Introduction

As many of the chapters in this volume demonstrate, it is the political right that is at the forefront of propagating Islamophobia, whether this emanates from political parties, the media or various public figures. In this regard, France is no different to other countries in Europe. Anti-Muslim sentiment, which was preceded by a long history of anti-Arab racism, is propagated by various political actors, not least the ever popular extreme-right Rassemblement National (formerly known as the Front National – FN) whose leader Marine Le Pen reached the second round of the 2017 French Presidential Election. Islamophobia has a long history in France, despite the use of such a word to describe anti-Muslim racism only coming into popular use in the 21st century. A fear of Islam and Muslims has been constructed by the French media since the 1970s with key events including the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the first ‘headscarf affair’ of 1989, and, of course, the events of 11 September 2001 and the subsequent ‘war on terror’ (Deltombe 2005). In the most comprehensive overview of Islamophobia in France, Abdellali Hajjat and Marwan Mohammed (2013) make the case that the French elites have been responsible for creating a ‘Muslim problem’, which has obvious links to the colonial past. There is, in fact, a wealth of research on how the colonial experience has informed attitudes to racialized minorities in France and, in particular, how the difficult decolonising experience of Algeria informs this collective memory (Silverman 1992; Macmaster 1996; Silverstein 2004). To this we can now add a more specific (and burgeoning) literature on the experiences of Muslims in France, which takes into account the particular struggles and discrimination they face as a result of Islamophobia (Bowen 2010; Fernando 2014; Fredette 2014; Peace 2015; Beaman 2017; Wolfreys 2018).

The push back against Islamophobia in Europe is often championed by progressive forces and the political left in an extension of the anti-racist struggles of the past. Yet, when observing the landscape of Islamophobia in France, one of the most interesting facets that sets it apart from many of its European neighbours is the fact that anti-Muslim attitudes are not routinely denounced and fought by those on the Left. The French anti-racist movement is divided on this issue (Peace 2012) and some who would identify as being on the Left are even responsible for the enmity directed at Muslims in the public debate. This has the result of adding to a climate of suspicion which also has a knock-on effect in terms of discrimination and even physical acts of violence. According to
the figures from the *Collectif contre l’islamophobie en France* (CCIF), Islamophobia in France reached a peak in 2015 with 905 recorded acts, ranging from instances of discrimination (588 reported incidents) to physical violence (55 incidents). In its annual reports, the CCIF regularly points the blame at French politicians of all ideological stripes for encouraging ‘political Islamophobia’ and at the French government in particular for its inability to condemn this. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this organisation itself has come in for heavy criticism for its attempt to link political discourse with acts of discrimination and abuse.

The issue of Islamophobia is politically sensitive and the object of fierce discussion. Yet while it is clear that there exists a problem regarding Islamophobia in France, it is ‘far too easy to say the French are just racist or just Islamophobic – easy and inaccurate’ (Fredette 2014, p. 15). It therefore needs to be made clear at the outset that this chapter is not arguing that the French Left is inherently ‘racist’ or that it can be compared to the extreme right. One must be careful to avoid over simplistic characterisations of what is actually a very complicated issue. Indeed, my reading of this situation is that the issue of Islamophobia, and all the controversies related to Muslims in France, is an issue that divides the Left. Nevertheless, it is a particularity of the French public debate concerning Islam and Muslims, that the most virulent criticisms, stereotypes and alarmist polemics are often proffered by those who would consider themselves as progressives. This is something which may surprise the outside observer when trying to understand the often uneasy relationship between France and its Muslims. This chapter, then, seeks to illuminate why this is the case and provide some examples of what has previously been described as ‘progressive’ (IRR 2011) or ‘liberal’ (Mondon and Winter 2017) forms of Islamophobia. It also discusses why there is an aversion to even using the term ‘Islamophobia’ on the French Left, a related issue which also sets France apart from many of the other countries discussed in this volume, rendering any analysis of this phenomenon even more complicated.

**The importance of secularism and gender equality**

The starting point for any discussion of Islamophobia and the Left in France is the issue of laïcité – the French version of state secularism. As Olivier Roy (2007) has pointed out, laïcité in France can refer to at least three separate principles – legal, philosophical and political. It is important to remember that secularism in France was, first and foremost, a value that was defended by the French left. This is because it regards the 1905 law on the separation of the Churches and State as a hard fought political victory against the Catholic Church. The Left, therefore, has always seen itself as both the guardian and standard bearer of laïcité. Ever since the first ‘headscarf affair’ in 1989 (see Esteves’ chapter in this volume), virtually every public discussion in France regarding its Muslim citizens relates back to the principle of laïcité, with those on the Left being its most ardent defenders. As John Bowen (2007, p. 242) demonstrates in his account of why the French National Assembly decided to pass a law in 2004 against religious symbols in schools, in the post 9/11 climate, ‘politicians on the left and the right sought to outdo each other in defending laïcité’. There is a political consensus around the need to safeguard laïcité in the face of what is seen as a threat from Muslims and/or Islam. In such a context, it has become de rigueur for politicians in France to demonstrate a firm line when it comes to secularism, particularly if they are on the Left. Yet what does secularism entail in the French context? Although politicians love putting forward their secular credentials, there is a significant debate in French society about what laïcité means in practice. Indeed, even among the members of France’s official watchdog on secularism, the *Observatoire de la laïcité*, there...
is no consensus and this organisation has been torn apart due to infighting over these issues.\(^4\) For many, secularism has become a convenient ‘tool for putting Muslims under scrutiny and questioning their allegiance to the values of the Republic’ (Wolfreys 2018, p. 1), particularly given the fact that most public controversies involving laïcité relate to Islam rather than other faiths. By visibly showing outward signs of religiosity, for example by wearing a headscarf, Muslims are accused of defiling the supposed neutrality of public space. This interpretation explicitly positions itself as a French exception that is in opposition to ‘anglo-saxon models’ (Baubérot 2013) and is tied to a wider development in French politics – the triumph of neo-republicanism as the dominant political language which can be found on the Left and the Right (Chabal 2015).

Jean Baubérot (2015) has observed how this dominant interpretation of secularism in France is essentially a right-wing reading that has now been accepted across the political spectrum.\(^5\) It plays directly on the public’s fears related to their identity, which is supposedly threatened by Islam (hence his term laïcité identitaire). This shift was already evident during the second mandate of Jacques Chirac who set up the Stasi Commission to reflect upon the application of the principle of laïcité (which recommended a law on religious symbols that was eventually passed in 2004). It was then reinforced during the presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy who first created a new ministry of immigration and integration which included the term ‘national identity’ in the title. This was followed by the launch of a nationwide debate about national identity in 2009 (which could simply be read as a debate on Islam). Quasi-governmental bodies such as the High Council for Integration (HCI) were directly responsible for these shifts in policy, but such organisations are in no way politically neutral (Beaugé and Hajjat 2014). The HCI, whose composition from 2002 until its dissolution in 2012 was clearly in favour of a more restrictive definition of laïcité, was tasked with coming up with advice and propositions relating to ‘the expression of religion in public space’ (HCI 2010). Although these initiatives took place under a ring-wing government, this new definition of laïcité was shared (or at least not opposed) by the majority of the Left. Some refer to this development as the nouvelle laïcité because the desire to apply the principle of ‘neutrality’ has now been extended to the whole of French society and not just places like government buildings. In their study of this phenomenon, Stéphanie Hennette Vauchez and Vincent Valentin (2014) illustrate this move with reference to the legal wrangle over the Baby Loup crèche which started in 2008 and ended in 2014. In this emblematic legal case, a woman wearing the veil was dismissed from her post for defiling the principles of laïcité and neutrality despite being employed in a private crèche. Key figures across the political spectrum supported the position of the employer and there is no discernible left–right split over such issues.

In addition to the principle of secularism, it is the defence of gender equality (l’égalité hommes-femmes) which is regularly invoked by those on the Left in order to defend measures against Muslims that would, in many contexts, be described as discriminatory. Ever since the first headscarf affair of 1989, one of the most recurrent objections from those on the Left to any form of veiling is that this constitutes a visual symbol of inequality between the sexes. Because this inequality is what the feminist movement has been fighting since its inception, the issue of the headscarf is seen as a key battle regarding female emancipation and against male patriarchy. Such discussions have traversed feminist movements across the world but have had a particular resonance in France where the view of the headscarf as an instrument of oppression (and male domination) is generally shared across the feminist movement and the political left more widely. This despite the existence of research since the 1990s which reveals the multiple reasons why Muslim women in the West may decide to veil and the dissenting voices of feminists such as Christine Delphy. At the heart of these discussions lays the key question of female agency. In the French debate, and particularly on the Left, the routine assumption is

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\(^4\) T. Peace

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that the headscarf is imposed upon women by a patriarchal order (father, brother, husband). Such women must be defended but their own viewpoint is often lost in such discussions, hence the need to publish accounts, which allow veiled Muslim women to actually ‘speak’ (Chouder et al. 2008).

Part of the reason why the debates concerning the wearing of the headscarf in schools were so passionate relates to the belief by many on the French left in the emancipatory role of state schools in forming its citizens. Because school children are minors, they need to be protected from the potentially corrosive influence of organised religion and be allowed to develop an independent conscience.6 In this view, the state ‘through its educational system, can and should emancipate Muslim girls from patriarchal, religious oppression’ (Laborde 2008, p. 125). Yet this emancipation is not simply about social and political equality but also concerns the issue of female sexuality. The female body and its visibility in public space is part of the subtext of many of the calls to ban the wearing of headscarves:

Until their ideological confrontation with Islam, many French feminists saw the sexual exhibitionism of their society – particularly as it applied to women – as demeaning to women because it reduced them to a sexed body. But in the heat of the headscarf controversy, those concerns were set aside and equality became synonymous with sexual emancipation, which in turn was equated with the visibility of the female body. 

(Scott 2007, p. 156)

These arguments were raised both during the headscarf controversy of 2003–2004 and again when the issue of the full-face veil was debated in 2009–2010. At both conjunctures, gender equality and laïcité were mobilised in union as the key arguments in favour of the resulting laws which banned religious symbols in schools (2004) and face coverings in public (2010), with both laws clearly aimed at Muslims living in France. These principles are often conflated as part of a singular ideal, something that was made clear in the Stasi Commission’s report, which claimed that ‘laïcité cannot be conceived without a direct link to the principle of equality between the sexes’ (Commission Stasi 2003, p. 52). While opposition to the headscarf or a particular attachment to secular or feminist principles cannot be described as Islamophobic per se, it is important to recognise that such arguments are often mobilised to single out Muslims for criticism and highlight the problematic difference that they pose to the French ‘republican norm’. In addition to the feminist arguments put forward by the Left in favour of bans on veiling, we can also add a ‘theological–political’ argument that viewed such laws as a bulwark against rising religious fundamentalism (Lévy 2010). In the section that follows, more concrete examples will be given of how those on the Left have been responsible for, or at least complicit in, the propagation of hostility towards Muslims in French society.

The link between Islamophobia and the Left

Discussing a link between the political left and hostility towards Muslims is controversial and, in many ways, reflects similar debates and disagreements regarding antisemitism and the Left (Peace 2009). There is a deep suspicion that accusations of Islamophobia made against elements of the Left are either an attempt to silence criticism of religion or merely a tool for discrediting political rivals, even within the same political family. This is certainly noticeable when looking at how those on the British radical left criticise their French counterparts. Alex Callinicos (2008, p. 154) is one such critic, stating that ‘to say that Islamophobia has penetrated the very heart of the progressive forces in France is simply to state a fact’. Indeed,
a striking division emerged between British and French left-wing activists active in the alter-

globalisation movement concerning attitudes to Muslims activists and in particular over the

issue of the headscarf (Peace 2015). Although such debates on a European level were often

framed in terms of ‘national’ characteristics, with French left-wingers routinely castigated as

racists and islamophobes, they obscured the reality of a split within the French left over these

issues. Debates and arguments within the feminist movement (Scott 2007; Delphy 2015) and

the anti-racist movement (Peace 2012; Gordon 2017) have been particularly hard fought.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the dominant view on the French left, understood as

including those affiliated to the centre-left Parti Socialiste (PS) as well as the more radical par-

ties including ex-communists and Trotskyists, is a rather restrictive interpretation of Muslim

civil liberties, particularly in terms of how Muslim women should dress. There is a broad

consensus across the political spectrum that both the 2004 law banning religious symbols in

state schools and the 2010 law banning face coverings are necessary and must be maintained.

What is more, in both cases these laws were championed by key figures on the Left. The

Stasi commission, for example, included the philosopher Régis Debray, former government

minister Michel Delebarre and the sociologist Alain Touraine. Only a handful of left-wing

members of parliament voted against the subsequent law of 15 March 2004 (including just

two representatives of the PS). The parliamentary commission that led to the 2010 law was

led by André Gerin of the Parti Communiste Français (PCF) and this also received wide support

during the parliamentary vote.

One might argue that such laws are not necessarily evidence of anti-Muslim prejudice. In

some cases, however, hostility towards Islam and/or Muslims is much more explicit when

coming from the Left, even if it is justified in the language of progressive politics. One of the

repeated criticisms about Islamophobia as a term is that the phenomenon being discussed is not

concerned with Islam as a religion but rather Muslims and how they dress, behave etc. In the

French case, and perhaps due to the attitude vis à vis religion as a whole in the country, it is

indeed Islam as a religion which is often the point of concern and in particular whether it can

be ‘tamed’ or even ‘made French’ (Bowen 2010). The number of books published which refer-
cence Islam de France is testament to this. The public debate on the issue of whether Islam can be

reformed and/or integrated into French society is often led by those on the Left:

In this campaign, conducted primarily by figures on the Left, two lines can be discerned: the

pessimists, for whom there is no secular Islam, and the optimists, who, on the contrary,

want to foster, or even bring into being, an Islam that would be liberal, secular, and truly

French. Many politicians on the Left have adopted this stance.

(Roy 2007, p. 3)

In this book, originally published in 2005, two left-wing politicians that Olivier Roy mentions

explicitly are Didier Motchane and Manuel Valls. The latter was, at that time, a rising star in

the PS and had begun to make his mark as an intransigent defender of French secularism in a

book entitled La laïcité en face (Valls 2005). It is, however, interesting to note that back in June

2003, in an interview with Le Monde, Manuel Valls had expressed concerns about the idea of

introducing a law to ban headscarves:

Banning religious attire [in schools] by introducing a law – and let’s be frank here, we’re

basically talking about Islamic dress – will merely turn the headscarf into a symbol. Such

intransigence will only serve to further divide Muslims in France from the rest of the popu-

lation and push some of them into sending their children to Muslim schools.
Islamophobia and the Left in France

Valls’ conversion into the poster boy for a rigid interpretation of secularism who now advocates for the banning of the headscarf in universities demonstrates how it can be politically expedient to associate oneself with a hardline attitude. This is partly a reaction to how the FN has been able to shape the public debate on issues pertaining to immigration, integration and Islam. The move by social democratic politicians (and their parties) towards the right on ‘cultural issues’ in an attempt to win back voters tempted by extreme right parties is a phenomenon that we can observe across Europe (Bale et al. 2010).

Valls has since gone on to hold senior positions in the French government, most notably Minister of the Interior (2012–2014) and Prime Minister (2014–2016). During both mandates he made statements, which were highly contentious regarding Muslims and Islam. During 2016, he referred to both the headscarf and the ‘burkini’ as embodying the ‘enslavement of women’ and often spoke of the need to combat ‘Islamist totalitarianism’ and defend ‘our culture and security’. Although the latter statement could be interpreted as mere opposition to terrorism, it is clear that such pronouncements are not only aimed at those promoting extremism. During one political meeting in the summer of 2016, Valls claimed that ‘Marianne, the symbol of the Republic, is bare breasted, because she nourishes the people! She is not veiled because she is free, that’s the Republic!’ Such statements are naturally calculated to have the biggest political impact, the latter coming in the wake of the terrorist attack in Nice, the subsequent ‘burkini’ scandal and a long-expected declaration to run for the presidency. In early 2017, Valls was subsequently questioned on national TV by the anti-racist activist Attika Trabelsi on Islamophobia and in particular the abuse and discrimination that women such as her faced for wearing a headscarf. In his response he blamed women for wearing the veil as a political statement [étendard politique] and the influence of Salafists and the Muslim Brotherhood. He also remarked that ‘we can see what is happening in our society and within French Islam and we want to help them to emancipate themselves from these trends that push people towards radicalisation’. Such a declaration is a telling example of how the issue of Muslim women wearing headscarves can be extrapolated and connected with issues of wider ‘Muslim problems’ in society including that of violent extremism.

Manuel Valls was one of the most well-known politicians associated with the PS who voiced such a tough approach with regards to France’s Muslim citizens. Yet his statements seem rather tame when compared with some of his colleagues. Laurence Rossignol, Minister of Families, Children and Women’s Rights in Valls’ government (and in that of his successor Bernard Cazeneuve), received a wave of publicity when in March 2016 she compared Muslim women who veiled with ‘American negroes who were in favour of slavery’ – comments that were naturally picked up in the international media. In the same interview, she also accused such women of being activists for political Islam, a familiar device for justifying opposition to any form of veiling and the fight against Islamophobia (Muhammad 2017). Indeed, the enemy is not so much the symbolism of the headscarf, but more what it might represent in terms of a more extreme version of Islam that is supposedly gaining ground. The idea of the ‘Republic in danger’ due to complacency regarding political Islam has a strong rallying potential which has united many journalists and politicians alike. The former PS regional councillor Céline Pina has become a figurehead for the battle against ‘Islamism’ and the supposed weakness of the French political class faced with its propagation. She reserves particular invective for those on the Left she deems as ‘useful idiots’ who ‘under the cover of defending a cause which in itself is beyond reproach: freedom of religion, tolerance, respect for minorities etc, end up facilitating the destabilisation of society through Islamism’ (Pina 2016, p. 5). These are the so-called Islamo-gauchistes [Islamo-leftists], a term first coined by the academic Pierre-André Taguieff and subsequently popularized by journalists such as Claude Askolovitch and Caroline Fourest, that has now become part of the political vocabulary in France, being regularly used to attack and insult political opponents.
The debate on the Left – Islamo-leftists versus Islamophobes?

The ‘Muslim problem’ is an issue that divides the Left in France and the headscarf had been the main point of contention in relation to domestic politics. The spate of terrorist attacks that the country has faced since 2012 has opened up a new set of fractures as people attempt to make sense of this violence and its relation to Muslims and Islam in France. In this period, which has also seen a rise in anti-Muslim attacks, there has been a rich debate among left-wing intellectuals prompted in particular by the attack on the satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo and the subsequent ‘Je suis Charlie’ movement. One response was the Republican Spring (Printemps républicain) launched in March 2016. This initiative by a group of neo-republican intellectuals and politicians had the aim of finding a ‘third way between the racism directed at Muslims and the denial by the Islamo-gauchistes regarding the rise of radical Islamism’ according to the philosopher and feminist Elisabeth Badinter, one of its most prominent signatories and a veteran of such quarrels regarding Islam. The author of this manifesto, the Professor of Political Science Laurent Bouvet, expressed the right to criticise ‘political Islamism’ without being accused of Islamophobia and claimed that French secularism is being attacked by those (on the Left) who have been brainwashed by a postcolonial ideology that sees Muslims as the new ‘Wretched of the Earth’ who refuse to see the continuity between Islamism and jihadism. Bouvet’s arguments have been described as ‘the expression of a rightward drift on the mainstream left’ (Wolfreys 2018, p. 13) and others see the formation of the Republican Spring as the culmination of a tendency on the Left to produce a discourse about identity that has hints of racism (Muhammad 2017). Those involved in the Republican Spring, on the other hand, regard the use of the term Islamophobia as a dangerous way to shut down any criticism of religion. Somewhat ironically, they have actively campaigned to shut down debate whenever the issue of Islamophobia is discussed on university campuses, often under the pretext that those taking part are ‘Islamists’.

As Nathan Lean’s contribution in this volume demonstrates, there is a long-standing debate regarding the desirability of the term ‘Islamophobia’. In France, this hesitancy to employ the term has been particularly entrenched, notably on the Left. Caroline Fourest has been one of its most virulent critics, famously claiming that ‘Islamophobia’ had been invented by Iranian Mullahs after the 1979 revolution in order to shame those women who refused to veil themselves. The debate on the Left over the use of the term was particularly heated in the period 2003–2004. This was prompted by Claude Imbert, founder of the neo-republican magazine Le Point, who declared in a televised interview that he was an ‘Islamophobe’, considering this a badge of honour. This created a division (even amongst those journalists working for the magazine) between those who criticised Imbert for making such a statement and those who supported it as an act of free speech. One of the first organisations to condemn these comments was the anti-racist group MRAP (Movement against Racism and for Friendship among Peoples) which had, at that time, begun to specifically campaign against Islamophobia. However, by early 2004 there was a clear division in the anti-racist movement in France regarding the use of this term, and much internal discussion within MRAP itself. Indeed, the organisation nearly tore itself apart over this issue, which has still not been resolved. The post-‘Je suis Charlie’ tension in France has had the effect of merely rekindling old battles between the various anti-racist movements. The president of the LICRA (International League against Racism and Antisemitism), Alain Jakubowicz, has made a personal crusade of attacking the term Islamophobia, creating in the process a Twitter storm in November 2016 with the hashtag #idiotsutiles (‘useful idiots’). A similar sentiment had already been proffered by Elisabeth Badinter earlier in the year who stated that the term Islamophobia was merely a way to disqualify someone who disagrees with a strict interpretation of secularism. In a radio interview with France Inter she remarked that:
One needs to be firm and not be afraid of being accused of being an Islamophobe, which for the last few years has been a way of shutting down debate, stopping people from speaking and creating a climate of suspicion around laïcité. When people realise that it is simply a weapon to use against laïcité they will stop being afraid and speak out.25

In the same vein, Pascal Bruckner – another public intellectual, has repeatedly denounced the use of the word Islamophobia.24 In his latest offering entitled ‘An imaginary racism’ (Bruckner 2017) he attacks those on the Left for accepting the term Islamophobia and wallowing in a form of post-colonial guilt. The title itself is indicative of the denial that Muslims in France are facing a specific form of racism. While many of these battles on the Left take place among media pundits and ‘public intellectuals’ the battle lines are also to be found in academia. Houda Asal (2014) has expertly traced the history of the concept of Islamophobia and its use (or avoidance) in the Francophone academic literature. She explains how a number of French academics have openly attacked this term.25 Asal’s review of the literature reveals how ‘Islamophobia’ as a concept has only recently received a measure of legitimacy as a sociological object of study in France. The ideological battle relating to its use occasionally spills out of the ivory towers and into the pages of the mainstream press, most notably the left-wing daily Libération. This goes beyond simple debates about concepts and is instead used to settle scores and undermine the reputations of rivals, most evident in the spat between France’s two best known scholars of political Islam, Gilles Kepel and Olivier Roy (Peace 2016). In one scathing op-ed, Kepel lambasts those academics who ‘employ meaningless buzzwords such as radicalisation and Islamophobia that obscure the research done by the social sciences’.26

Yet despite such strong worded statements, the term is becoming more mainstream in research on racism and xenophobia. The decision of the French watchdog on racism, the CNCDH (National Consultative Commission on Human Rights) to adopt this term in 2014 can be seen as something of a turning point in the debate. Until this point, the commission had always avoided the use of ‘Islamophobia’ in favour of more neutral terms like ‘anti-Muslim acts’ when discussing verbal or physical abuse experienced by Muslims (or those perceived as such).27 In the introduction to its annual report for the year 2013 there is a careful explanation (totalling 9 pages) as to why Islamophobia is now considered as a legitimate term for the organisation, despite the continuing existence of dissenting voices (CNCDH 2014). Reading this justification gives a sense of the deep divide regarding the use of the term ‘Islamophobia’ that exists among scholars despite the trend moving towards its acceptance.

Some on the Left feel that Muslims are being unfairly targeted due to a hysteria surrounding Islam in France. Three recent books illustrate this trend. The first in this vein is Nos mals-aimés (‘Our unloved ones’) by Claude Askolovitch (2013), which offers an account of a France that ‘doesn’t want its Muslims’. This book serves as a sort of mea culpa given the content of his previous journalism and was the direct result of him deciding to leave his job working for the magazine Le Point after a dispute regarding its (mostly unfavourable) coverage of Islam. Askolovitch reveals a shift in attitudes amongst some on the Left, including himself, who feel that things have gone too far in terms of rampant Islamophobia. Another journalist who has spent much time defending Muslims and denouncing Islamophobia (and as a result been heavily criticised for doing so) is Edwy Plenel. The former chief editor of Le Monde, he is one of the founders of the online news outlet Mediapart which offers a critical counterpoint to the more mainstream publications on issues connected to Muslims and Islam. In his book For the Muslims (Plenel 2016) he draws parallels between contemporary Islamophobia and historical antisemitism and compares the situation of Muslims in France to that of the Jews in the past, claiming that
both groups have been essentialised, caricatured and defamed. Regularly accused of being an *Islamo-gauchiste*, Plenel was himself the victim of a caricature by Charlie Hebdo in November 2017 which made national headlines. This controversy was, for some, a good example of a war on the Left when it comes to issues related to Muslims, Islam and secularism. The third book to mention is the demographer Emmanuel Todd’s *Who is Charlie?* (Todd 2015) written in the wake of the ‘Je suis Charlie’ movement. This deliberately provocative assessment of the nation’s response to the tragedy in 2015 rightly points to the demonization of Islam in France despite being a ‘grossly simplistic interpretation of the huge demonstrations of 11 January’ (Esteves 2016, p. 170). There is a clear divide between two distinct voices on the Left. One which seems itself as the defenders of Republican and secular values (that their opponents denigrate as Islamophobes and reactionaries), while the other seeks to defend Muslims from the climate of fear in France (the so-called *Islamo-gauchistes*). The latter pleads for a recognition of the objective existence of Islamophobia that is sometimes even promoted, even if inadvertently, by the former.

**Conclusion**

What this chapter illustrates is that the French left has a difficult relationship with Islamophobia both as a social phenomenon and as a concept. There is a rich debate which, over time, indicates an increased acceptance of the devastating effects of anti-Muslim racism in society, whatever name we want to call it. Rather than resorting to facile conclusions about the link between the French left’s obsession with *laïcité* and the promotion of Islamophobia, I think it helps if we acknowledge that certain interpretations of secularism in the French context have contributed, whether directly or indirectly, to increased suspicions with respect to Muslims living in France. When the Left is guilty of Islamophobic discourse, it is often founded on the values of anti-clericalism as well as the fight against ‘Islamism’ and sexism; rather than the blunt racism of the right (Hajjat and Mohammed 2013). What seems to bother many on the Left is that a Muslim identity still exists despite the promises of a French universalism that was supposed to do away with difference. There is ‘a segment of the secular Left that in the 1980s defended the rights of immigrants against the Front National [that] is indignant that the children of those immigrants display a Muslim identity’ (Roy 2007, p. 4). This attitude does have the potential to develop into outright anti-Muslim racism through blogs and websites such as *Riposte laïque*. Yet this is not the norm and not everyone who defends French secularism is a racist, despite ‘a good deal of scholarship that has cast French neo-republicanism – and especially *laïcité* – as an intolerable attack on liberal pluralism, or simply as a thinly veiled form of neo-colonial domination targeted at Muslims’ (Chabal 2015, p. 30). The point is that the zeal for defending French secularism, even if pursued with progressive intent, often leads to *de facto* discrimination, usually against women wearing the headscarf. When such women are instructed to remove offending items of fabric from their heads because they are deemed to violate the ‘neutrality’ of the secular public space, it can only have the effect of exasperating an existing sentiment of feeling unwelcome and excluded.

The debate on the Left is constantly evolving and the term ‘Islamophobia’ is becoming increasingly mainstream as evidenced by its invocation by former President François Hollande in the wake of the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks (Esteves 2016). The primary race to become the Socialist Party’s presidential candidate in early 2017 was further evidence of how things might be changing. The winning candidate, Benoît Hamon, denounced the fact that *laïcité* had ‘become a convenient pretext for a virulent and offensive against Islam’. Since the elections of June 2017, there are members of France’s National Assembly who openly denounce Islamophobia such as
Danièle Obono and Clémentine Autain representing the radical left party *La France Insoumise* (France Unbowed). Similarly, Marlène Schiappa the current Secretary of State in charge of Equality between Women and Men has also stated that banning women wearing headscarves on school trips amounts to nothing less than Islamophobia. Despite these signs, there are still those that need convincing that it is necessary to fight against Islamophobia and that using the term does not mean you are siding with extremists or opposing the critique of religion. Some are attempting to make this argument (Muhammad 2017) but the task is not facilitated when much of the Left prefers to argue about who has the correct interpretation of secularism rather than agreeing on the need to fight anti-Muslim prejudice. In this sense, the French case is indeed an exception but in order to move forward, a genuine debate needs to take place, without one side being silenced. This seems to be a long way off, but there are at least signs of change.

**Acknowledgement**

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**Notes**

1. To this list we could, of course, also add the vast academic production in French on the topic.
2. This is not to say that France is unique when it comes to Islamophobia emanating from the Left. Nadia Fadil (2010) has documented a similar phenomenon in neighbouring Belgium and here I follow her use of ‘the Left’ as a descriptive rather than a normative category to refer to politicians, intellectuals and journalists who would describe *themselves* as being on the Left and/or ‘progressive’.
3. To view these statistics see the website of the CCIF www.islamophobie.net/rapport-2017/
4. See ‘A quoi sert l’Observatoire de la laïcité?’ *Le Monde*, 23 January 2016. This division opposes on the one side the President Jean-Louis Bianco, regularly accused of complacency or laxism, and members such as Patrick Kessel who runs the *Comité Laïcité République* which adheres to a very restrictive interpretation of secularism (see below).
5. This interpretation owes much to a report authored by right-wing politician François Baroin in 2003 entitled *Pour une nouvelle laïcité* (Hajjat and Mohammed 2013).
6. It should be noted that initially the idea of banning headscarves in universities was rejected because the students who study there are adults and therefore the guiding role of the state is not an imperative. More recently though, the possibility of extending such a ban to universities has been discussed (for example during the 2017 presidential election campaign).
7. In total there were 494 votes in favour of the law, 36 against and 31 abstentions. See www.assemblee-nationale.fr/12/scrutins/jo0436.asp.
8. It should be noted that many politicians on the Left decided to not take part with a total of only 336 members of the National Assembly actually casting a vote. www.assemblee-nationale.fr/13/scrutins/jo0595.asp It has been suggested that Gerin’s use of Islamophobia was an electoral gamble based on the shift to the right of working class voters in former Communist strongholds such as Vénissieux (Quartiers XXI 2015).
9. In 2005 a government initiative was launched entitled the *Fondation des œuvres de l’islam de France* (FOIF) which was designed, amongst other things, to resolve the issue of how mosques and Islamic associations were financed without relying on funds from abroad. This idea was revived in 2016 in the wake of the terrorist attacks that had rocked France. See ‘La Fondation des œuvres de l’islam relancée après dix ans d’échecs’, *Le Monde*, 2 August 2016.
11. While opposition to Islam has become a unifying political issue across the European extreme right, it is worth remembering that in the French case this has been a key theme since the Algerian War (Mammone 2015).
This debate took place on the television programme *L’Emission Politique* (France 2) on 5 January 2017. A video of the exchange can be viewed at www.youtube.com/watch?v=owQeLF3hB7Q.

This strategy nearly cost him his seat in parliament as during the elections in June 2017 his constituency was hotly contested and he was only re-elected with the thinnest of margins (139 votes). His opponent in the second round, Farida Amrani, even launched an appeal with the *Conseil constitutionnel*. Valls quit the PS at the end of that month in order to sit with Macron’s parliamentary majority. He subsequently decided to quit French politics (and give up his seat in parliament) in 2018 in order to run for Mayor of Barcelona.


See ‘Peut-on accuser les députés FI d’“islamo-gauchisme” comme l’a fait Valls?’, *Libération*, 5 October 2017.

In this article Caroline Fourest describes the *Islamo-gauchistes* as those who ‘in the name of a communitarian (communautariste) and Americanised vision of identity, fight against universalist feminism and secularism’.

In March 2012 Mohammed Merah killed three soldiers as well as three children and a teacher at a Jewish school in Toulouse and Montauban. Incidents also occurred in 2013 and 2014 before the wave of attacks that has hit the country since 2015 culminating in the November 2015 Paris attacks that left 130 people dead.

See ‘Des personnalités de gauche se mobilisent pour la laïcité’, *Le Monde*, 18 March 2016. Despite her wealth, Badinter is usually considered to be part of the Left due to her commitment to feminism and through association with her husband, Robert Badinter, who was a prominent member of the PS (and former Minister of Justice). As with many of the public figures described in this chapter, this characterisation of her as part of the Left would be disputed by many.

Ibid.

During the writing of this chapter, a national controversy erupted over the hosting of an academic conference on Islamophobia in Lyon. This was subsequently cancelled after a campaign on social media led by personalities connected with the Republican Spring. See ‘L’annulation d’un colloque universitaire sur l’islamophobie fait début à Lyon’, *Le Monde*, 11 October 2017.

See ‘Ne pas confondre islamophobes et laïcs’, *Libération*, 17 November 2003. The theory about the Iranian Mullahs has since been debunked, most notably by Hajjat and Mohammed (2013).


An excerpt from this interview can be viewed at www.youtube.com/watch?v=D7eNeiV6G0s.

Bruckner is considered as one of the *Nouveaux philosophes* – public intellectuals who, although previously Leftists, later abandoned Marxism and advocated a critique of totalitarianism, in particular Communism. They came to prominence in the 1970s but by the mid-1980s ‘their methodology, approach and conclusions had been severely criticised by other philosophers as simplistic, reductive and facile’ (Chabal 2015, p. 44).

This includes Pierre-André Taguieff. In fact, the title of the first academic book in French dealing with Islamophobia, *La Nouvelle Islamophobie* (Geisser 2003) was a response to Taguieff’s book on antisemitism *La Nouvelle Judéophobie* (Taguieff 2002).


In fact, 10 years earlier the CNCDH was rather critical of the term ‘Islamophobia’ as revealed in a draft of its report for 2003. See ‘L’“islamophobie” et la judéophobie font la polémique’, *Libération*, 22 November 2003.

The title of Plenel’s book *Pour les musulmans*, first published in 2014, is a direct reference to an article written by Émile Zola entitled ‘Pour les Juifs’. It was aimed as a response to the comments of neo-republican intellectual Alain Finkielkraut who had stated in a radio interview that there was a ‘problem with Islam in France’. See the subsequent debate between Plenel and Finkielkraut in 2014 at www.youtube.com/watch?v=evURJlW-Jw.

Plenel was caricatured on the front page of the satirical newspaper which insinuated that Mediapart had deliberately covered up knowledge of alleged sexual assaults by the Swiss Muslim intellectual Tariq Ramadan. See ‘“Charlie” contre “Mediapart” vu du Royaume-Uni: “Une discussion consternante’, *Le Monde*, 15 November 2017.
30 See the special section ‘La querelle de l’après-“Charlie”’ published in *Le Monde*, 7 May 2015, which includes the fierce reaction to Todd’s book by then Prime Minister Manuel Valls: ‘Non, la France du 11 janvier n’est pas une imposture’, www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2015/05/07/la-querelle-de-l-apres-charlie_4629495_3232.html.

31 A notable example is *Riposte laïque*, a website that initially claimed an affiliation with the Left there is now a clear overlap with elements of the extreme right (Hajjat and Mohammed 2013).

32 In one example picked up by the press, at the award ceremony for the *prix de la laïcité* (organised by the *Comité Laïcité Républice*) in October 2015, the journalist Suheda Asik was asked to remove her headscarf ‘out of respect’ for Paris City Hall in which the ceremony was taking place.


34 This quote comes from an article written for the *Huffington Post* in 2014 (see www.huffingtonpost.fr/marlene-schiappa-bruguiere/manuel-valls-quartiers-populaires-antisemites_b_5606114.html). Schiappa’s comments were then used to attack her once she entered the government.

References


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