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Denial of Denial: Color-Blind Racism and Academic Silencing in France Iseult Mc Nulty

Abstract

In February 2021, the French minister of higher education, Frédérique Vidal, publicly condemned postcolonial, decolonial, intersectionality, gender, and racial studies. Contending that a radical faction of the Left is wreaking havoc on universities and dividing French society, she emphasized her disagreement with studies relating to race, arguing that the concept is biologically unsound—regardless of its material or social reality. The minister suggested that an investigation be launched to examine the radical Left’s dissemination of divisive ideologies that are allegedly corroding academia as well as French society and Republican values.

This article harnesses Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s theorization of color-blind racism through the lens of French Republicanism, as well as postcolonial and decolonial theory, in order to unpack the epistemological violence at play in this controversy. Why is scholarship on race framed as a threat to core Republican values? What does this mean for academic freedom?

In February 2021, the French minister of higher education, Frédérique Vidal, suggested that an investigation be launched into the corrosion of academic institutions that she termed as belonging to the “radical Left” (Delaporte 2021). The word she used was “Islamist-leftism”—an elusive umbrella term that accuses leftists who support Palestinians of complicity with Islamist terrorism (Faure 2020). Associating and critiquing postcolonial, decolonial, intersectional, gender, and racial studies, her

investigation would examine the ways “rampant leftism” pushes a politically divisive agenda that threatens *les valeurs de la République*, or French Republican values (Fassin 2021). This article will focus on her specific line of argumentation, which leads her to contend that research relating to colonialism and race only serves to “fracture and divide,” making her assault on academia one undeniably bound up in race (Plowright 2021).

Following the death of George Floyd in May 2020 in the United States, French antiracist activists sought to bring the conversation on institutional racism into the French context. Various government officials, including the current president, Emmanuel Macron, rejected any claims that structural, institutional, or systemic racism is relevant in the French context (France Inter 2021). Resistance to postcolonial and decolonial ideas is neither new nor specific to France. However, I argue that given the unique aspects of the French Republic’s approach to race, this particular controversy has taken on an inherently French quality.

Legally, the French Republic does not recognize race, viewing the concept as biologically and scientifically unsound. However, many theorists point out that while any biological understanding of race should be rejected, it does have a social and ontological reality and should be regarded “as an organizational principle of the social world” (Hamilton 2020, 2). In the French context, “acknowledging race or using racial categories [is considered to be] incompatible with fighting racism” (Fleming 2017, 6). Whatever its intent, this refusal to recognize race as a social fact has cultivated a denial of the deleterious and violent expression of the reality of race: racism. The salience of racism in French society remains hidden behind the state’s color-blind rhetoric (Browne 2009). Color-blindness is simply a new adaptation of racism, one where racism exists “without racists” (Bonilla-Silva 2016, 6).

This essay harnesses academic research on race and racism in France in order to determine why scholarship on race is framed as a threat to core Republican values and what this means for academic freedom.

I use Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s work to demonstrate how a racially color-blind ideology has become a French Republican article of faith, bordering on an existential credo. I will apply postcolonial and decolonial

theory to suggest that this is precisely why academic research on race has come under fire from government officials, compromising the tenets of academic freedom.

Color-Blindness as a French Republican Doctrine

The conceptual framework Bonilla-Silva builds to analyze color-blind discourse proves extremely informative for a French context. He contends that in the aftermath of the civil rights movement, with the end of legal and explicit white supremacy, the United States underwent an ideological shift from formal, overt racism to covert, color-blind racism. The situation for racial minorities in the United States may not be as dire now as it was then, but color-blind ideology is nevertheless an enduring form of racism withstood by “practices . . . that are more sophisticated and subtle than those typical of the Jim Crow era,” while being just “as effective as the old ones in maintaining the racial status quo” (Bonilla-Silva 2006, 25). Although Bonilla-Silva’s work concentrates on a US context, Stuart Hall’s (1997) conception of race as a “floating signifier” reminds us of the plasticity of race and the adaptable nature of racism. Race has ebbed and flowed through time and space, and has the capacity to change and reconfigure itself as it moves (Wolfe 2016). Carefully applying Bonilla-Silva’s theoretical framework to a French context while being mindful of France’s Republican specificities, this article eschews the common conception that racism in the United States and in France are incomparable.

Color-blindness is a new adaptation of racism that relies on the denial and depoliticization of racial issues (Lê Espiritu and Puar 2015). The view that French society is postracial and that racism is essentially over fuels the refusal to acknowledge the structural nature of racism, which perpetuates the unequal racial status quo and “muddies the waters of mainstream conversations and understandings of race” (Reynolds 2019, 8). This use of color-blindness does not seek to make society more equitable but only “functions to make white privilege invisible” (Browne 2009, 78). “We must be clear that ‘color-blind’ rhetoric—whether from the French state itself or from individual academics—reinforces white supremacy” (Fleming 2020, 2). Scholars and activists whose work centers

race are seen as fueling racial animus, stripping away the “historical basis, severity and power” of racism as a structure (Song 2014, 107).

The French method of combatting racism, so far, has been one of “racial avoidance” (Fleming 2017, 6). Through the categorical rejection of the concept of race, France firmly upholds its color-blind approach (Keaton 2010). French Republicanism stresses the importance of equality but simultaneously seems to deny the state’s role in perpetuating inequalities, making it nearly impossible to provide critical solutions (Khanna 2011). Despite having been heavily criticized by academics who specialize in the study of race, Republicanism has become so naturalized (and unconditionally and uncritically taken for granted) that the Republican rhetoric of color-blindness is used as a shield against any criticism of the state (Kisukidi et al. 2021). One of the most important limits of the French approach is that it focuses on individual manifestations of racism while ignoring the fact that “the state is a key actor in the process of racialization” (Garner 2017, 52). The conditions of French citizenship are that one can only be Republican, or an individual member of the Republic, which is why any reference to “race” or “ethnicity” has been removed from the Constitution and national censuses (Kervran 2020). By “making invisible the making of people invisible,” the French state has distanced itself from racism while ignoring its own role in creating and perpetuating it (Valluvan 2016, 2244).

Since “colonial atrocities are understood as the negation of French Republican ideals rather than ones that developed with them,” it has become difficult to study how state-enforced systemic racial discrimination undermines the very foundations of Republican principles (Khanna 2011, 197). French and Francophone postcolonial and decolonial scholars have produced a significant body of research pointing to the limits of Republican color-blindness. These authors seek to develop their theories in the French context, to explore the impact of colonialism on metropolitan France and to deconstruct contemporary inequalities by unpacking their colonial roots (Sékongo and Yéo 2007). In other words, they flip studies of colonialism on their head by exploring the consequences for the colonial power rather than for the formerly colonized. The collective aphasia of the Republic’s capacity to brutalize,

exclude, and discriminate is extremely important for the formation of a national myth and to sustain the illusion that the French state is immune to racism (Stoler 2011).

Epistemological Violence

Bonilla-Silva's map of color-blind racism demonstrates how, in addition to socioeconomic and political exploitation, a large part of the establishment of European domination over the rest of the (colonized) world was epistemological (Bonilla-Silva 2006). The Enlightenment-era's thirst for knowledge and pursuit of truth is often credited with resulting in the construction of liberal philosophies—such as French Republicanism—that have since served as the foundation for contemporary democracies (Tuhiwai Smith 2012). Racism as a system was developed alongside the emergence of modern nation-states, including the contemporary French Republic (Goldberg 2002). While critical race theory explores and reflects upon the roots of the world order inherited from Enlightenment philosophy, postcolonial and decolonial authors seek to uncover how the legacies of chattel enslavement and colonization can explain modern socioeconomic and political inequalities (Maldonado-Torres 2016). The concepts of modernity and rationality are products of Enlightenment thinking that are fundamentally intertwined with the history of imperial colonization, racial formation, and the development of global white supremacy (Omi and Winant 2014). It is hence argued that since race is the cornerstone of “modernity,” the belief in Western, and white, superiority is the foundation of Western epistemology (Quijano 2000). This belief was developed to justify the subjugation, enslavement, and colonization of nonwhite peoples. Modern manifestations of race (and correspondingly, of racism) remain rooted in the same belief in white superiority, although this sentiment is much more covert than it was in past centuries (Fleming 2017).

Edward Said (1978, 205) refers to the sense of entitlement embedded in the Enlightenment mindset as a “positional superiority” that almost precedes imperial and colonial violence. This belief in inherent Western superiority enabled the level of violence that went hand in hand with colonial projects. “The Enlightenment provided the spirit, the impetus,

the confidence, and the political and economic structures that facilitated the search for new knowledges” (Tuhiwai Smith 2012, 61). If we seek to excavate the ways structures of oppression are intellectually bolstered, it is interesting to examine, in addition to the classification and hierarchies imposed on bodies (racism), the ways coloniality is embedded in the production of knowledge. A pillar of decolonial thought is the aim to challenge the West’s “epistemological dominance,” or the idea that Europe is the center, the core, and the rest of the world is the periphery of what is and should be considered of value (Bhambra 2014, 120). Decolonial studies propose a new “geopolitics of knowledge” that seek to include and center “the Other” and “Other” epistemologies in order to demystify “the West’s view of itself as the center of legitimate knowledge, the arbiter of what counts as knowledge and the source of ‘civilized’ knowledge” (Tuhiwai Smith 2012, 66). Historically, colonialism and its associated belief systems played a highly influential role in the decimation of the knowledge of the colonized. This essay argues not only that this epistemological power dynamic continues to permeate our ways of knowing but also that it is the very reason why research seeking to unpack the legacies of colonial structures (that is, the persistence of racism) is under attack (Harawi 2020). Counternarratives and knowledge produced from the periphery are deemed illegitimate and even dangerous. Indeed, what counts as fact remains under the authority of those who “[shape] the parameters of legitimate knowledge,” which ultimately serves to undermine epistemologies from the margins (Aked 2020, 117).

Addressing Western epistemological dominance, Gayatri Spivak (1999, 59) asks, “Who will listen [to Third World authors]?” The inability of non-Western, nonwhite authors, or authors who produce knowledge from the peripheries to be taken seriously is inherently the result of epistemological violence, or the embodiment of an ongoing coloniality of mind (Wa Thiong’o 1992). Western-centric hierarchies of knowledge are such that the knowledge produced by marginalized authors (which may account for their lived experience) is itself marginalized and delegitimized (Tuhiwai Smith 2012). Furthermore, there is evidence that suggests that academics of color are “actively punished . . . when [their work] discomfits the status quo,” and the controversy at hand is arguably

a concrete example of this (Lê Espiritu and Puar 2015, 66). Indeed, “minority representatives or experts are very seldom heard in a credible, authoritative way” (Van Dijk 2013, 271), and, moreover, “certain bodies [are constructed] as threatening, dangerous, and uncivil,” an accusation more likely to be “thrown at bodies of color, of immigrants, of queers” (Lê Espiritu and Puar 2015, 64–65). Academic freedom is thus not granted equally to everyone: “Suppression of academic freedom is especially pronounced for socially defined black faculty who critically examine white supremacy,” which ultimately serves to ensure that the racial status quo remains unchallenged (Reynolds 2020, 388). Not only do governments fail to protect minority academics but the assault on critical thinking by those very governments exacerbates racialized and gendered threats on those scholars (Harawi 2020). For instance, the Islamophobic language used by the French minister and state in their McCarthyistic attack on critical thought marginalizes Muslim students and academics and further reinforces Islamophobic racism in France (ibid., see also Kisukidi et al. 2021).

Conclusion

To contextualize this body of theory within Vidal’s statement, critical authors working to decolonize academia, and eventually society more broadly, are faced with a “concurrent rise of colonial nostalgia and white supremacy among some academics” (Sultana 2018, 228). Their academic freedom to research race, coloniality, intersectionality, and social justice is under assault by fellow academics as well as by the state, precisely because their research may result in the dissemination of knowledge that is critical of the state and that may compromise the dominant class’s hegemony. The idea that young people from marginalized sections of French society may be “seduced” by these decolonial ideas poses a real threat to the dominant white bourgeoisie’s position of power (Kisukidi et al. 2021). It is in the interest of “those who benefit from injustices and inequalities” to repress these ideas (Sultana 2018, 231). The French state’s witch hunt against these schools of thought is unsurprising since “systemic and institutional racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination are often maintained through acts of silencing” (Sultana

2018, 250). The ruling factions of French society are protecting their interests by perpetuating epistemological violence, discrediting and delegitimizing counternarratives that stem from the peripheries and that seek to rethink our world order.

The idea that academia is under such a threat that it requires governmental intervention is a mischaracterization of the issue: real problems (that is, racism) are not addressed, and nonproblems (that is, the supposed corruption of French Republican values by academia) are overaddressed (Harawi 2020). The color-blind, Republican discursive matrix deployed by the French state serves as a rebuttal against discourses critical of the state's approach to race. Due to the embeddedness of color-blindness within Republicanism, the denunciation of racism is seen as an attack on France itself. This sophism echoes Teun Van Dijk's (2013) argument that within racism denial the accusation of racism is so intolerable that the accuser becomes the true racist. This analysis confirms that "denials of racism are not tropes existing in a vacuum. . . . They also serve a very specific sociopolitical function: they challenge the very legitimacy of antiracist analysis" (Zia-Ebrahimi 2020, 317).

Furthermore, the very nature of epistemological dominance entails the impossibility that the hegemonic class or dominant group will truly reckon with counterhegemonic narratives due to its inherent delegitimization of them (Tuhivai Smith 2012). This fascinating narcissism has fueled the Republican refusal to hear or acknowledge scholarship that criticizes it. The targeted academic fields aim to address (and redress) structures of domination. Their work therefore defends, rather than undermines, universalist and Republican values (Fassin and Ibos 2021). Scholarship on race seeks to challenge and change the racial status quo for the better, so that Republican values of *liberté, égalité, and fraternité* are truly upheld. This article therefore suggests that indeed, scholarship on race is a threat to Republican values, as they are deployed today.

To open up the discussion, it is useful to contextualize this controversy within a broader, more global phenomenon. France is not alone in its witch hunt against critical thought. The threat currently posed by the French state to academia seeking to challenge ongoing coloniality can be

compared to the North American, British, Israeli, Turkish, or Brazilian contexts (Lang 2020; Carter 2021; Sultana 2018; Landy et al. 2020; Fassin and Ibo 2021). Counterhegemonic narratives that go against the state are repressed and silenced around the globe (Harawi 2020). Racism is a worldwide issue, as are the efforts to maintain the racial status quo. With Eryn Lê Espiritu and Jasbir Puar (2015, 67), I argue that “the convergence of these three issues—academic freedom, the erosion of faculty governance, and political work on [marginalized or racialized groups] . . . is not coincidental but constitutive and intrinsic.”

Through this article I hope to contribute not only to the literature addressing color-blind racism in the French Republic but also to the body of work developing around the world on epistemological erasure as racism, as authoritarian silencing of academia becomes more widespread. The “will to divide” (Vidal’s term) is deployed not by counterhegemonic discourses seeking to reinstate our shared humanity and truly uphold humane values of equality but rather by the powerful who benefit from societal division. Racialized voices and counternarratives should be centered and amplified (not suppressed) in academia, specifically in its work on race. However, these issues do not end at university gates: our world becomes richer when we include, value, and respect all forms of knowledge production and dissemination.

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