

To Count or Not to Count: The Debate on Ethnic and Diversity Statistics in France Today

Jean-Loup Amselle

EHESS (Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales)

54 boulevard Raspail

75006 Paris

amselle@atacama.ehess.fr

The purpose of this talk is less to provide an answer or a solution aimed at asserting the extent of discrimination in France than to offer an analysis of the process of ethnicization which can be witnessed today. Three points will be tackled: the conjuncture, the political market of ethnicization, and the institutional market that is linked to it.

The Conjecture

The present conjuncture, marked by the election of Nicolas Sarkozy as French president on 6 May 2007, is characterized by the rise of the ideas of race, ethnicity and the biologization of social relations. Several examples bear witness to this trend: the creation of a Ministry of National Identity, Immigration and Co-development; the proposed use of DNA tests to prove biological links when immigrants apply for family regrouping, the only form of legal immigration, the aborted creation of the Institute for Research on Immigration and Integration chaired by H  l  ne Carr  re d'Encausse, a member of the French Academy who will be infamously remembered for her openly racist declarations during the suburban riots of November 2005; and the attempted introduction of ethnic statistics, which was temporarily suspended by the Constitutional Council in November 2007 but is now once again gathering momentum with the advent of the Sabeg-H  ran Commission (COMEDD), the focus of our attention here (Y. Sabeg is Government Commissioner for Diversity and Equal Opportunity, Fran  ois H  ran is Director of the INED, National Institute for Demographic Studies).

All these examples show that we are witnessing what Michel Foucault called an extension of biopolitics and a surveillance policy in France. The paradox, however, is that the two components of this policy (biopower and surveillance), which are a reminder of the presence of National Front leader Jean-Marie Le Pen's ideas within government and therefore come under Foucauldian criticism, are also somewhat reinforced by the concomitant rise of

postcolonial ideas, these ideas being themselves a product of “French Theory,” namely the Heideggerian deconstructive Left.

It was indeed the deconstruction of the great narratives inherited from the Enlightenment, the Republican narratives, and the narratives of class struggle which allowed for the development—on the Left or in part of the Left—of a postmodern and postcolonial narrative focused on the recognition, in a multicultural context, of ethnicity, race, visible minorities, in a word, of the “fragment”[\(1\)](#).

It therefore becomes apparent that beyond the recognition of difference(s)—or *diversité* (diversity) as we say in France—the notions of culture, ethnicity, and multiculturalism have, through a sort of boomerang effect, resulted in strengthening the dominant “White” catholic national identity, that of *Français de souche* (people of French stock) as they say in the National Front, or *souchiens*, the term preferred by the “Indigènes de la République.”

In fact, we have witnessed the convergence of the ideas of race, ethnicity, and biopolitics between the Right (especially the hardcore Right, represented by Brice Hortefeux) and the multicultural and postcolonial Left, both of which—for opposite reasons—were led to proclaim the principle of race as a structuring element of French society.

This growing emphasis on the principle of race makes the antiracist battle, which was itself criticized by Pierre-André Taguieff at the beginning of the 1990s in the name of anti-racism, extremely hard to fight. The Left has indeed broken ranks in the face of the presence of members of “visible minorities” in the French government (Rachida Dati, former minister of Justice, Fadela Amara, secretary of state for urban affairs, Rama Yade, former secretary of state for human rights), a presence matched with a frenzied defense of French identity[\(2\)](#). The constant repetition of concepts such as French identity, the positive role of colonization, the legitimacy of *pied-noir* memory or controlled immigration goes well with the promotion of identities of color and race, at least for those who managed to slip through the net, are well integrated, and brightly display the theme of “glitter” identity (*diversité “paillettes”*).

While a front was able to form against the creation of the Institute for Research on Immigration and Integration, for example, the foundations of this new institution started to crumble as soon as the possible introduction of ethnic statistics was mentioned. This soon highlighted a split in the political spectrum. On one side, the Republicans in the French sense of the term (SOS-Racisme, the Movement against Racism and for Friendship between Peoples [MRAP], the International League against Racism and Anti-Semitism [LICRA], and the Human Rights League [LDH]) advocate Republican action against acts of discrimination. They consider that the battle that needs to be fought first is that against racism and those who discriminate—a fight that does not directly involve those who are discriminated against.

That is why they oppose the use of ethnic statistics and propose “testing” as an alternative method of detecting racism. This method consists, for example, of sending out members of visible minorities to nightclubs to see if they are refused entry. However, as it is based on the definition of “visible minorities,” this scheme has come under criticism from the advocates of ethnic statistics, who do not see the difference between the Republicans’ stance and what they themselves propose.⁽³⁾ It is worth noting that some of those who oppose ethnic statistics are or have been members of organizations fighting for the recognition of “visible minorities” (the Representative Council of Black Associations [CRAN], supported by NAACP and the American Embassy in France, for example).

At the other end of the spectrum, the multicultural and postcolonial Left and Far Left are advocating the introduction of “diversity statistics,” which they see as the only means of combating discrimination. They also argue that the recognition of ethnic groups and races is essential to explain the suburban riots of November 2005. Some members of the multicultural Left have, for instance, helped the government to introduce “diversity” in higher education and as a consequence, have joined the Sabeg-Heran Commission. It must be noted that French Socialist MPs have rallied to this position and are now advocating the introduction of ethnic statistics.⁽⁴⁾ There are, however, dissident voices within the party, including Malek Boutih, the party’s national secretary in charge of social issues. The New Anticapitalist Party (NPA), led by Olivier Besancenot, has also declared itself in favor of “positive discrimination”/affirmative action.

The government itself and the Right are also divided over the issue of ethnic statistics : Yazid Sabeg is naturally in favor, but other people like Fadela Amara, Alain Juppé, and Henri Guaino are against, and Jean-François Copé is “reluctant.” The positions of Louis Schweitzer, president of the HALDE (High Authority of Struggle against Discriminations) and Patrick Weil, an influent expert on immigration matters are unclear. In fact, the situation changes everyday, but Patrick Gaubert, who was appointed by Sarkozy to head the High Council on Integration (HCI) and is the president of LICRA, has recently created his own commission to oppose ethnic statistics.

Should we conclude that race and ethnicity are now at the forefront of the political struggle and that these principles have torn apart the Right/Left divide? Yes and no.

Yes, because one can ask whether the “racial” argument has not become a diversion, a camouflage that allows the evacuation of social concerns and provides a cheap qualitative response to costly quantitative needs (purchasing power). For example, without changing the headcount, it doesn’t cost any more to increase the number of black or *beur* police officers⁽⁵⁾. The struggle for the recognition of ethnicity and race is, without doubt, one of the major issues of our time, at least in France. It is at the root of Sarkozy’s “open-door” policy, as it enables him to transcend and literally blow up the Right/Left divide, which nevertheless reappears from time to time, as was the case during the municipal elections of

2008.

No, because it can be argued that race and ethnicity are markers that allow for all possible political positionings. It is highly likely that some politicians in the presidential majority care precious little about ethnic statistics and that opposing this measure is just a way of marking their distance from Sarkozy. In fact, the president himself and his entourage do not have a clear stance on this issue. Are we then talking about divergent ideas or simply alternative strategies (several irons in the fire) aimed at a political market?

The Political Market and Ethnicization

Is there a market for ethnicity, particularism, the “fragment” in France today? Isn’t all this about fragmenting the nation or acknowledging its fragmentation, making it exist in a performative mode or as a self-fulfilling prophecy? Indeed, the problem facing leaders today is the multiplication of contradictory identity claims in an era of globalization and diasporas (the right for Israel to exist, the right for Palestinians to have a state, the right for Turkey to join the European Union, the right for Armenians to have “their” genocide recognized, etc.).

Fragmentation itself, the belief in fragmentation or the staging of fragmentation make it possible to ride the expectations of French society by appealing to the aspirations of the different constituencies that compose it or into which it is divided—White, Catholic, Jewish, Black, North African, second-generation immigrant, repatriated *pieds-noirs*, etc.

To divide and rule over voters and thus operate a new division of society in order to make it a malleable political body is thus the primary function of the debate over ethnic statistics. Consequently, one must not have the wrong debate nor fight the wrong battle. The issue is not so much to argue over the relevance of ethnic statistics to measure discrimination—whatever the definition of discrimination may be—as to discuss the place this debate occupies on the French political scene, including on the Left and Far Left. Isn’t this debate, across the whole political spectrum, all about a positioning strategy? Isn’t it a political offer, formulated in terms of diversity, that can be labeled “glitter,” and that is based less on “multicultural” or “republican” beliefs than on the desire to occupy and dominate political space, including within one’s own camp?

From this point of view, notions like “ethnic statistics,” “diversity,” or discrimination are more slogans, stakes, or markers aimed at the political conversation than the focus of an in-depth debate.

The Institutional Market of Ethnicization

A similar reasoning can probably be applied to research institutes (National Institute of Demographic Studies [INED], National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies [INSEE], etc.) and polling organizations, for which the issues of ethnic statistics, measuring

diversity, and discrimination represent high financial stakes. In France this type of survey now constitutes a very promising financial and institutional market for these institutes, which are on the cusp between research and the direct operation of the state apparatus (this is, *mutatis mutandis*, the equivalent of “ethnic marketing” in the corporate world). This is not to say that institutions like the National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS), the School for Advanced Studies in Social Sciences (EHESS) and to some extent the Institute of Research for Development (IRD), are totally detached from the state, but they are less directly operational, whatever researchers belonging to institutions engaged in the “ethnicity hunt” might say. Again, in statistics or demographic organizations like the INSEE or the INED, the practice of “ethnic” surveys can go hand in hand with a positioning on the Left or the Far Left, because these surveys are carried out in the name of the fight against discrimination and particular pockets of handicap, and therefore against the republican universalism that is accused of covering differences with a “veil of ignorance” (Rawls). As a result, the focus has shifted from the social question to the racial or ethnic question in the name of the recognition of diversity and discrimination, the latter explaining for example the riots of November 2005(6).

In this perspective, the fact that race(s) would take over from social class(es) means that the ethnicization of social relations would become an objective characteristic of these very social relations. The Marxist and/or Republican Left, incapable of accounting for these new racial social relations, have allegedly paved the way for postcolonial stances. In the perspective offered here, by contrast, the ethnicization of social relations is the result of a boomerang effect operated by some social players on the basis of colonial categories such as “Black,” “Black African,” “negro,” or “negritude” in particular and of the performative recording by the state apparatus of ethnic statistics and the subsequent creation of vertical cuts in society. In the present discussion, the question has shifted from ethnic statistics to that of *ressenti* (inner feeling).(7) What exactly is recorded when one claims to pay attention to the “inner feelings” of respondents—the ultimate weapon of the defenders of “measuring diversity”? The recent and particularly vague term *ressenti* has been borrowed from industrial psychology and meteorology. It refers to ethnic and racial representations, categories, and stereotypes that are in the spirit of the times and possess a collective, autonomous existence that is independent of the will of the people concerned. It is these stereotypes that social players themselves reappropriate individually.(8) Measuring diversity is not only about recording it; it is also about making it happen, creating it.(9) Identifying the people that are discriminated against is creating identities. Indeed, every term that is used (Black, Jewish, North African, Gypsy, etc.) has a history: each term appeared at a particular time under particular circumstances and was replaced by another term in other circumstances. Each term is the result of a struggle between those who name, assign an identity and those who are labeled, find themselves confined in some identity or refuse to be.

To conclude, it seems that one cannot *a priori* define the identity of an individual on the

basis of their mono- or even multi-identity, and that the chosen identity (*ressenti*) is not the result of free determination but of the appropriation of pre-existing categories, which carry an entire history and a whole string of prejudices.

It would appear that the question of ethnic statistics or the measuring of diversity relates as much to language philosophy (Austin) or conversational analysis (Gumperz) as it does to demography, sociology or anthropology.

Translated from the French by Raphaël Jacquet

Notes

1. The theme of the “fragment” was developed particularly by M. Hardt, T. Negri & N. Guilhot, *Multitude, War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, New York, The Penguin Press, 2004. See also G. Spivak’s notion of “strategic essentialism.” For a more general discussion on this topic, see Jean-Loup Amselle, *L’Occident décroché, enquête sur les postcolonialismes*, Paris, Stock, 2008. ([back](#))
2. For example, after his party’s defeat in the municipal elections of March 2008, Nicolas Sarkozy visited Toulon accompanied by Brice Hortefeux after having kept away from him in the public eye for a long time. ([back](#))
3. On another note, surveys based on surnames are equally questionable: a French Jew of North African origin may share the same surname with a Muslim from a North African country. ([back](#))
4. *Le Monde*, 20 February 2009. ([back](#))
5. My contention here concurs with Walter Benn Michaels’ ideas in his book *The Trouble with Diversity, How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality*, New York, Metropolitan Books, 2006. ([back](#))
6. Didier and Eric Fassin (eds), *De la question sociale à la question raciale*, La Découverte, 2006 ; Robert Castel, *La discrimination négative*, Le Seuil, 2007, Pap N’Diaye, *La condition noire*, Calmann-Lévy, 2008 ([back](#))
7. See François Héran’s interview in *Le Monde*, 5 March 2009. ([back](#))
8. This reappropriation pattern could be described as follows. First, it starts with the existence of “stigmas” which can be colonial (but not only), racist (the stereotypes concerning Jews and Gypsies have no colonial origin) or, more generally, stem from a stake between those who assign and those who are assigned. The second phase is that of the *ressenti* which is the result of the reversal of these stigmas and of their reappropriation by

individuals. Finally, the third phase is the creation of a system of reference or “color chart” used for the elaboration of questionnaires and ethnic statistics.[\(back\)](#)

9. Contrary to Patrick Simon’s assertions in *Le Monde* of 3 April 2009. [\(back\)](#)