

# Anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and The Uncertain Future of French Secularism

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Pascal Bruckner, *An Imaginary Racism: Islamophobia and Guilt*, trans. Steven Rendall and Lisa Neal. Polity Press, 204pp., \$20 cloth.

**T**HE YEARS SINCE FRANCE'S *annus horribilis* of 2015 have been unquiet ones. An almost perfect storm now hovers over the nation, its constituent elements being, in no particular order, terrorism, populism, and the refugee crisis. Most disconcerting, from the French perspective, is the absence of anything resembling civic solutions to the malaise. But this political void, already apparent in the 2012 presidential elections, now seems triumphant—with President Emmanuel Macron's (widely despised) eclectic global euro-liberalism facing off against diffuse opponents, such as last year's *Gilets Jaunes* protest. Both movements, it has been noted,

seek to “transcend” traditional politics but so far have only exacerbated division. Hopeful signs from this new populism are blunted by the neo-reactionary politics (Left and Right) that seem follow the Yellow Vests. As in 2015, we should be grateful for the small blessing of Michel Houellebecq, whose 2019 novel, *Sérotonine*, both anticipates and explicates the current crisis with his usual jaw-dropping prescience. As with *Submission*, the new work leaves very little room for optimism.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Houellebecq, *Sérotonine* (*Flammarion*, 2019); translated into English by Shaun Whiteside as *Serotonin* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019). The novel, like *Soumission* (Flammarion, 2015; English translation by Lorin Stein, Picador, 2016) has been a publishing sensation. There are countless articles in the French and American press, among them Rachel Donadio, “A Novel Made for the ‘Yellow Vest’ Movement. Michel Houellebecq’s latest provocation takes aim at the EU.” *The Atlantic*, (Jan. 13, 2019), online at [www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/01/michel-houellebecqs-new-book-indictment-eu/580165](http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/01/michel-houellebecqs-new-book-indictment-eu/580165).

At the heart of all of this remains, of course, the question of Islam in France and, specifically, whether the republic might be heading to a breaking point. The “challenge” facing France’s six million Muslims and their countrymen has as much to do with what can or cannot be discussed as with actual social problems.<sup>2</sup> The subject has gone from off limits to obsession—a process reminiscent of Henry Rousso’s depiction of Vichy historiography as a “syndrome.” In that characterization, France’s wartime government was at first considered unworthy of discussion—the true collaborationists were (it was argued) a very small minority—and it was, rather, the heroism of the Resistance that should be emphasized. But, over time, a very different narrative emerged—one of a deeply compromised France incapable of dealing honestly with its past. This eventually became, in nearly psychiatric terms, an “obsession.”<sup>3</sup> By the 1990s French historians, it seemed, talked of little else.

The parallels are notable. Open discussion of the view that Islam presents a problem for the secular republic was until surprisingly recently beyond the bounds of polite commentary. But now it is the subject or subtext of nearly everything. Houellebecq (who was tried unsuccessfully for “inciting hatred” against Muslims) has himself remarked about how, far from his books bringing this contentious topic into public debate, he has merely reflected a French

obsession. How can I be blamed for raising this subject, the author quipped, when one already hears about nothing else on the news?<sup>4</sup> The horrors of the 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* and *Hypercacher* attacks, followed by the appalling Bataclan massacre, are only the most obvious markers. As important is the quotidian anti-Semitism and violence that now characterize life in the Paris banlieues. The judgment that French schools are no longer safe for Jewish students (something now openly admitted) would have been inconceivable a generation ago.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, one only has to go back to the 1990s to remember a moment when the republican contract, with its mixture of carrot and stick, appeared to have solutions for the most troubling problems posed by mass immigration. I remember living in one of those (slightly) “difficult” Paris suburbs in the 90s and being well impressed with the success of the French model. There was a hardy expectation that, despite problems, France (and, indeed Europe) would seduce the next generation of French Muslims into a secular, republican way of life. Unlike America, where slavery and racism have seemingly forever poisoned the melting pot, France would oversee a process of integration and acculturation that would be the envy of

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4 Angélique Chrisafis, “Interview: Michel Houellebecq, Am I Islamophobic? Probably, yes.” *The Guardian* (6 Sept. 2015), online at [www.theguardian.com/books/2015/sep/06/michel-houellebecq-submission-am-i-islamophobic-probably-yes](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/sep/06/michel-houellebecq-submission-am-i-islamophobic-probably-yes).

5 Anne Rosencher, “Islamisme à l’école: le ‘j’accuse’ d’un principal de collège.” *L’Express* (25 August 2017), online at [www.lexpress.fr/education/islamisme-a-l-ecole-le-j-accuse-d-un-principal-de-college\\_1937071.html](http://www.lexpress.fr/education/islamisme-a-l-ecole-le-j-accuse-d-un-principal-de-college_1937071.html). See also the controversy surrounding last year’s resignation of France’s Interior Minister, Gérard Collomb, for example: [www.la-croix.com/France/Politique/Securite-immigration-islam-France-bilan-Gerard-Collomb-2018-10-03-1200973446](http://www.la-croix.com/France/Politique/Securite-immigration-islam-France-bilan-Gerard-Collomb-2018-10-03-1200973446). Collomb’s successor, Christophe Castaner, has said much the same thing, and has also called attention to anti-Semitism among the Gilets Jaunes. See, Angélique Chrisafis, “Spreading like poison; ‘flurry of anti-Semitic attacks alarms France.” *The Guardian* (12 February 2019), online at [www.theguardian.com/world/2019/feb/12/french-police-investigate-antisemitic-attacks-in-paris-simone-veil](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/feb/12/french-police-investigate-antisemitic-attacks-in-paris-simone-veil).

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2 The actual number of Muslims in France is hotly contested. Accounting for semi-transient individuals and unreported family members is not easy, but six million seems to be a fairly conservative approximation. The numbers are, to be certain, politicized and widely variable. For a more conservative estimate see Alexandre Pouchard and Samuel Laurent, “Quel est le poids de l’islam en France?” *Le Monde* (7 April 2016), online at [www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2015/01/21/que-pese-l-islam-en-france\\_4559859\\_4355770.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2015/01/21/que-pese-l-islam-en-france_4559859_4355770.html). For a more “liberal” estimate see Jean-Paul Gourévitch, *Les véritables enjeux des migrations* (Rocher, 2017).

3 Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944*. Translated by Arthur Goldhammer (Harvard, 1991).

the world. Remember France's 1998 World Cup championship? Its "Black Blanc Beur" (black, white, and Arab) team seemed the embodiment of that success. Paris, enraptured by their hometown victory that beautiful July evening, brought back memories of the Liberation. Today one looks back at this era with its books like *L'Amour de la France expliqué à mon fils* and the "daring" films of Matthieu Kassovitz, with a mixture of sadness and anger.<sup>6</sup> The bond didn't hold, and the French model proved a terrible failure. France won the Cup again in 2018, and the contrast is telling; this time the moment of happiness was muted and brief—as if weighted by the failures of the past two decades.<sup>7</sup> The experts were wrong.

Of course, not all the experts. With *An Imaginary Racism*, his unrelentingly powerful new book, Pascal Bruckner has waited out his critics to become, for those willing to listen, the leading analyst of this terrible moment. The book does not actually break any new ground—Bruckner has been on this theme for thirty-five years. But, unlike the rightward drift of the rest of the 1970s *nouvelle philosophes*, Bruckner's politics haven't changed a bit.<sup>8</sup> He comes to this debate with the same ideas he has always had—Enlightenment anti-religious, libertarian, liberationist. His obsessions were evident in 1983, with *Blood of the White Man* his reflection on what Third Worldism was doing to the West. He called it:

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6 Max Gallo, *L'Amour de la France expliqué à mon fils* (Seuil, 1999). Kassovitz's films of the era (such as *Métisse* and *La Haine*) with their French-Black-Jewish-Islamic subplots now seem almost naive.

7 Joseph Downing, "Success of French football team masks underlying tensions over race and class." *The Conversation* (July 13, 2018), online at [theconversation.com/success-of-french-football-team-masks-underlying-tensions-over-race-and-class-99781](http://theconversation.com/success-of-french-football-team-masks-underlying-tensions-over-race-and-class-99781).

8 The term "nouvelle philosophes" was coined by Bernard-Henri Lévy and refers to a group of young intellectuals who, in the late 1970s, broke with the marxist orthodox and rejected the post-structuralist fashion. Along with Lévy and Bruckner, André Glucksmann and Alain Finkielkraut are its most famous adherents.

*a gigantic weapon aimed at the West. The logic of aggression is at work in Third World solidarity, and this has made it a continuation of the Cold War by other means. Being non-European is enough to put one on the side of right. Being European or being supported by a European power is enough to make one suspect. The bloody messes in banana republics, and butchery of political opposition and the dictatorial lunacy by their petty chieftains are all brushed aside. Such trifles will not restrain the progress of these peoples toward socialism. What seems criminal in Cuba, Angola, and Guinea has the real purpose of washing away the far greater crime of colonialism.*<sup>9</sup>

Considered reactionary, colonialist, and borderline racist when it was written, Bruckner has outlasted his critics. In this way, Houellebecq and Bruckner are paired. Or, perhaps it's better to say, contemporary France has brought them together. But having endured them does not mean he has forgiven them. One of the guilty pleasures of *An Imaginary Racism* is the author's long and exacting memory. He was right, he knew he was right, and his critics were (as Thomas Hardy once put it) not just wrong, but damnably wrong.

The depth of that Cassandra frustration is everywhere in *An Imaginary Racism*, and Bruckner is once again an excellent diagnostician. He wields the historical and philosophical background to contextualize the current crisis, but because he also has the bitterness of a wronged lover, the book's chapters are neatly divided between analysis and polemic. Bruckner rests his argument on two notions. First, that "Islamophobia" is not only a misnomer, but a devilishly cynical distortion of what the religion's critics are trying to accomplish. But his second point is that it is, in effect, too late. The term has won—it has been embraced by the media, nurtured by academia, and elevated (with

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9 Pascal Bruckner, *The Tears of the White Man: Compassion as Contempt*. Translated by William Beer (Free Press, 1986).

amazing rapidity) to the status of racism and anti-Semitism. Indeed it has come to replace anti-Semitism, just as Muslims now replace Jews as France's focal minority. Bruckner devotes substantial space to tracing that development, and I will return to that theme as it deserves a close look.

## **The judgement that French schools are no longer safe for Jewish students (something now openly admitted) would have been inconceivable a generation ago.**

Bruckner hates the word Islamophobic—in part because it embodies the assault on language that Camus warned us about, but also because it fundamentally confuses two very different things, that is, a bigotry against individuals (which is inexcusable) and a reasoned critique of their religion (which is necessary).<sup>10</sup> Still, if this term's "lexical goal" had only been to silence Western critics, it would merely be disagreeable. But Bruckner argues that of equal importance to its promoters is the power it has to silence westernized Muslims. The whole project of reconciling European and Muslim values has been ceded in order to grant hegemony for this religion's loudest and most intolerant members. Secularism, France's precious and unique contribution to our world, is discarded as simply another form of racism.

The recent case of "Mila," a teenager from Lyon, is a case in point. The girl, a high school student who is a lesbian, was tired of being bullied by some of her Muslim

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10 Albert Camus famously said "calling things by the wrong name adds to the world's misery."

classmates, and recorded a provocative, anti-Islamic video which spread quickly on social media. The controversy sent shockwaves through France for two reasons—first, for what it revealed about the prevalence of threats and harassment and, perhaps more disturbingly, for the backlash which demonstrated that a majority of French youth no longer consider confrontational blasphemy (France's preferred position since at least Voltaire) to be a valid form of free speech.<sup>11</sup>

Bruckner blames France's elites for this critical error. Rather than marshal support behind those in the Muslim community who would defend the republic, they were terrified into silence by these accusations of racism. Thus, the *bien pensants* in media, universities, and government accepted a dynamic whereby an un-veiled French Muslim was a "sell-out." This, Bruckner argues, is (ironically) a "colonialist approach" since it embraces notions of primitivism as authenticity. The end result of this, rather than the supposed goal of tolerance, is its opposite—a kind of "fetishization of the veil." On some level, French politicians realize this has happened and now are fighting a losing battle to regain ground—a war fought in the "lost territories of the Republic," as a famous study of France's suburbs puts it. Being constantly on the defensive, the French state has had to take absurd actions to counter the trend—most jarring being the "burkini arrests" of 2017. That image of a lone Muslim woman on a beach (dressed in harmless, modest clothes) surrounded by police while flanked

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11 Mila's video was met with death threats. The authorities claimed they were unable to protect her, and the girl was pulled from school. But what really shocked France was the surveys that followed, which found that a majority of French no longer consider criticism of religion as a valid freedom. A number of Leftist politicians even joined in a campaign criticizing her. The story received enormous attention in both France and abroad. See especially [www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/12/macron-wades-into-french-girls-anti-islam-row-saying-blasphemy-is-no-crime-mila](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/12/macron-wades-into-french-girls-anti-islam-row-saying-blasphemy-is-no-crime-mila).

by barely covered bathers was a farcical one. But Bruckner isn't laughing. The veil, the burqa, the burkini, are symbols, "tools for taking control of the public sphere."

For Pascal Bruckner, himself a Left Bank *habitué* par excellence, much of the blame belongs with the detachment and snobbery of people like him. The Parisian establishment, he argues, police what can and cannot be said and castigate dissenters as racists. Not quite ready to make common cause with the *Gilets Jaunes'* anti-intellectualism, he is nonetheless slightly optimistic about their movement—it could, at least, expose the urban Left's isolation.<sup>12</sup> His list of offenders, partisans in an obscurantist war against reason and decency, is remarkably long and thorough, and one almost wonders whether this book wasn't as much an act of revenge as analysis. In any event a short sampling will have to suffice.<sup>13</sup>

First, there is Régis Debray, the ubiquitous figure on the far left who has not only called for blasphemy laws (to protect Islamic "beliefs") but has also suggested that there should be no such laws against Holocaust denial (as that is merely an "opinion"). Important too is noted sociologist Eric Fassin (a darling of the *New York Times* opinion pages) who excused the massive rape of women in Cologne on New Year's Eve of 2015

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12 Anti-Semitism is, it seems, widespread among *Gilets Jaunes* protestors as well. See Jon Henley, "Antisemitism rising sharply across Europe, latest figures show," *The Guardian* (15 February 2019), online at [www.theguardian.com/news/2019/feb/15/antisemitism-rising-sharply-across-europe-latest-figures-show](http://www.theguardian.com/news/2019/feb/15/antisemitism-rising-sharply-across-europe-latest-figures-show).

13 Unlike the popular historian and provocateur Eric Zemmour (who has no problem embracing the *Gilets Jaunes*) Bruckner is cautious. Their unreflective reaction strikes him as essentially illiberal. See Bruckner, "Le peuple, quel peuple?" *Le Point* (9 January 2019), online at [www.lepoint.fr/editos-du-point/sebastien-le-fol/pascal-bruckner-le-peuple-quel-peuple-09-01-2019-2284614\\_1913.php](http://www.lepoint.fr/editos-du-point/sebastien-le-fol/pascal-bruckner-le-peuple-quel-peuple-09-01-2019-2284614_1913.php). Eric Zemmour has no such compunctions. See this excellent profile by Elizabeth Zerofsky, "The Right-wing Pundit 'Hashtag-Triggering' France," *New York Times Magazine* (February 6, 2019), online at [www.nytimes.com/2019/02/06/magazine/eric-zemmour-france-far-right.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/06/magazine/eric-zemmour-france-far-right.html).

as part of an "emancipatory struggle." Philosophers like Jean-Luc Nancy and Étienne Balibar merely stand on an edifice constructed by a whole generation of apologist intellectuals, from Louis Massignon to Michel Foucault to Edgar Morin. And, inevitably, there are a passel of "mediatized experts" on Islam, epitomized by Olivier Roy, an "expert" who cannot even read Arabic.<sup>14</sup>

These men are "professionals of voluntary servitude" who, in seeking to exonerate Muslims, "infantilize[s] them." They form a kind of "Marxism-Salafism" where "violence speaks the language of peace." In Islam, they see the same energy they once saw in Marxism:

*Beneath the surface they both want to destroy this society, to be redeemed by the immigrant, by the foreigner, who will come to regenerate our old exhausted nations. . . . The Western far Left and political Islam are both haunted by the same fantasy of recapitulation.*

Two major problems stalk this large caste of bad-faith apologists. First, France being France, they are given more publicity than warranted because of the "oligarchy" in media and politics who will always elevate the Left-wing intellectual. Worse, these "preachers of shame" enable the success of Islam's "preachers of hate." Men like Tariq Ramadan (now, mercifully, facing consequences for what looks like a career of abusing women) are powerless without their establishment conciliators.<sup>15</sup>

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14 See especially Adam Nossiter, "Memo from Paris. 'That Ignoramus:' 2 French Scholars of Radical Islam turn Bitter Rivals," *New York Times* (July 13, 2016), online at [www.nytimes.com/2016/07/13/world/europe/france-radical-islam.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/13/world/europe/france-radical-islam.html).

15 Some feminists have made the point that Ramadan's "respected Muslim intellectual" caused many to ignore the vile misogyny behind his liberal façade. See Adam Schatz, "How the Tariq Ramadan scandal derailed the #balancetonporc Movement in France," *The New Yorker* (November 29, 2017), online at [www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/how-the-tariq-ramadan-scandal-derailed-the-balancetonporc-movement-in-france](http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/how-the-tariq-ramadan-scandal-derailed-the-balancetonporc-movement-in-france).

The parallel to this is that the many Muslim intellectuals who have attacked this double standard find themselves the victims of smear campaigns and death threats. And it is hard to disagree with Bruckner when he wonders why these Western progressives are not embarrassed by themselves, wealthy white men that they are, explaining oppression to Muslim women. Timothy Garton-Ash and Ian Buruma (two of his long-term enemies) can live their lives in peace and comfort wherever they go—while they attack Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who cannot.

At times this book appears to be mostly a plea for free speech. But although Pascal Bruckner seems to wish for the universal protection granted by the First Amendment, he retains skepticism about the American approach. The election of Donald Trump, that personification of anti-political correctness, has merely whetted the appetite of the aggrieved mob of supposed PC victims. As for the progressive (who “awakens each morning, like a sleuth, seeking out a new form of racism”) the climate in America seems to merely further convince him of his moral superiority, as well as the even greater urgency of his own moralizing. Even the term “Islamophobia” is at home in the United States where, with a trace of American puritanism, there are those who seek to use words to blur meaning “the way [they] used to blur the genitals on statues.” In opposing the American scourge of political correctness, Bruckner sees the possibility for re-invigorating a French tradition of liberty. But he will not make common cause with the alt-Right in this pursuit.

Like Houellebecq in *Submission*, Bruckner bemoans the way this Left-Right convergence lands on the hatred of Jews. And, again like Houellebecq, he sees a parallel between the elite’s appeasement of Islam and the compromises that same elite embraced when facing the Nazi occupation. It is present in the passivity of the approach, the cowardice

masquerading as sophistication, and, most jarringly, in the willingness, once again, to sacrifice France’s Jews at the altar of expedience.<sup>16</sup>

That the vilest forms of anti-Semitism have been flourishing in these communities should have been a warning signal to Left-wing Europe. Bruckner, however, knows better. The European Left, once indignantly desperate to distinguish anti-Zionism (which they naively saw as a continuation of anti-imperialism) from anti-Semitism, barely bothers with these distinctions any more. On the contrary, it increasingly seems that the accusation that a statement or action is “anti-Semitic” is now sufficient proof of one’s radical bona fides. In other words, if you are called anti-Semitic it means the right people dislike you. The Jews now not only carry their traditional role as scapegoats for capitalism and communism, but can now also be blamed for colonialism and white supremacy. All the while, these accusations mollify whatever post-Shoah guilt remains in the nation’s consciousness. But for Bruckner the secret to this obsession is that it is even more than just guilt—it is desire.

However cynical one may be about the motives of the Left, it is remarkable to observe the frequency with which anti-Zionists revert to accusations against Jews “exploiting” or “forgetting” the “lessons” of the Shoah if not outright “adopting” the methods and ideas of Nazis.<sup>17</sup> For this

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16 For more on the “Vichy-Muslim” parallels in Houellebecq see Seth Armus “Trying on the Veil: Sexual Autonomy and the End of the French Republic in Michel Houellebecq’s *Submission*,” *French Politics, Culture and Society* (35: 1, 2017), at [www.berghahnjournals.com/view/journals/fpcs/35/1/fpcs35010.xml](http://www.berghahnjournals.com/view/journals/fpcs/35/1/fpcs35010.xml).

17 Examples of this are ubiquitous and, amazingly, they actually began to appear before the state of Israel was even established. What is also remarkable is that, no matter how often Nazi-Jew/Israel-Palestinian trope is used, each writer seems to believe they are bravely invoking a new idea. See “Popular Singer in Iceland Compares Jews to Nazis,” *Times of Israel* (7 February 2019; [www.timesofisrael.com/popular-singer-in-iceland-compares-jews-to-nazis/](http://www.timesofisrael.com/popular-singer-in-iceland-compares-jews-to-nazis/)) for a recent such example.

agonizing puzzle our author thinks he has the answer—the Holocaust has become an “object of desire.” It must, somehow, be taken away from the Jews and granted to Muslims—Bruckner invokes Hitler’s comment to Hermann Rauschning on why the Nazi leader focused on Jews saying that, “there cannot be two chosen peoples.” By acknowledging the historical suffering of the Jews we grant them a kind of power that others resent—so for the Jews of France the elevation of the Shoah to national tragedy, rather than assuring protection, has become a “Nessus robe” (so called, after the poisoned shirt that killed Hercules in Greek mythology). But for Bruckner this is axiomatic—Holocaust deniers never really “deny” the Holocaust, they despise its power, and, ultimately, they conspire to steal it.<sup>18</sup>

For Houria Bouteldja (the anti-Jewish polemicist who speaks in the language of postmodern “decoloniality”) France’s ideology is one of “state philo-Semitism” with Jews designated to “protect the white body.”<sup>19</sup> Bruckner notes this as an example of how anti-Semitism “constantly feed[s] on its own refutation. . .nourished by the very phenomenon that is supposed to limit it, the persecution of Jews.” This “Jewification” of Muslims leads easily to the Nazification of Israel. The invocation of anti-Semitism becomes merely a dishonest tool in order to obscure the critical hatred, Islamophobia.

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18 The term “Holocaust inversion” or “Shoah inversion” has lately seen more use since it nicely sums up this particularly vicious twist. See two articles in *Fathom*. Leslie Klaff “Holocaust Inversion and Contemporary Antisemitism” (Winter 2014; [fathomjournal.org/holocaust-inversion-and-contemporary-antisemitism](http://fathomjournal.org/holocaust-inversion-and-contemporary-antisemitism)) and Alan Johnson, “Why the Nazi Analogy and Holocaust Inversion are Antisemitic” (August 2018; [fathomjournal.org/why-the-nazi-analogy-and-holocaust-inversion-are-antisemitic](http://fathomjournal.org/why-the-nazi-analogy-and-holocaust-inversion-are-antisemitic))

19 Houria Bouteldja (whom the translator misidentifies as male) is a special case, to be sure, but she is not alone among “decolonizers” in that her ideological Jew-hatred clouds all of her other bizarre and complex positions. For more on this see Clément Ghys, “La derive identitaire de Houria Bouteldja.” *Liberation* (25 May 2016). See [www.liberation.fr/debats/2016/05/24/la-derive-identitaire-de-houria-bouteldja\\_1454884](http://www.liberation.fr/debats/2016/05/24/la-derive-identitaire-de-houria-bouteldja_1454884)

Moreover, quoting Vladimir Jankelevich, anti-Zionism becomes, “permission to be democratically anti-Semitic. What if the Jews themselves were the Nazis? It would no longer be necessary to feel sorry for them, they would have deserved their fate.”

Empowered by the elixir of anti-Zionism, there seems no crime so horrid that it cannot be marshalled in its defense. Do we need to recount them? Little children murdered in a school in Toulouse? A woman beaten nearly to death and raped in her apartment in Creteil? Another thrown from her balcony of an HLM in the 11th arrondissement? These crimes, and many others, have found no shortage of apologists on the French Left. And, as if designed to achieve symbolic closure, there was the desecration of a Jewish cemetery in Sarre-Union by five individuals who described themselves as “anti-Fascists.” Bruckner’s fury at this betrayal is palpable.

Rather than adapt to life under guard or in the closet, many Jews have simply left France. Although the number of departures has not yet been as devastating as some feared, there are now, without exaggeration, newly Francophone areas in Israel—even a Francophone city. This phenomenon received a good deal of attention in the press, both in Europe and the US, and, tellingly, was a sub-plot of Houellebecq’s *Submission*. The stark details have now been laid out with social scientific precision in *L’an prochain a Jerusalem?*<sup>20</sup> In his calm introduction Michel Wieviorka, a leading French sociologist, outlines how this crisis is, more than anything, a reflection of the crisis “within the Republic itself.” The book, filled with polls, charts, graphs and maps (e.g., the streets in Sarcelles where Jews are most likely to be attacked!) tells, through statistics and interviews, what we might

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20 Jérôme Fourquet and Sylvain Manternach, *L’an prochain a Jerusalem: Les juifs de France face à antisémitisme* (Éditions de l’aube, 2016).

otherwise allow ourselves to forget. And, to invoke an overused, but unavoidable image, France's Jews are clearly the canaries in this particular social coal-mine. The predicament is much deeper than the culture. Bruckner hints that, after the 2016 murder of Father Hamel in a small Norman church by terrorists pledging allegiance to the Islamic State, perhaps churches too will need the protection that synagogues have? And, as one of his enemies, Emmanuel Todd, has lately confirmed, that there may already be more observant Muslims in France than Christians.

## **Ultimately, this is not actually a war over “beliefs” but about the public sphere.**

Ultimately, this is not actually a war over “beliefs” but about the public sphere. For that reason, it is in schools and public institutions where the crisis is most vivid. That is the appeal of Georges Bensoussan's impressive collection, *Une France soumise: La voix du refus*.<sup>21</sup> The book slightly resembles, both in layout and actual appearance, *The Black Book of Communism*, that late 20th century master catalogue of Communist abuses.<sup>22</sup> Bensoussan seeks to compile voices from across the Hexagon of those struggling against anti-Semitism, misogyny, “Francophobia,” and the banalization of violence. Through a mixture of scholarly assessments and interviews, it paints a devastating picture of a nation exhausted by conflict and trapped in an ever-expanding cycle of placation. It is, frankly, one of the most depressing books I've

read in some time. I would not have thought that the disheartening report of people like Pierre-André Taguieff (a tireless chronicler of French anti-Semitism), for example, would be a welcome relief, but his academic detachment is less disturbing than the reports of nurses, teachers, police, and all variety of civil servants who work on the front-lines of dysfunctional France. Through interviews with these everyday French women and men (nearly all of whom, wisely I'm sure, choose pseudonyms) the work peels away any façade of acculturation.

This book adds to what opinion polls have increasingly suggested—namely, that the French populace has little faith in a future “together.” While many in the intellectual and political classes try to salvage the failed model, the national debate has, in a sense, already been won by the “Islamoskeptics.” Unlike in the United States where, for a variety of reasons, the fate of the dispossessed still elicits sympathy, the broad majority of the French population appears unmoved by the refugee crisis, and the focus, from populist parties Left and Right, is on how to contain it.<sup>23</sup> Another important difference is that France (still) has a vibrant intellectual culture willing to instrumentalize the republican contract. There continue to be unapologetic voices on the French secular Left denouncing these crimes and compromises. In the US, however, it has become all but impossible to stake out a “progressive anti-Islamic” position. As in Germany, and until quite recently Britain, public statements of concern about the behavior of Muslim immigrants remain comparatively repressed.

In the Anglo-American world there are few public intellectuals who don't fear the “Islamophobic” label. A number of figures from the intellectual Right (Douglas Murray

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<sup>21</sup> Georges Bensoussan, *Une France soumise: La voix du refus* (Albin Michel, 2017).

<sup>22</sup> Stéphane Courtois, Nicholas Werth, et al, *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*. Translated by Jonathan Murphy (Harvard, 1999).

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<sup>23</sup> There is a great deal of polling on this subject, but the Ipsos poll in 2017 shocked many people. See [www.thelocal.fr/20170704/sixty-five-percent-of-french-say-there-are-too-many-foreigners-in-france](http://www.thelocal.fr/20170704/sixty-five-percent-of-french-say-there-are-too-many-foreigners-in-france).



and Christopher Caldwell, for example) have protested, but the American academy, so long under the spell of French Theory, has been characteristically slow to catch up with the cultural implications of this new populism.<sup>24</sup> It has, in the past few years, fallen into several predictable tracks. One is the progressive post-colonial defense, inherited from Edward Said and now thoroughly wedded to the academic establishment. It contorts progressive politics into precisely the kind of new *tiermondisme* that has enraged Bruckner for decades. A number of leading American historians of France have entered the fray—Joan Scott, the iconic postmodern feminist, blazed the trail with a full-throated cheer for the veil soon followed by a variety of similar apologetics.<sup>25</sup> Another noted scholar, Todd Shepard, has focused on the reaction to this crisis—the sexualization of the Arab male body, which, in a kind of hermeneutics of suspicion, is seen as the true force motivating France’s civilizational panic.<sup>26</sup>

Seeing Jews and Muslims as rhetorical victims of some ephemeral “French ideology” or “colonial secularism” and resisting the voices of actual victims (both Jews and Muslims) is, unfortunately, the standard approach in the American academy. There are many such examples, although the series of articles dedicated to this in a recent issue of the journal *Jewish History* are an almost too perfect case in point.<sup>27</sup> The authors (not surprisingly, all Americans) are what our academy considers experts in this field, and indeed all are well-informed, scholarly and fair. Yet the

range of subjects is not matched by a range of ideas. All the authors would reject the premises of Bruckner’s argument, and none can see beyond the assumption that Jews and Muslims occupy merely different historical moments in their relation to the state. Jonathan Judaken introduces the topic by arguing the inextricability of the “interlocked vulnerabilities and insecurities” of Jews and Muslims. For Ethan B. Katz, invoking the hijab invariably returns to its pair, the kippah—the otherness of Jews and Muslims can never be separated. The invocation of the “kippah” as an innocuous alter to the hijab supposedly reveals the inability for Jews to escape from their existence outside the secular narrative. Sandrine Sanos sees the gendering of Jewish and Muslim bodies and the “sexualization of race” as a specific aspect of *Charlie Hebdo*. Dorian Bell argues that these two hatreds are twinned by their “complementary mechanisms for diverting the anxieties bred by the global economic order,” whereas Kimberly Arkin sees the Jewish concern as part of a discourse that long pre-dates the recent attacks and not reduced to empirical questions about safety and security”(!) This sort of analysis comes close to Emmanuel Todd’s very controversial *Who is Charlie?* as does Matt Sienkiewicz’s suggestion that, while not “responsible” for the attacks, the magazine “crafted” a style which intended to provoke “extreme anger.” In other words, we have an entire issue of a journal devoted to a very narrow, and crucial topic, yet the authors, focused primarily on victimhood, avoid engaging with the violent reality.<sup>28</sup>

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24 See Douglas Murray, *The Strange Death of Europe: Immigration, Identity, Islam* (Bloomsbury, 2017) and Christopher Caldwell, *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe: Immigration, Islam and the West* (Anchor, 2010).

25 Joan Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton, 2010).

26 Todd Shepard, *Sex, France and Arab Men: 1962-1979* (U. Chicago, 2018).

27 “Jews and Muslims in France before and after Charlie Hebdo and Hyper Cacher.” A special issue of *Jewish History* (32: 1 November 2018) edited by Jonathan Judaken and Ethan B. Katz. See [link.springer.com/journal/10835/32/1](http://link.springer.com/journal/10835/32/1).

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28 Emmanuel Todd, *Who is Charlie?: Xenophobia and the New Middle Class*, translated by Andrew Brown (Cambridge, 2015). As always with Todd, the book is not without its virtues, but it rejects the idea that the “I am Charlie” protestors were motivated by sympathy with victims or the need for free speech. They are, rather “Zombie Christians,” lashing out yesterday against Jews, today against Muslims. Todd seems almost anxious for the collapse of French civilization and the emergence of some variety of Islamic state in its place.

The point is not to pick at American academics (an already adequately besieged class) but merely to show how our own cultural critics resist seeing what French Jews (and many others) now understand as their reality. But in America at large (outside of the academy), we are starting to see what the French have learned, over the past decade—that is, that the heaviest wage for culture of tolerance toward Islamism will be borne by women and Jews. The grassroots anti-Trump activism that led to the massive “Women’s March” movement made a point of incorporating a Muslim woman (in a Stars and Stripes themed hijab) as its symbol. Thus progressive feminism hoped to marry immigrant solidarity with this powerful image. But the movement has faced real consequences for its unexamined radicalism. The March’s leadership seemingly endorsed a host of anti-feminist ideas, from female genital mutilation to attacks on LGBTQ community, to apologia for Iranian and Saudi misogyny—all in an attempt to remain in the good graces of what they perceived as marginalized Muslim women.

But the most egregious victims of this were American Jewish women. In the months that followed the initial January 2017 march, Jews found themselves attacked, expelled, marginalized and, in one terrifyingly blunt exchange, blamed by a Women’s March leader for all the world’s ills. These leaders of the Women’s March (as carefully selected for diversity as the bomber crew of a World War II film) contained an Asian-American, a Latina, a Muslim-American, an African-American and a WASP, all of whom expressed identical global politics and endorsed, with varying degrees of focus, a boycott of Israel. More amazingly, three of these women (Linda Sarsour, Tamika Mallory and Carmen Perez) trafficked in explicitly anti-Semitic discourse of the sort that shocked most mainstream followers. After months of obfuscation and denial the leadership

half-apologized, but the damage done to the movement appears substantial. Critically, this leadership adopted the tactic Bruckner is most concerned by—that of reducing all criticisms of Islamism to “Islamophobia.” For months they scoffed, objected and denied, invoking “white privilege,” “Zionism,” “racism,” “the alt-Right,” et cetera.<sup>29</sup>

The resilience shown by these women comes, it seems, from two sources. One, the expectation that Jews, as an economically successful sub-group of White America, have no legitimate claims to discrimination—this even though the FBI considers them the *primary* victims of American hate crime.<sup>30</sup> Second is a troubling conformity that seems to have grown out of Leftist group-think; that is: *everyone in our club knows what the real issues facing women are, and, despite what might be publicly stated, any attempt to complicate that narrative is seen as sabotage.* In just the past year there has been a radical reorientation of the Democratic Party, with a handful of newly elected representatives pushing anti-Israel positions into the mainstream. And, with depressing predictability, these activists have followed what British sociologist David Hirsh calls the “Livingstone Formulation” (named for former London mayor Ken Livingstone) in which any accusation of anti-Semitism provokes an indignant counter-accusation that the accuser is trying to “silence” free speech. In its most extreme form, now very common across the hard Left and far Right, adherence to positions that elicit these accusations are praised as a sign of one’s bravery or “transgression” since anti-Semitism is merely a subjective sentiment rather than

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29 These controversies have been well-covered in the press. An excellent investigation by Leah McSweeney and Jacob Siegal, “Is the Women’s March Melting Down?” *Tablet* (December 12, 2018) covers most of the bases. See [www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/276694/is-the-womens-march-melting-down](http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/276694/is-the-womens-march-melting-down).

30 [www.jta.org/2018/11/13/united-states/hate-crimes-jews-rise-37-fbi-reports](http://www.jta.org/2018/11/13/united-states/hate-crimes-jews-rise-37-fbi-reports).

an objective phenomenon, like racism. To anyone aware of recent events in France this is depressingly familiar.<sup>31</sup>

In Britain, where Hirsh's metaphor originates, a long practice of winking at Left-wing anti-Semitism has had devastating results under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn. Unlike in the US, it has already caused a wholesale abandonment of the Left by the country's Jews—statistics are a bit unreliable, but something like 75% of British Jews identified as Labour supporters ten years ago while today, the number is below 25%. And the parallels don't end there. Critics of Labour Party anti-Semitism find themselves harassed to the point of needing police protection. One can only assume that, given the stridence of the reaction to having its positions challenged, this will come here next. And indeed, just as association with anti-Semites was a factor in undermining Corbyn's 2019 election, so the aggressive anti-Israel attitudes of some of Bernie Sanders's surrogates (although far less explicit) may have weakened, rather than broadened, the appeal of the Democratic presidential hopeful.

Despite all the bad news, there is something almost charmingly French about the resilient cheerfulness of Bruckner's polemic. That, I suppose, is part of the point. France, by his lights, has one critical contribution to our world—a secular society of slow cafes and open communication. His closing passage evokes

that image with a nearly maudlin meditation on the France that was built by man, for man, at great cost and sacrifice and concluding:

*We are living in a terrible period. But as appalling as it is, it is also passionate. It is impossible to escape the challenge of the century now beginning: in collaboration with the moderate or enlightened Muslims who are its main victims, we must defeat the fanaticism of the Islamists. For this immense task, there will never be too many people of good will.*

It is a compelling idea—we too can find meaning in this fight. Even Michel Houellebecq, arch-cynic, succumbs to something like it, in *Submission*, where he twice allows himself to imagine the France-We-Have-Lost. Notably, for him too, it has nothing to do with blood and soil, it's a Jewish family drinking wine in their tiny backyard, it's the poise of a striking black girl waiting for the number 21 bus. And it is precisely these people whose freedom is the most threatened. But amidst this Bruckner invokes a stern caution from Freud, who reminds us that people can only be bound together in love “if there are those left over they can agree to hate.” This is why he will not be joining Zemmour in the salons of the far Right. Bruckner is no reactionary. He is angry, disappointed, heartbroken, even, but compassion runs through this account. Now would be an excellent time for American academics to take note. ♫

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<sup>31</sup> David Hirsh, *Contemporary Left Antisemitism* (Routledge, 2017) is highly recommended.