
H-France Salon

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Race, Racism & the Study of France and the Francophone World Today, Part II Introduction

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On June 18, 2019, *Le Monde* published an open letter signed by more than 200 university professors and researchers in France, the U.S., and elsewhere, protesting the serial demotion of sociologist Akim Oualhaci by the Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS). For three consecutive years, despite the favorable recommendation of specialists in his field, the admissions jury at the CNRS downgraded Dr. Oualhaci in its rankings and ultimately removed him from the list for research positions altogether. Dr. Oualhaci practices a kind of critical sociology that brings a social justice perspective to the study of marginalized and minoritized communities, and he himself has roots in the population of working-class youth of immigrant background that he studies. For many observers, the glaring anomalies in his treatment by the CNRS raise troubling questions both about the role of racial and social discrimination in the hiring process and the kinds of research that are validated and legitimized by France's elite academic institutions.¹

The specificities of this case aside, the controversy calls attention to a number of hard questions that institutions of higher education and scholarly research have been facing in recent years:

Who works in these institutions and how and why do their career trajectories differ? What types of research, teaching, and mentoring do these institutions support? Who do they primarily serve? Most pointedly, what forms of active discrimination and/or unconscious bias affect student and faculty outcomes and the kinds of academic inquiry that are taught, funded, and published?

In the past decade, student activism and new research in higher education have given these questions increasing urgency. In the United States, Africa, India, Britain, and Europe, student movements have not only pushed for an awareness of the academy's role in exclusionary, exploitative knowledge production and socio-political structures; they have also demanded multiple forms of reckoning and reparation. Statues have been removed from public display. Curricula and pedagogical methods have been called into question. The composition of student and faculty populations has been criticized for lacking both demographic and intellectual diversity. A growing body of research on the obstacles faced by students and faculty from underrepresented, underserved, and/or formerly colonized communities has emerged in tandem with, and bolstered, student demands on these issues. Studies reveal the disproportionate amount

¹ "Le CNRS a enterré sa réputation d'ouverture," *Le Monde*, 18 juin 2019; Simon Blin, "Opacité, soupçons de discrimination...le recrutement pas très scientifique du CNRS," *Libération*, 25 juin 2019.

of service and crushing hours of “invisible labor” performed by women and minoritized groups in the academy, as well as shocking gaps in mentoring that stifle the academic success of minoritized and first-generation faculty and students.

All of this has led to calls in the U.S., France, and elsewhere to “decolonize the university.” As Gurminder Bhambra, Dalia Begrial, and Kerem Nisanciolu characterize it, this involves cultivating everyday practices that acknowledge and seek to combat the role of colonialism, empire, and racism as forces shaping the modern university in ways that are systematically effaced from view.² Such efforts have elicited fierce resistance and controversy, especially when directed toward making systemic curricular change (the reassessment of Western Civilization courses in the Anglo-American academy, for instance), pursuing more inclusive faculty hiring practices (that explicitly or implicitly challenge long- and often dearly-held conceptions of meritocracy and “excellence”³), and creating spaces of “non mixité” (such as the “Paroles Non Blanches” meetings at the Université Paris VIII – Vincennes Saint-Denis, which caused a firestorm in France).

With this series of *H-France Salons*, we aim to encourage a productive recognition of similarities and differences between France, the U.S. and other places. Different national, local, and institutional histories, traditions, and cultures must be acknowledged; they have shaped the topographies of academic life today in highly visible ways. A central theme that emerged in the first installment of the series was the enduringly stark contrast in the status and reception of the study of race and racism on either side of the Atlantic. If such work has been more or less accepted as intellectually legitimate and institutionalized as an integral part of most humanities and social sciences disciplines in the U.S., sociologist Abdellali Hajjat’s and historian Silyane Larcher’s February 2019 special issue of *Mouvements* on intersectionality dramatically underscores the persistence of a vicious intellectual and political battle surrounding the legitimacy of race as a category of inquiry and the place of minoritized scholars in French academe.⁴

The *Mouvements* special issue emerged as an explicit response to a piece historian Gérard Noiriel, a pioneer of the history of immigration in France, posted on his [personal blog](#) in October 2018, in which he blamed the decline of the workers’ movement and working-class history on the rise of identity politics. Noiriel articulated this commonly held view in particularly pointed terms:

² Gurminder Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial, and Kerem Nişanciolu, eds., *Decolonising the University* (Pluto Press, 2018), 2.

³ These notions in particular have been found to disguise [similarity effects](#). Similarity effects or similarity-attraction refer to a subconscious preference for people who we perceive to be like us that can have a strong affect in hiring, admissions, or election processes. Similarity effects produce homogeneity and in the case of academia, replicate exclusionary demographics in the composition of faculty, student, and administrative populations.

⁴ See, for example, “A la fac, deux camps s’affrontent, à coups d’insultes, sur le mot ‘race’,” *Le Monde*, 11 janvier 2019.

Le projet d'écrire une histoire populaire du point de vue des vaincus a été accaparé par les porte-parole des minorités (religieuses, raciales, sexuelles) pour alimenter des histoires féministes, multiculturalistes ou postcoloniales, qui ont contribué à marginaliser l'histoire des classes populaires. Il suffit de consulter la bibliographie des articles et ouvrages publiés en histoire ces dernières années ou de regarder les recrutements sur des postes universitaires pour être convaincu de cette remarque.⁵

In their Introduction, Hajjat and Larcher question why the so-called “question sociale” and “question raciale” would ever be considered as mutually exclusive to the detriment of a more nuanced analysis that examines the dynamic intersections of these and other categories—hence the title of the issue, “intersectionnalité.” The remaining essays all seek to validate race as a category of scholarly research and the utility of intersectionality as a concept and method. The essays also challenge Noiriél’s contention that research on minoritized populations and by minoritized scholars has crowded out research on the working classes and social issues in the French academy.

Audrey Célestine, Abdellali Hajjat et Lionel Zevounou push back against some of Noiriél’s assumptions about “intellectuel·les, universitaires ‘minoritaires’” and “des porte-parole des minorités.” In their article, they write, “il semble que les débats liés aux concepts de ‘racialisation,’ ‘intersectionnalité,’ ‘postcolonial,’ ‘nouvel antisémitisme’ ou encore ‘islamophobie’ aient tendance à se dérouler par tribunes de presse interposées, et non par un dialogue via des articles scientifiques.” They warn of the amplifying effects of this mediatization, which tends toward sensationalism rather than productive scientific exchange. Inez Bouzelmat offers a fascinating sociological study of research on race in France in her piece, which maps different kinds of approaches and spheres of activity “dans un souci de dépasser les querelles stériles, de s’intéresser aux conditions de production de la connaissance scientifique sur la question raciale [...] en mobilisant la notion de champ scientifique et en explorant les positions que les chercheur·se·s y occupent.”

Larcher’s historical essay traces the supposed aporia between the “race question” and French universalism from the French Revolution through Isabelle Boni-Claverie’s recent documentary *Trop noire pour être française?* (2015) This aporia, she concludes, is a false binary. In their contribution, Lila Belkacem, Lucia Direnberger, Karim Hammou and Zacharias Zoubir deconstruct strategies of “dénis et dénégations,” “disqualifications,” and “particularisations” that scholars use to discredit race as an analytical category. Similarly, Sarah Mazouz and Éléonore Lépinard discuss both the intellectual fecundity and limits of intersectionality in their piece, exposing three main strategies of delegitimization adopted by those who reject it. They question the “epistemic resistance” to the concept/method, anticipating much of the debate surrounding the demotion of Dr. Oualhaci. They write that “Il est bien sûr capital de continuer à travailler sur les classes populaires, mais il est grand temps de prendre acte que les recherches qui renouvellent ce champ sont celles qui intègrent le genre, la sexualité et la race à leur analyse et examinent les modes d’imbrication de ces principes sociaux de hiérarchisation.” Their reflection clearly and

⁵ Gérard Noiriél, « Réflexions sur la ‘gauche identitaire’ », blog « Le populaire dans tous ses états », 29 octobre 2018.

compellingly ties together questions of identity, scholarly production, epistemic justice, institutional change, and broader social and political transformation beyond the academy:

Qui nos institutions académiques accueillent-elles et quels savoirs valorisent-elles et font-elles éclore sont donc deux questions indissociables. Et ce n'est qu'en tentant d'y répondre et en donnant toute sa place à des travaux potentiellement porteurs de transformation sociale pour les groupes marginalisés que l'enseignement supérieur et la recherche pourront continuer de jouer un rôle politique et social en France, car elles produiront une recherche scientifique qui renouvelle notre compréhension du monde social et le donne à voir dans sa complexité.

We draw detailed attention to this powerful interdisciplinary collection of perspectives on the contemporary situation in France so that readers can compare and contrast them with the pieces by Tyler Stovall, Nimisha Barton, Mita Choudhury, Stephen L. Harp, Crystal M. Fleming, and Pratima Prasad featured in this second part of the *H-France Salon on Race, Racism and the Study of France and the Francophone World Today*. These scholars bring to bear their experiences as academic administrators, pedagogues, researchers, mentors, diversity consultants, and allies to reflect on race and racism in the academic world in the U.S. They engage a number of critical themes, chief among them: identity, scholarship, and teaching; mentorship and institutional equity; white supremacy and white privilege. Given the interconnectedness that we as editors have encouraged between the three thematic issues of this salon (research, the profession, and a forthcoming installment on teaching), many of these topics and others were discussed in the exchanges in the [first issue](#) between Dorian Bell, Madeleine Dobie, Éric Fassin, Abdellali Hajjat, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, Michael G. Vann, and Françoise Vergès. We encourage you to revisit them.

We hope that you will find these pieces as engaging and significant as we have and that you will send us your thoughts at hFranceSalonOnRace@gmail.com.

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