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Commentary : “Mobilising for the Values of the Republic” - France's Education Policy Response to the “Fragmented Society”: A Commented Press Review

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The article by Matthias Busch and Nancy Morys “Mobilising for the Values of the Republic” - France's Education Policy Response to the “Fragmented Society”: A Commented Press Review’ is dedicated to the recent debates on moral education in France.¹ The debates have centred on the proposed reforms, called ‘the great mobilisation of schools for the values of the Republic’, which the Minister of Education Najat Vallaud Belkacem announced shortly after the attacks of January 2015. The reforms include the creation of a new subject area in the primary and secondary curriculum: moral and civic education (*l'Éducation morale et civique* - EMC). Initiated in 2013, they are part of a set of public policies developed in response to the “fragmented society” observed by M. Wieviorka in his analysis which the authors refer to in their study. The Law of 8 July 2013 on “the reform of the schools of the Republic” (art. 41) states that “schools teach students moral and civic education to respect others, including their origins and their differences, the principle of equality between women and men and the principle of *laïcité* [secularity].” After the tragic events of 2015, which gave a new precedence to the ambition to “share the values of the Republic”, renewing the civic dimension of schooling was included in a European initiative of the Council of Europe developed at the end of the 1990s (Eurydice, 2005). It led to the definition of “key competencies for the teaching of democratic citizenship” (Audigier, 2000) and to the promotion of pedagogical approaches focused on student activities.

The study by Busch and Morys is based on a review of official texts, including educational policy documents, scientific and journalistic articles, interviews, statements of teachers and experts. This methodological approach considers a variety of arguments in the debate and highlights the key points which relate more broadly to the role of secular schools in the ideology of the French Republic on social integration. Our aim here is to provide a non-exhaustive historical perspective with the aim of better understanding the significance of these very topical issues.

Before the implementation of school policies in the Third Republic, in particular the Ferry laws of 1882-85 which established secular, compulsory and free schooling, the French Republicans focused on schools as a founding principle in the development of citizenship,

thus focusing the debates that ensued on the issue of secular schooling (Déloye, 1994; Fabre, 2002). Their policy was underpinned by a belief in the crucial role of schools in the socialisation of individuals and in the development of both a sense of belonging in the society and in the nation and an attachment to the key principles governing them. The new school reform studied here is part of this civic mission. The article by Bush and Morys clearly illustrates that even if there are many points that cause debate, the general framework of this way of thinking has not been challenged by the political class or by the teaching profession as a whole.

Despite this consensus, the civic mission of schools raises questions about its authoritarian and institutional dimension, thus relating to the debate on the inculcation of morality which is rooted in the history and the ideology of French schooling. How can we spark an attachment to the values of the Republic without imposing a morality of the State by means of education (Zuber, 2014; 2016)?

The problem that the French Republicans who came to power after the Second Empire faced was how to make both stability and the commitment to the regime compatible with the exercise of freedom and critical thinking. They solved it through an “efficient do-it-yourself” approach, which even though it was not strict, it emerged from two contradictory intellectual traditions, that of the Enlightenment and the philosophy of Auguste Comte. Freedom was not conceived as a natural right but “as the power of freedom and the freedom to participate, both of which have the capacity to transform formal rights into real rights, thus ensuring that individuals will not only have the right, but also the ability to exercise them” (Ozouf, 1993). The only and most effective bearer of this freedom was the education system which became part of the Republic’s great project of reconciliation between individual freedom and social cohesion. The process of synthesising these two principles was situated in the idea of secular morality whereby schools would act as the essential vehicle but would not become a form of state doctrine.

The founding principle underlying this approach is that of free enquiry and its ambition to have conviction prevail over domination. In this logic, the transmitted values should not be imposed; they must be transmitted while respecting one’s exercise of reason. “The policies and doctrines of the Republic can only aim at and be found within themselves, beyond any transcendence, the reasons for their potential victory since they place their trust in the sovereign opinion. They must, therefore, en-

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sure that reasoned conviction, which is as essential as a mathematical or scientific sequence, prevails over (...) any 'authority'" (Nicolet (1982) 1994, p. 33).

Therefore, children should not memorise a text such as the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. For the French Republicans who were committed to these principles, individuals, either by their own reason or conscience, must be able to go back to the founding principles and adapt their own conduct accordingly. Each member of the nation must be a responsible stakeholder of these values. This corresponds to the modern conception of politics according to which the legitimacy of power is no longer founded on tradition, but on autonomy. The comments by Pierre Kahn, Head of the Programme Commission for the new citizenship class, on the "culture of judgment" and the "ethos of discussion", borrowed from Jürgen Habermas and Karl O. Apel, which are included in this study, are part of these continuing preoccupations. This relates to the development of a new subject area in schools and the possible ways of teaching secular morality and common secular values. The new school programme on moral and civic education, beyond the issue of content, has been a part of educational debates since it is included in the process of redefining the curricula in terms of both the skills (Raulin, 2008) and the logic of interdisciplinarity which are facing a great deal of resistance. Bush and Morys illustrate the set of conflicting dynamics relating to considerations of professional practices, including the disciplinary tradition which has strong roots in France.

In the end, all these controversies are part of a recurring question on the significance, the role and the ways of applying the principle of *laïcité* in France. Proclaimed as a tool of integration in the Republic and the nation, *laïcité*, since the middle of the twentieth century, has faced social changes and new challenges which have had an impact on the institution of schooling and its civic and integrating mission.

Laïcité, as a pillar of the ideology of the French Republic, is also a constituent element of French political modernity. Understanding it today depends on the historical legacy and issues that it has left behind.

Since the end of the eighteenth century, France has experienced a specific mode of political modernity. It took place through the universalising conception of citizenship, marked by the elimination of ethnic and religious specificities. More particularly, the Revolution signalled the advent of transforming the relationship between state and society; the Le Chapelier decree of 14 June 1791, which is indicative of this development, stated that: "There are no more corporate bodies in the State; there are only the specific interests of each individual and the general interest. It is not permissible for anyone to inspire citizens towards intermediate interests or to isolate them from public matters by cultivating their corporate interests."

The State assumed a central role in structuring a society which was made up of separate individuals who became its main body of unification (Rosanvallon, 1990). Striving to achieve political, economic and cultural

unification was particularly intense under the Third Republic and its necessity and power were far greater than the country's heterogeneity (Weber, 1983). Unity was affirmed and implemented through centralised institutions, in particular through the education system.

The conditions under which the country's modernisation policy developed, in particular the fact that it was rejected by the Catholic Church, which was marked by a strong current of clericalism, is another French specificity,

"An imagined France is a France with exceptional antagonistic traits, desired and loved by the hostile brothers that the French are towards dreams which have their origins in very different worlds. This imagined France is founded on value conflicts. We must not forget that a century ago, the life of our country was under the shadow of religious wars. This is the originality of France: in the modern Christian West it is the only country to have experienced such a confrontation between unifying principles that are so radically opposed." (Birnbau, 1991).

The identification of France with Catholicism, which was founded on an exclusive principle of national identification, lost this characteristic in the nineteenth century when it became one among many alternatives in the conflict over French identity; France was either the eldest daughter of the Church or the child of the Revolution and the rights of man. The Church was in fact incompatible with the Republic by the mere fact that it rejected the principles derived from the Revolution and from modernity more generally. The Republic was founded against the political intrusion by religious institutions which at the time led it towards a stance of opposition to the socially dominant religion.

The establishment of secular schools emerged from this conflict. Schools were intended to take on the role of socialisation, which the Church originally had, and to support the Republic. The school programmes of 1882 signalled the secularisation of the education system and the elimination of religious education which was replaced by moral and civic instruction. The separation of Church and State of 1905 reaffirmed and clarified the great principles which were put in place without questioning their meaning.

Since the 1970s, these principles have been reassessed, particularly in view of the growing cultural and religious plurality of students, just as the principle of *laïcité* more generally has also been revisited following the increasing diversification of society. Several of these elements are closely intertwined and echoed in this analysis of the current controversies.

On the one hand, in the past thirty years the simple transcendence of ethnic and religious specificities, which gives everyone the same rights regardless of affiliation and constitutes the foundation of the secular egalitarianism of the French Republic, seems to be no longer a sufficiently effective tool in the fight against discrimination and the struggle for social and economic integration. The breakdown of the social elevator (Chauvel, 2006; 2016), the challenges of equal opportunities (Derouet, 1992), the "disillusionments of meri-

ocracy" (Duru-Bellat, 2006) and the phenomena of discrimination² have called into question the ability to hold a debate around the common values of the Republic in a credible manner in view of generating a sought-after sense of common belonging. On the other hand, the multiplication of various forms of religious expression raises the question of the rights of students and the reconciliation of religious freedom and public order.

More particularly, the conflict over the Islamic headscarf issue in schools, which erupted between 1989 and 2004, has highlighted this issue. It was first examined by the Council of State which was asked to give its opinion in 1989. It recognised the students' right to religious freedom which "includes the right to express and manifest their religious beliefs within the school" but which is subject to the condition that this freedom does not become an "obstacle to accomplishing the goals that have been entrusted to the public education service by the legislator." Therefore, "the wearing of symbols by students who intend to express their religious affiliation is not in itself incompatible with the principle of *laïcité*."

On the opposite side of this view, the Bayrou circular of 1994 and the Law of 15 March 2004 prohibited the display of any ostentatious symbols of religious (or political) affiliation in primary and secondary schools. The abstract and universalist conception of citizenship was therefore reaffirmed.

At the same time, between the 1980s and the beginning of the early 2000s another debate emerged, this time on the importance of developing a secular approach to teaching religion in view of addressing the students' insufficient knowledge of religions. This is not a mere and isolated issue of academic knowledge since it also concerns the schools' civic mission (Debray, 2003; Borne & Willaime, 2007). The teaching of different religious cultures must give students the opportunity to discover the multiple worlds of meaning that coexist in French society. This is an essential precondition in the development of an argued critical judgment, and, in the long term, in the ability to live together based on the spirit of tolerance and the recognition of the other. Teaching about religion was included in the school programme in the 2000s under an interdisciplinary form of education that does not question the secular foundations of the school.

Beyond the political circumstances, it is in this complex historical, social and ideological context that the current ambition to "share the values of the Republic" must be seen. And it is against this measure that any research work evaluating the implemented policies should be seen, something which the authors of this article hope for.

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Endnotes

¹ For an example of these debates, see the following study-day that was organised on 7 February 2015: «Quelle place pour l'éducation morale à l'école?» [What is the place of moral education in schools?], organised by the Centre de Philosophie Contemporaine de la Sorbonne (CEPA), the Ecole Supérieure du Professorat et de l'Education de Paris, and the journal Skhole.fr. <http://skhole.fr/questions-ouvertes-pour-l-ecole-du-xxie-siecle-quelle-place-pour-l-education-morale-a-l-ecole>

² See, for example, the work of the Observatory of Discriminations: <http://www.observatoiredesdiscriminations.fr>