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To what extent does the debate on exceptionalism signal an identity crisis in contemporary French politics and society?

In this essay, I will interrogate the different debates concerning exceptionalism and analyse whether a true crisis of identity can be seen to exist within modern French society and politics, concluding with a weighted summation. French exceptionalism, or 'exceptionalism' as I will refer to it from this point forward, is an elusive term regarding its meaning, varying in its scholarly definition. It is broadly understood to be an assumption of cultural superiority of French civilisation above all others – especially regarding France's colonial history, Paris' imperialist project using its exceptionalism as justification, distinct from racial supremacy preferred by the British and later Americans –, although it is best understood by its underlying 'exceptional' ideals; those of French republicanism, specifically its modern incarnation: 'neo-republicanism'. One central tenet of republicanism other than the triad of liberty, equality and fraternity – famously the national motto and now mandated by a 2013 law to stand alongside the tricolour on every school in France –; is *laïcité*, France's unique style of colourblind secularism that originated in early 20th Century state antagonisms towards the Holy See but now is widely used in opposition to the rising Muslim population (in other words a pretext for state-enforced Islamophobia, such as a 2010 act prohibiting the niqab or burka in public, considered by many French Muslims to be a breach of their religious liberties).

Commenté [EM1]: OK. But what is your argument?

Commenté [EM2]: OK. How would you define *laïcité*?

I shall begin by deconstructing the aforementioned ‘debate on exceptionalism’. Some would point to the two successive and decisive electoral defeats of Marine Le Pen, then leader of the National Rally (RN), in both the 2017 and 2022 presidential election second-rounds as evidence of a pronounced resolution of the exceptionalism-stemming identity crisis within French society. This would be due to the victorious Macron’s intentional embracing of neo-republican rhetoric, seen most clearly in the former name of his self-described ‘transpartisan’ movement, the liberal LREM – the *Republic* on the Move, renamed in September 2022 to simply ‘Renaissance’. On the contrary, neo-republicanism is now such a broadly adopted mode of political and social thought that it has been accepted within French electoral politics by groups that sit on opposing ends of the original left-right wing divide, the benches of the National Assembly. As Emile Chabal (2017: 1), one of the foremost academics on the topic of French republicanism, so accurately puts it, “both the Front national (FN) and the far left have sought to reclaim and repackage republicanism, a tradition for which they were both resolutely hostile only a few years before.” Chabal goes on to state that towards the end of the Cold War, after the implosion of both the credibility of Marxist-Leninist Communism and socialism more generally, neo-republicanism stood as “an attractive, ready-made alternative” (Chabal, 2017: 1).

Commenté [EM3]: What do you mean by "neo-republican"?

The significance of this recent historical context to the debates on exceptionalism cannot be understated; it is vital to our understanding as it explains how the previous anti-republican fervour of the French Left, seen most clearly in the anarchist tendency expressed most vividly by militant groups during the May 1968 unrest, dissipated. Furthermore, instead of supplanting exceptionalism, neo-republicanism can instead be seen as a new form of exceptionalism, rebranded for the contemporary French with recent additions of regional European identity and integration. Indeed, Jill Lovecy (1999: 206) points out that in the mid-1990s there was a visible shift in the debate on

exceptionalism due to “the twin processes of Europeanisation and globalisation, within which the French state and its domestic social and economic partners were now having to learn to operate.”

The pervasive ideology of neo-republicanism is indeed a continuation of exceptionalism via other means. Neo-republicanism is a force that generates such a normativity in French social and political discourse that it encloses any mainstream public debate within the parameters of its own internal logic and boundaries; the barriers of *la République française*, who demands her self-preservation through continuous socio-political metamorphoses. This is not to say that there are not those who reject republicanism entirely, one historic and lingering tendency within the dissident far-right in France is a nostalgia and often outright vocal call for a return to the monarchical system (although this movement is fractured between three rival claimants to the throne: the Houses of Bourbon, Orléans and Bonaparte). Edward DeClair would even go so far as to call the RN the successor to *Action Française* – French Action, the most prominent monarchist party in the country’s history. A more modern example of a movement that openly denigrates neo-republicanism, would be the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests – a global current with French branches developing following a domestic case of police brutality: the death of a black man, Adam Traoré in custody of the Gendarmerie –, BLM’s contemporary anti-racist demands such as a call for racial statistics to be collected and published, a proposition that stands in opposition to both French law and republicanism’s defining principle of *laïcité*.

As well as this, I must draw attention to the fact that the ‘neo-republicanism’ of different socio-political figures varies greatly, from being held up by leftist commentators such as Régis Debray paraphrased by Chabal (2017: 1), as being a positive continuation of “the revolutionary spirit of 1789”, to its formerly cited adoption by the far-right RN. Yet none of these arguments contest the

Commenté [EM4]: Include reference.

Commenté [EM5]: Adama

unquestionable supremacy of neo-republican discourse and ideals in contemporary France. However, I would nonetheless personally conclude that the debate on exceptionalism does indeed indicate a deep crisis of identity in present-day French politics and society, regardless of the recently aforementioned counter-position, due to how France's unresolved colonial legacies manifest themselves in potent social ailments such as Islamophobia and civil unrest, such as the spiritual heir (albeit less political in its manifestation) to May 1968: the 2005 suburban riots.

Tensions in the banlieues between largely unemployed ethnic youths and the state stem from a failure of French integration, heightened by a Jungian subconscious fear in French minds of national collapse. As Scott Sayare writes in a November 26th, 2015 'The Atlantic' article (Sayare: 2015): "A history of political upheaval and collapse seems to have instilled in the country's political leaders the conviction ... that France's Republican project is terribly fragile. This alleged fragility can impose a sort of permanent defensiveness, a siege mentality that treats criticism as treachery and the admission of failure as an "anti-Republican" [sic.] threat to the nation's very survival." The history that Sayare refers to here could be many humiliating military defeats: the Napoleonic and Revolutionary Wars; the 1870 Franco-Prussian War; World War II, including Vichy collaboration (with its own Holocaust shame), but the most recent – the Algerian War, often euphemistically referred to as 'the events' – bears the most psychic pain, having resulted in both the collapse of the Fourth Republic and the loss of three departments of France. S. Romi Mukherjee notes a "Republican sacred [which] must be understood as a fragile and tenuous construct" (Mukherjee: 2019). Moreover, it is key to note that the specificity of 'French' exceptionalism is unclear due to accusations by those living outside of France of 'colonial hypocrisy', with the three previously noted central tenets of republicanism being equally the national motto of Haiti, the first country to be formed through armed struggle against the French state.

Bibliography

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