoted in Jean-François Robinet, *Condorcet, sa vie, son oeuvre, 1743-1794*, Paris, Librairies-Imprimeries Réunies, s.d.; p. 69-70. (Underlined in the original text.)
36. Cf. Sophie Wahnich, « L'universel a-t-il jamais été abstrait? FAQ », *Vacarme*, 71-2, 2015, p. 84-104.
37. Jacques Rancière, *La méésentente. Politique et philosophie*, Paris, Galilée, 2005.
38. Laurent Dubois, « Des lumières enchaînées: la révolution haïtienne et la pensée politique des esclaves », conference at the Collège de France, Chaire d'histoire moderne et contemporaine du politique of Pierre Rosanvallon, Paris, May 2010.
39. Jacques Rancière, *La méésentente. Politique et philosophie*, Paris, Galilée, 2005.
40. On the left of the portrait, the marble chest represents Guillaume-Thomas Raynal, the author of *Histoire des Deux Indes*. In this book, Raynal "prophesied" that "a Black Spartacus" would "one day come to undo the yoke of slavery." According to historians working on the Haiti revolution, this text allegedly was read by Toussaint.
41. On the left of the portrait, the marble chest represents Guillaume-Thomas Raynal, the author of *Histoire des Deux Indes*. In this book, Raynal "prophesied" that "a Black Spartacus" would "one day come to undo the yoke of slavery." According to historians working on the Haiti revolution, this text allegedly was read by Toussaint Louverture when he was a slave (Toussaint could read). This picture is regarded as a tribute to the heroism displayed by Antilles soldiers who claimed their allegiance to the Republic. It gives a face to an actor who is never mentioned in mainstream histories of the revolutionary period in France, let alone those who deal with the first abolition. In this sense, Noiriél's recent *Histoire populaire de la France* is no exception. Moreover, through its references, it illustrates this idea of a subterranean genealogy of the republican idea in France, which tortuously crosses the struggles of the subjugated, as explained in this article through the phrase of "Chained Enlightenment" (borrowed from historian Laurent Dubois) in particular.
42. From Marcel Dorigny, foreword of Carolyn Fick, *Haïti: naissance d'une nation*, Rennes, Les Perséides, 2014, p. 17-18. Italics mine.
43. For further details see, Silyane Larcher, *L'autre citoyen*, op. cit., p. 73 sqq.
44. Claude-Olivier Doron, *L'homme altéré. Race et dégénérescence*, Paris, Champ Vallon, 2017.
45. Carole Reynaud-Paligot, *La République raciale. Paradigme racial et idéologie républicaine (1860-1930)*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 2006. That hypothesis is also at the heart of recent research on the ironic consequences of public policies addressing racial discriminations: Sarah Mazouz, *La République et ses autres. Politiques de l'altérité dans la France des années 2000*, Lyon, ENS Editions, 2017.
46. See note 9.