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Ragazzi, F.P.S.M.

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Counter-radicalization, Islam and Laïcité: policed multiculturalism in France's *Banlieues*

Francesco Ragazzi 

Institute of Political Science, Leiden University, Leiden, Netherlands; Centre d'Etude sur les Conflits, Liberté et Sécurité (CECLS), Paris, France

ABSTRACT

What is the impact of counter-radicalization policies on minority membership in France? Probably more than any country in Europe, in France, the question of terrorism and radicalization has been inseparable from that of the accommodation of the Muslim minority – a debate structured around the French interpretation of universalist secularism, or *laïcité*. *Laïcité* is presented as both a principle of terrorism prevention and an ideal to safeguard. Avoiding communautarisme, the retreat of minority populations into cultural and political segregation, is what is at stake. If we follow this logic, counter-radicalization policies should be one step further into France's assimilationist and resolutely anti-multiculturalist system. Drawing on fieldwork in two suburbs on the outskirts of Paris, Pantin and Villeneuve-Saint-Georges, this article argues however that current practices of everyday anti-terror policing end up enacting precisely what they are trying to avoid, resulting instead in what I define as “policed multiculturalism”.

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KEYWORDS Islam; security; secularism; France; multiculturalism

Introduction

Terrorism, counterterrorism and the management of ethno-religious diversity have been intimately linked in public discourse for at least a decade. In 2010, Prime Minister David Cameron of the UK, President Nicolas Sarkozy of France and Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany took turns denouncing multiculturalism as a “failure” and assigning to it a large part of the responsibility for the wave of terror attacks that Europe had experienced since 2005 (Cameron 2011; BBC 2010; France 24 2011). A declaration of the Council of the European Union (2020), blaming in part the recent wave of terror attacks in France on the failed integration of migrant communities in

CONTACT Francesco Ragazzi  f.ragazzi@fsw.leidenuniv.nl  [@fragazzi](https://twitter.com/fragazzi)

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Europe, exemplifies the ways in which the narrative around the “death of multiculturalism” remains entangled with the question of political violence (Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010; Joppke 2004; McGhee 2008).

In France, the narrative is transposed unto the long-standing debate on *laïcité*, the French rendering of secularism. Since its origins in the Third Republic’s debates on the separation of state and church in the schools, as Baubérot shows in his work, the concept of *laïcité* has evolved, holding a plurality of meanings for a diversity of actors (Baubérot 2015), including the ones interviewed for this article. When French academics and policymakers “discovered” an ethno-religious Muslim minority in France (Amiraux and Simon 2006, 202), *laïcité* re-emerged in the 1990s in the form of opposition to *communautarisme*: another polysemic term used to delegitimize any identity-based deviation from the Republic’s colour-blind, secular ideals (Mohammed and Talpin 2018; Escafré-Dublet, Guiraudon, and Talpin [this issue](#)). This is the context in which *multiculturalism*, a term considered to be anchored in Anglo-Saxon (US, UK, Canada), rather than French institutional traditions came to be framed as a form of *communitarisme*, i.e. the antithesis of the French republican *laïcité*. A good example of this take can be found in an op-ed of Pierre-André Taguieff in 2003, in which he explains that “political or institutional multiculturalism constitutes, in its narrow meaning, a *multicommunautaire* model of society, which is opposed in its most fundamental principles to the republican model of the nation, or more precisely to the civic model of the nation, a political ideal illustrated imperfectly, on the historical plane, by the French nation” (Taguieff 2003, 2–3). Progressively, but more prominently after the terror attacks of 2015, the conceptual pair became a central key of interpretation: *communautarisme* as the cause of terrorism, *laïcité* both as the ideal under threat, and the solution to violence (Dhume-Sonzogni and Fassin 2016).

The assassination of a history-geography teacher in the city of Conflans in October 2020, and the attack in the church of Nice thirteen days later, has emboldened the proponents of a “tough” understanding of *laïcité* – which we can define along with Baubérot as “identitarian” – assuming that some religions form part of the Western tradition, while others, like Islam do not (Baubérot 2015). And while the President Emmanuel Macron has so far avoided identifying the origins of the current wave of terrorism on French soil as *communautarisme* – a term too directly associated with Islam the term he has offered instead – *separatisme* – does little to dispel the idea that defending *laïcité* lies at the core of France’s counter-terrorism policy (France Culture 2020).

In France, it thus appears that counterterrorism policy, and especially counter-radicalization policy (a sub-set of counter-terrorism policy) should be both constructed around and result in a reinforced practice of *laïcité*, understood as a universalist – or “religion-blind” – approach to diversity.

But is it? In this special issue, Escafré-Dublet, Guiraudon, and Talpin ([this issue](#)) argue that French-style secularism, disguised as colour-blind neutrality, enacts in fact a highly racialized set of local practices which are very often very different from official discourse.

This article largely comforts this premise, and in particular the notion that “ethnoracial minorities are policy recipients in localized political contexts” (Escafré-Dublet, Guiraudon, and Talpin [this issue](#)). That an important number of strategies and measures have in practice functioned in opposition to the state’s universalist, secular discourses at local level in France, targeting banlieues where racially minoritized populations are located, is not a new idea (Doytcheva [2007](#)). This article pushes however the argument slightly further. It shows that the current forms of everyday anti-terror policing work precisely through what they are trying to avoid, namely a securitized management of diversity along ethno-religious lines. Grounded in a logic of risk and preventive policing, and extending its reach to the sectors of religious representation and social work, I argue these practices enact a form of *policed multiculturalism*. In the following sections, I offer a historical overview of the relationship between counterterrorism and *laïcité*; situate my argument in the literature and then present my analysis of empirical material gathered in two suburbs of Paris.

France’s counterterrorism and counter-radicalization policy

Before “radicalization”: French counterterrorism and laïcité

Before 2014, for the French government, counterterrorism and the management of Islam were – at least officially – separate. In a document presented during the European Council meeting of 30 November 2009, as their European counterparts presented their freshly established counter-radicalization policies, the French authorities affirmed that “de-radicalisation” measures are contrary to their doctrine, which considers that religious practice falls within the private sphere of individuals, and that taking radical discourse into consideration would lead to the recognition of its religious legitimacy. (cited in Bonelli and Ragazzi [2019](#), 488). Since the 1980s, France’s counter-terrorism apparatus had indeed traditionally relied on three pillars: judges, intelligence services and specialized police units (Bonelli [2008](#)). The 1986 counter-terrorism law established the offence of *Association de Malfaiteurs en lien avec une entreprise Terroriste* (criminal conspiracy in connection with a terrorist enterprise, or AMT).

A specialized group of investigative judges and prosecutors was entrusted with exceptionally broad powers to detain (both pre-charge and pre-trial) and prosecute suspects, even if only tangentially related to terrorism cases (Bonelli and Ragazzi [2014](#)). The judges relied on a two-legged intelligence

apparatus, one oriented at foreign counterintelligence (DST) and the other at domestic subversive groups (RG).¹ In this institutional framework, imams, religious organizations, and local actors involved in social work were removed from the picture; it was inconceivable that they could be involved in the counter-terrorism effort.

Officially, the approach seemed fully consistent with the principles of *laïcité*. In practice, however, through interpersonal contacts, the management of religious dignitaries' visa applications and deportations (Jouanneau 2009), bilateral diplomatic relations with countries of origin (Bruce 2010; Kastoryano 2004), the governance of Islam in prisons (Béraud, de Galembert, and Rostaing 2013) or administrative interventions in businesses suspected of harbouring radical activists (*pôles de lutte contre l'Islam radical*) (Bonelli 2008), the French security apparatus had been, much earlier than 2014, substantially involved in managing French Islam.

The French approach was soon at odds with its European neighbours'. Around the end of the 1990s, the Dutch intelligence services developed a new understanding of terrorism: from a purely law enforcement perspective, it was framed as a problem of "radicalization" of certain sectors of society (Muslim communities, right-wing groups).² As the Netherlands and the UK experienced their first wave of terror attacks with the murder of Theo van Gogh in 2004 and the London bombings of 2005, the reflexion intensified in intelligence circles, and by 2005, governments on both sides of the Channel adopted policies aimed at "countering" or "preventing" violent extremism (C/PVE): the UK with the PREVENT part of the CONTEST strategy, and the Netherlands with the officialization of the "Comprehensive Approach" to counter-terrorism and security. Under the leadership of the UK presidency of the European Union, the EU adopted the European Counter-Terrorism Strategy (Council of the European Union 2005a) and the Strategy for Combatting Radicalization and Recruitment to Terrorism (Council of the European Union 2005b) in 2005: the approach was mainstreamed at the EU level, but France continued to resist, claiming that *laïcité* prevented it from joining the change.

This official approach did not shift until the spring of 2012, with the terror attacks committed by Mohammed Merah in Toulouse and Montauban. The new government of François Hollande, elected a few weeks later, used the crisis as an opportunity for reconsideration. The Secrétariat Général de la Défense et de la Sécurité Nationale (SGDSN), a security organ attached to the Prime Minister's office, commissioned a report to re-think the question of radicalization. Under the leadership of Yann Jounot, a report on the prevention of radicalization was submitted to the government in October 2013, laying the foundations of France's new approach (Jounot 2013).

“Radicalization” as a societal problem: an uneasy discourse for a new practice

The report, based on several interviews with key actors in France and in the UK, the Netherlands, Belgium or Denmark, suggested introducing some principles that had become the staple of counter-radicalization policies abroad.³ In the document, the prevention of terrorism is defined as a problem that requires extending the scope of actors involved from the “security-oriented” to the “non-security oriented” ones, to best detect, report and thus anticipate this threat constructed as diffused in society. Jounot, however, struggled with the question of *laïcité*.

On the one hand, the report admitted that “France [was] isolated” and urgently had to align its approach with those of other European countries (Jounot 2013, 8). On the other hand, despite repeatedly defining the issue as a problem of “radical Islam”, the community-oriented approaches were not considered as suitable to the French institutional tradition, because “in [a policy] aimed at the religious sphere, the authorities cannot intervene directly because of the principle of *laïcité*”.

However, argued Jounot, “*laïcité* does not mean abstention” (Jounot 2013, 13). The solution was to disaggregate the problem of radicalization in four sub-questions. First, radicalization remained a problem of policing – and a few proposals were made to improve existing structures. Second, it was presented as a problem of *dérive sectaire*, a risk of involvement in a cult. Third, it was presented as a question of crime prevention, and finally, as a question of relations with religious representatives (Jounot 2013, 6–8). Departing from a narrow security approach (police/intelligence services/judges), the report reframed the question of terrorism as one of “security” and “non-security” actors, comprising youth and social work and religious leaders. This turn has remained a constant feature of France’s counter-radicalization strategies.⁴

Counter-radicalization, community and “policed multiculturalism”

How does one theorize this “societal turn” of security policy, one in which non-professionals of security (e.g. social workers, youth workers, teachers) are enlisted in the counter-terrorism, and which relates to the question of *laïcité*? There is of course, a large literature on the relation between Islam and the Republic in the French context (for a recent engagement, see Peter 2021) which largely overlaps with a literature on the question of *laïcité* and secularism (see Akan 2017 for a critical rendering of these debates). This literature has pointed out, already in the 1990s, the inconsistencies between the official language of *laïcité* and the everyday practices of state actors, be it through active interventions and regulation of religion

(Fernando 2010; Scott 2018), or the co-optation of mosques in local forms of government (Cesari 1998; Cesari and Casanova 2017). Some authors have even suggested to abandon the very idea of a generalizable notion of secularism and speak instead of “localized secularisms” (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2008) emphasizing the need to recover actors’ practices and avoid caricatures of a “French model”. This study draws on this literature, asking whether (and how) the processes of securitization reinforce the contradictory logics observed already twenty year ago.

Yet while key studies have been published in France on the effects of counter-terrorism in public discourse (Guibet Lafaye 2017), on schools (Lorcerie and Moignard 2017; Verba 2018), child protection (Clariana 2020) and social work (Michon 2020; Puaud 2018), as well as the general context of growing Islamophobia (Hajjat and Mohammed 2013), a comprehensive take on the relation between counterterrorism and the management of ethno-religious diversity in France has yet to emerge. I thus turn to the literature outside of France.

A first group of authors, at the intersection of criminology, security studies and practitioner-oriented literature, has analysed counter-radicalization in community policing (Klausen 2009; Pickering, McCulloch, and Wright-Neville 2008). They present counter-radicalization as a “soft” policy, unlike “hard” counterterrorism. Counter-radicalization is presented as a way to empower communities and is praised for engaging them through a language of partnership (Lambert 2011). Most of the literature focuses on how best to isolate and identify risky behaviour and establish trust and cohesion in targeted neighbourhoods (Vidino and Brandon 2014). Discrimination is conceptualized as a possible, but not inevitable, undesired effect; the outcome of such partnerships is seen as beneficial to social cohesion. Here, community is thus unproblematic and under-theorized.

In opposition to this approach, a growing body of critical literature has highlighted the potentially damaging effects of counter-terrorist and counter-radicalization policies on citizenship (Jarvis and Lister 2013); exclusion and discrimination (Choudhury 2010; Eijkman and Schuurman 2011; McGovern and Tobin 2010), identity (Mythen and Walklate 2009) vulnerability (Coppock and McGovern 2014), social cohesion (Husband and Alam 2011) and human rights (Kundnani and Hayes 2018; McGhee 2008). Most critical authors adopt either an explicit or an implicit version of the “suspect community thesis”, focusing on the exclusionary and discriminatory effects of counter-radicalization. Pantazis and Pemberton (2009) have explicitly developed this argument. Drawing from the work of Paddy Hillyard (1993) on the effects of the Prevention of Terrorism Acts (PTA) 1974 on Britain’s Irish community, they describe Muslims as the new “suspect community” (Pantazis and Pemberton 2009).

While presenting a more nuanced understanding of the effects of counter-radicalization policies than the partnership approach, the “suspect community” thesis misses two important aspects of contemporary counter-radicalization policies. First, as I have argued in greater detail elsewhere (Ragazzi 2016) it relies on a static conceptualization of community which fails to satisfy both a Weberian critique – according to which Muslims might well be considered a suspect “category” but it would require political work to make them a “community” (Weber 1978) – and a Durkheimian critique, the notion that something like a “Muslim community” characterized by common ways of life and beliefs, concentrated social ties marked by face-to-face encounters and frequent interaction (Durkheim 1997), would pre-exist its categorization as “suspect”. Such homogeneity and bonds of solidarity are never discussed. In either case, Muslims are construed as a suspect “category”, but whether this category is equivalent to a suspect “community” remains a contentious assertion.

Second, the “suspect community” approach misses the fact that “community” – whether construed as suspect or not – is not a by-product of counter-terrorism but is instead a particular modality of government. This second critique forms the basis of my alternative hypothesis, which I term *policed multiculturalism*. Following Nikolas Rose (1999), I am less interested in defining multiculturalism as a specific institutional arrangement; I mobilize the term to underline that “community” should not be analysed as a social formation or a process of mobilization, but as a specific entry-point for bureaucratic practices. This contemporary program of government, which Rose defines as “government through community” is organized in terms of the relations of identification between the person and “their community”, intended as “the particular real or purported collectivity to which each individual is assumed to belong, bound by kinship, religion, residence, shared plight or moral affinity” (Rose 1996). Drawing on this conceptual displacement – I suggest thinking about counter-radicalization as a form of policing which enacts a specific, non-universalist vision of the social order (Ragazzi 2016).

This mode of government functions through a process of differentiation between those whom Rose (1996) terms the “affiliated” who are to be nurtured and encouraged to serve as vectors of governmental power, and the “marginalized”, those who are unable or unwilling to be governed. According to the logic of counter-radicalization, “community” is approached through the angle of risk. Radicalized individuals are indeed categorized ambiguously as both “at risk” and “risky” (Heath-Kelly 2013; Aradau 2004). This duality, which translates the ambiguous positioning of counter-radicalization between security and welfare, delineates the contours of three categories.

First, it “empowers” and “responsibilises” the affiliated, especially the spokespersons who can claim to speak in the name of the community, by

"linking them in new ways into the political apparatus in order to enact programmes which seek to regenerate the economic and human fabric of an area by re-activating in 'the community' these 'natural' virtues which it has temporarily lost" (Rose 1996, 336). The idea of "affiliated" Muslims is a first category, which echoes Mahmood Mamdani's "good Muslim" (2003), but turns a passive category into an active one.

Conversely it subjects the "ungovernable", the "marginalized" – the "bad Muslim" – to an alternative: either enter the second category of the "reformed" through rehabilitation or de-radicalization (Horgan and Braddock 2010) or be definitively relegated to the third category of the "excluded"; constituted either as legitimate targets of permanent surveillance and exceptional prosecution (Bigo et al. 2015), revocation of citizenship (Joppke 2016) or physical elimination through extra-judicial killing (Wilcox 2017). This approach, which complicates the notion of community, locates suspicion and marginalization as only two of the possible mechanisms of the government through community.

In the following section, I show how the policed multiculturalism hypothesis – that counter-radicalization policies should be understood as a way to govern diversity through securitized ethno-religious communities – applies to the French case, despite its official rejection of community-based approaches to diversity in the name of *laïcité*.

A note on methodology

A few words on the research design and methodology. The research was designed primarily as an interpretative project, with the aim of generating insights and developing hypotheses rather than from a confirmatory perspective. There is thus no claim to representativity of the findings beyond the cases. What we sought after was instead rich accounts of personal and professional experiences that would allow us to generate insights about the research question (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012).

The analysis relies on 14 qualitative interviews carried out between April and September 2015 in two cities on the periphery of Paris: Pantin and Villeneuve-Saint-Georges. The city of Pantin is located in the Seine-Saint-Denis department and is contiguous with the city of Paris. It has a population of 57,482 inhabitants. Villeneuve-Saint-Georges is located in the Val-De-Marne département 20 km south of Paris. It has a population of 33,545 inhabitants.

The two cities were chosen for their history of immigration and in particular for the presence of an important Muslim population. Both cities have had to face the question of the incorporation of Islam in the local political life, and have thus been particularly concerned by the processes described in this paper. Furthermore, they were previous fieldwork sites in which the

researcher who carried out the interviews, had a fine-grained knowledge and the long-established relationships with the respondent.

Interviewees were selected for their participation in the local implementation of France's counter-radicalization strategy. Among them were social workers, a political advisor, local elected politicians and appointed government officials, child protection professionals, school headmasters, representatives of non-profit organization and an imam. The purpose of the interviews was to understand both the actors' practices and the way in which they understood and interpreted these practices at the local level. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. They lasted between 20 minutes and approximately 2 hours. Only the interviews cited in the article are referenced.

Pantin and Villeneuve-Saint-Georges: "policed multiculturalism" in practice

At the local level, "hard counter-terrorism" (surveillance, criminal investigations) remains the purview of the security apparatus. Counter-radicalization is coordinated within a multi-agency departmental monitoring unit for the prevention of radicalization and support for families (CPRAF),⁵ which translates the new involvement of "non-security" actors in the counter-radicalization effort.

In 2015, Pantin's unit was composed of these institutions: judicial (prosecutor's office, children's tribunal, juvenile protection service, prison services, probation services), education (ministry of education), child protection, welfare and social cohesion (CAF, Préfet pour l'égalité des chances, politiques de la ville), NGOs (ADSEA), police (DGSP) and healthcare (agence régionale de santé) (Interviewee #4, 4). These units discussed individual cases, shared the names of potentially radicalized individuals, and determined the best measures to apply. Religious representatives are handled separately through meetings and *instances de dialogue* (forums for dialogue) and do not participate directly in coordination.

How does this new local arrangement of counter-terrorism policy relate to *laïcité*? In these sections I explore four dimensions of this relationship. I begin by offering a sample of the discursive positions around *laïcité* and show it remains the main reference point of all discourse. Next, I show how three set of practices undermine this logic: the security practices of risk, the practices of community representation and the practices of community-oriented social work.

The structuring discourse of laïcité

Whether they buy into it or question it, the discourse around *laïcité* structures the representations of the actors for discussing counter-radicalization policy.⁶

Our interviews revealed a set of different positions. For a first category of the actors, the dangers of *communautarisme* and *radicalization* are directly linked. As a representative of Pantin clarifies:

The rise of *communautarisme* paves the way for radicalisation. But it is almost automatic because people fall in a form of victimisation and will debate for years to find out who is more victimised than the other [...] At the end of the day, weak-minded people just need someone to say “you see, in this republic you have not been welcomed,” “you can see that in this republic there is discrimination,” [...] And if you open the door to victimisation, you open the door to radicalisation. (Interviewee #6, 1)

Several respondents, however, are sceptical of the dominant interpretation and call upon another understanding of *laïcité* – not as exclusionary of religion, but no less linked to principles of equality. Here again, the idea that France would function based on community representation is rejected. What constitutes the criterion of “radicalization” is not a religious practice, but rather the rejection of the “social project”. A social worker explains:

Countering radicalisation ... what the Social and Family Action Fund says is that specialised prevention [social work] acts at the local level in order to tackle any risk of marginalisation and social maladjustment. So, radicalisation, given that we are in a *laïc* (secular) country, is one of these risks of marginalisation. In France we are more in an assimilation country than in a community-oriented model. [...] A young person who has a religious discourse, young people who have religious discourses that are not in line with society, it exists. But to define a young person as being a radicalised young person, as long as he accepts the educational relationship, and that he agrees to be in touch with an educator and works with him on the opportunity to build a social project, we believe that he is not radicalised. He is radicalised when he refuses the social project. (Interviewee #3, 12)

For many actors involved in social work, “radicalization” is a new label for old problems, which they associate with social relegation – rather than religion – and the usual problems associated with at-risk youth and teenagers. As an official of the departmental council in charge of the childhood and family section explains:

For a variety of reasons, we find our usual public, young people who have issues with their parents and who are in a position to accept paternal substitutes as soon as they come into the picture. And so that’s what makes the bed of pimps for young girls on the Internet and that makes the bed of jihadist recruiters as it makes the bed of many other purveyors who rely on these weaknesses of our young people. We know them well. That’s why we were surprised, we weren’t faced with situations we didn’t know about. (Interviewee #2, 3)

Despite the prevalence of the actors’ work as oriented towards *laïcité*, three sets of practices will put the community – as a category through

which counter-terrorism can be implemented – at the centre of counter-radicalisation policy.

Risk-based security practices

In theory, the new counter-radicalization doctrine can be perceived as a socialization of security work (what Jounot calls a delegation to “non-security actors”). It is also perceived the other way around: as a power grab by security actors in domains traditionally the purview of welfare professionals. “Crime prevention” is one of the means through which security actors can enter the field. The same child protection official explains the role of the local police prefecture.

Before, we were in a more or less fluid interaction with the Public Prosecutor’s Office, on all our child protection policies, and now, by this means, there is a third actor who positions itself, based on the notion of crime prevention – which is not insignificant either, to have used this vector – and who positions himself in our fields of social action and protection [...]. And who plays the role of coordinator. And that’s extremely new in the institutional landscape [...]. I don’t know. Sometimes it frightens me and then sometimes I tell myself that we can’t do without it. I don’t know. (Interviewee #2, 8)

Two elements are of particular concern. The first one is the negotiation of the purpose of counter-radicalization as a specific form of state intervention, between the interests of the youth “at risk” and the interests of society against “risky” youths, in other words, between a logic of rehabilitation characteristic of “penal welfarism” (Garland 2001) and a logic of risk prevention (O’Malley 1992; see also Heath-Kelly 2013). As the same interviewee explains:

What frightens me, well, it’s this hyper-presence of the police, obviously. And this border, always with its risk of porosity, between the question of repression and the question of prevention and identification, because when we say prevention, it is above all the question of identification that is at stake. Identification to prevent, of course, to prevent people from leaving for Syria. But it is well known that the border is always extremely narrow between repression and identification. (Interviewee #2, 8)

Actors from the welfare sector know that the shift towards a logic of security and risk prevention is a reframing of their work. This “securitization of social work”⁷ potentially goes against their professional and ethical beliefs. As the head of the *prevention spécialisée* (social work) unit of Villeneuve-Saint-Georges explains:

Regarding deradicalisation, we are not at all in the field of specialised prevention (social work), hence my ... It would seem clearer to me if there were dedicated structures for that. Not to mix everything up. I’m not sure that

specialised prevention is the best actor to do that. We risk losing our soul. Our principles. [...] we must not mix everything up. (Interviewee #1, 15)

The second issue raised by social work actors is how risk-thinking, induced by the security logic, structures governmental action through a community perspective which threatens the principles of *laïcité*. Commenting on the new security perspective brought about by the 2015 terror attacks, interviewee #2 explains:

We've always been concerned about diversity, but we've never thought of it in those terms, in terms of essentialisation. [...] All of a sudden, in order to know where to dispatch police units and to prioritise the level of danger, we are told "where are your sensitive sites?" And we are told "near Jewish schools, near Koranic schools, near mosques, near churches." And I find this to be so violent! It's unbearable, to force us to think of it in this form of risk. To think that there is a difference to be made ... So, all of a sudden, all our public policies and tools were coloured by this concern. [...] It breaks into what we have built, a secular (*laïc*) public service. (Interviewee #2, 4)

The turn of 2014, by reframing the equilibrium between security and social work at the local level, rebalances power relations between actors. Through the logic of risk, it introduces elements of community-based thinking; like security professionals, youth and social workers need to think of their publics in terms of "risk", in a way which they perceive as contradicting the principles of *laïcité*.

Practices of community representation

Dialogue with Muslim community representatives – a hallmark of community partnerships in countries like the UK or the Netherlands – is one practice imported to France, albeit with some caveats. The designation of "trusted Muslims" – the "affiliated" in Rose's terms – is a quest to establish the state's legitimacy in the eyes of a population that is considered to function differently from mainstream society. The aim is to tap into a real or purported network of mechanic solidarity (in Durkheimian terms) or an idealized "Muslim social capital" and knowledge of cultural specificities.

The French authorities did not wait until 2014 to encourage the creation of representative bodies which they could enter in dialogue with over religious matters, such as the building of mosques or the certification of halal food (Frégosi 2008; Geisser and Zemouri 2007). Such structures are consistent with principles of *laïcité*, as they concern the management of religious institutions. But to involve religious leaders in a matter unrelated to religion, such as counterterrorism, marks a stark departure from accepted norms, as it implies that religion can be a criterion to choose state interlocutors. The relationship with local representatives is thus ambiguously presented as both related and unrelated to counterterrorism:

How can the French State deal with a religious phenomenon which can be a threat in certain aspects? It's very complicated for a secular (*laïc*) state. The bet is that with the strengthening of the links between the state and Muslims, it will soften. [...] Minister Cazeneuve wished last year that relationships would get stronger. He asked all the prefects of France to bring together the Muslim world to learn about their problems and identify interesting personalities [...]. This is not at first sight part of the counter-radicalisation effort, it is first of all a question of strengthening links with the State, but it can also help to prevent radicalisation. (Interviewee #5, 5)

At the local level, the relationship between authorities and religious leaders had traditionally been a component – albeit a controversial one – of representative politics (Duthu 2009). In some municipalities, the principle of *laïcité* had served as an excuse to deny religious demands, such as the construction of mosques. In others, such as in Villeneuve-Saint-Georges a more open approach has been adopted. As one political advisor explains:

When the mayor arrived six years ago, her first gesture in relation to the religious was to open a gymnasium, where she spoke, before the prayer, in front of 800 believers, men in front, women behind – she greeted everyone. [...] It had never been done before. [...] The other mayors, from both right and left, have always considered that it belonged to the private sphere, and never dared touch this topic (Interviewee #7, 3).

In contrast to public discourse, these local forms of recognition have had a security dimension, especially regarding the perceived risk of terrorism (Duthu 2009). The “trusted Muslim” occupies here a similar function to that of the local leaders in colonial indirect rule (Duffield 2005). It is thus important that representatives be considered legitimate because they are “Muslim enough”. As one regional civil servant explains, concerning the choice of a specific interlocutor:

We worked a little with [Muslim representative name] informally within the framework of the counter-radicalisation unit, but he has a disadvantage, he is too westernised. We would have to find others with whom we could work, but it's delicate. (Interviewee #5, 8)

These practices are heavily critiqued by the supporters of a strict understanding of *laïcité* – for which any recognition of the political importance of religious groups is a deadly compromise.

Some mayors who were elected in 2014 have been playing with fire, allying themselves with small Muslim groups because, they thought “they’re going to bring us votes.” [...] It gives these small groups an enormous importance, including vis-à-vis others, as they can say “you see, because we are Muslims, we are elected. So, you have to come and join us because we Muslims have to impose our way of thinking on this secular (*laïc*) republic.” [...] The elected representatives who have chosen this game, from all sides, have taken a considerable risk. (Interviewee #6, 6)

The criticism can, however, also come from the community side. As one respondent explains:

For example, for [local Muslim leader], he was targeted a lot, he was a bad Muslim, he was betraying his own people. He had a lot of attacks on the Internet, on social networks, which affected him a lot (Interviewee #7, 10).

By plugging into pre-existing practices of community representation, explicitly denounced by some, but implicitly practiced by many, local counter-terrorism in France thus does not differ significantly from its counterparts in the Netherlands or in the UK, enacting uneasily in the framework of counter-terrorism policies at the local level the forms of community representation it otherwise publicly rejects.

Ethnicized practices of social work

Policed multiculturalism, finally, can be traced in a third set of practices, linked to the “colonization” – I use here Garland’s (2001) notion in reverse – of social work by counter-terrorism (Michon 2020).⁸ Counter-radicalization inherits again a set of practices that is permeated by a logic of community. Social workers – be they youth workers, educators, child protection professionals – are key components of the local counter-radicalization setup (Puaud 2018). They have a double function: to detect “early signs” of radicalization (*les signaux faibles*) and to “rehabilitate” those who can be “reformed” – the second category discussed earlier.

Yet similarly to what has happened with the management of local Islam, social work has been permeated by two logics. First, as Verba and Guélamine (2017) show, frontline workers who deal with religiosity on a daily basis regularly engage in a negotiation with the principles of *laïcité*. In the words of one social worker:

We as educators [...] sometimes we have to be smart, strategic [] we take people where they are. Whether it’s the relationship with religion, the law, delinquency, violence, drug addiction, what else? It’s long-term support. Our main tool is our approach, our street work, exchange and dialogue. (Interviewee #1, 10)

Strictly applying the principles of *laïcité* – like the strict application of any rule potentially infringed by the publics of social workers – is thus impossible. Enrolling social work in counter-terrorism thus means inheriting a pragmatic approach to religion bound to be in contradiction with the public discourse of *laïcité*.

The second logic is that of the ethno-religious representation in its personnel. This point is contentious for many respondents. It traces back to “big brothers policy” of the socialist governments of the 1980s and the 1990s

(Boucher 2005). Through the use of subsidized employment, neighbourhood residents were recruited into social work and other jobs as young adults. The logic was that their ethno-religious background and trajectory would legitimize them in the eyes of local youth. This led to a two-layered critique.

First, the policy, conceived as a form of appeasement of social tensions through co-optation, was criticized for compromising the principles of *laïcité* of public administration.

The question of the “big brothers,” the “kaid rule”,⁹ which some cities have instituted, the question of buying social peace. Malek Boutih, the socialist MP, made a scandal about this. He says that there are cities that have somewhat endorsed Salafism by doing this. By giving jobs in town halls, in mediation, even as gym janitor, things like that, they pray in the gym. My brother works at the town hall of Créteil and he tells me things, it’s incredible, the religious practices of his colleagues. (Interviewee #1, 16)

The second critique regarding *laïcité* – is that the policy has led to a substitution of professional skills by ethno-religious community competences (Boucher and Belqasmi 2011). As one respondent explained:

Left-wing politicians have in fact played the big brother card, and they are not very favourable to the question of professionalisation and specialisation of inter-cultural mediation. Because of course they don’t have specialised experts. After the 1980s, we saw how they completely exploited the neighbourhood associations. (Interviewee #2, 5)

Beyond the division between competences and professionalism, ultimately the profession of social work itself is heavily composed of personnel from immigrant backgrounds who find themselves in a difficult position:

Then I will add, I know it may not be politically correct, our professionals are, for the most part, of the 3rd or 4th generation from Maghreb or African immigration. [...] And not hearing what these colleagues tell us about their conflicts of loyalty, their difficulty in dealing with their family culture, and the question of *laïcité* and the question of blasphemy, not hearing this demand, also means refusing the integration initiatives of these colleagues. For me, it means not seeing in which crucible of representation they are stuck into. (Interviewee #2, 5)

Thus French counter-radicalization, by enlisting actors from the field of social work, is populating its ranks with a large number of post-colonial, racialized, ethnicized subjects whom, regardless of their vision and practices of *laïcité*, have to come to terms with the double bind they are placed into.

Conclusion

This article highlights the discrepancy between a dominant language of *laïcité* and security practices that increasingly function through a logic of community, thus governing social and political diversity through the prism

of risk and security – what I have termed *policed multiculturalism*. For scholars embedded in the French literature, or for scholars of citizenship and multiculturalism, it might not come as a great surprise that the distinction between the French model and multicultural models might not be, in practice, as evident as often assumed (Escafré-Dublet, Guiraudon, and Talpin [this issue](#)). The research results presented in this article have brought a new example of this, showing how the logic of security, especially when it spreads throughout non-security sectors of the state apparatus, participates in and reinforces the community-centred logic of contemporary bureaucratic practices.

It is important to specify that the argument developed in this article is neither an embrace nor a critique of the community-centred nature of counter-radicalization policies. Any variant in the imaginary continuum between colour-blind and community-centred approaches to counterterrorism brings a delicate set of trade-offs. What it has tried to highlight are the gains and losses for citizenship, equality and social cohesion in the discrepancy between an all-pervasive discourse of *laïcité*, with its excesses – who would for example, outside of France, question the legitimacy of a Muslim employee asking for a religious holiday off – and how actors from the fields of security, social work and local politics derogate to them. While the quest for the “authentic Muslim” is as despicable as the darkest strategies of colonial rule, the recognition of French Islam as a legitimate interlocutor in local politics seems a step in the direction of the social and political inclusion of a population that is, in political and media discourse, often conflated with an “enemy within”.

If a critique can be formulated, it lies elsewhere: in the problems raised by the war of conquest, legitimated by counter-radicalization policies, waged by security actors with relation to the sectors of religious representation, youth work, child protection or social work. Developing counter-radicalization in France has naturalized the notion that everyday displays of religiosity, as expressed in choices related to clothing, diet, free time, which were already suspect of affiliation to *communautarisme* are now publicly associated with *terrorism*. The long-term effects of this submission of entire sectors of social, youth and educational work to the logic of security and suspicion, despite the huge dilemmas it creates for its professionals, remain unknown and largely occulted from public debate.

Notes

1. For a detailed analysis of the evolution, see Bonelli and Ragazzi (2019).
2. For a detailed history, see Fadil, Koning, and Ragazzi (2019).
3. For a comparative analysis of UK, French and Dutch counter-radicalization policies, see Ragazzi (2014).
4. For a summary of France’s various counter-radicalisation strategies and their main features, see Pawella (2019).

5. Cellule départementale de suivi pour la prévention de la radicalisation et l'accompagnement des familles (CPRAF).
6. This should of course to be placed in the context of the official colour and religion-blind discourse about police work in France (Bonnet and Caillault 2015; Fassin 2011).
7. On the question of counter-radicalization and the "securitization of social work" see the special issue: Ragazzi (2017).
8. Michon also uses the notion of "colonization", but from a Habermasian perspective.
9. The term in French is "caïdat" and alludes to traditional authority structures in Muslim countries such as the former French North African colonies.

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ORCID

Francesco Ragazzi  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7876-6880>

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Interviews

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- Interviewee #2, High-ranking official, Departmental Council 94, Childhood and Family Section, Paris, 2015, April 5.
- Interviewee #3, High-ranking official, Social work unit, Pantin, 2015, April 29.
- Interviewee #4, High-ranking official, Departmental Council 93, Childhood and Family Section, Pantin, 2015, April 5.
- Interviewee #5, High-Ranking official, Val de Marne Prefect office, Créteil, 2015, September 1.
- Interviewee #6, High-Ranking Local Authority Official, Pantin, 2015, July 21.
- Interviewee #7, High-Ranking Local Authority Official, Villeneuve-Saint-Georges, 2015, July 10.