



HAL
open science

A White Race Blindness?

Sarah Mazouz

► **To cite this version:**

Sarah Mazouz. A White Race Blindness?. French Politics, Culture & Society, 2021, 39 (2), pp.116-135.
10.3167/fpcs.2021.390206 . hal-03356987

HAL Id: hal-03356987

<https://hal.science/hal-03356987>

Submitted on 28 Sep 2021

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

A White Race Blindness?

Abstract Universalism and the Unspeakable Making of Race

Abstract: Drawing on observations and on interviews conducted in a *préfecture* and in a *municipalité* of the Paris periphery, this article analyzes how republican universalism operates as a “particularizing” tool enacting Whiteness. Starting from the paradoxical situation in which White state officials are reluctant to engage with the notion of racial discrimination when they are keen to ascribe racial categories to people of color, I argue that race blindness is in fact a form of White blindness to racialization. People of color who subscribe to the ideology of the color-blindness tend to adopt a position whereby their loyalty toward the requirement of race blindness is supposed to protect them from suspicions raised by the racialized identity they are assigned to. But in practice, this stance internalizes the White view on them. The article concludes by discussing the link between White race blindness and the failure of republican policies against racial discrimination.

Keywords: ethnography of the state, France, race blindness, racialization, Whiteness.

Résumé: À partir d’une enquête ethnographique réalisée dans une préfecture et une municipalité de la région parisienne, cet article analyse comment l’universalisme abstrait produit la particularisation de celle et ceux qui sont perçues comme autres par les membres du groupe majoritaire. Ce faisant, il constitue une des mises en acte de la condition blanche. En partant du paradoxe observé à plusieurs reprises sur le terrain, où des représentants de l’État sont tout à la fois rétifs à admettre que des discriminations raciales existent et prompts à assigner racialement celles et ceux qui leur paraissent être d’une autre origine, ce texte montre comment la cécité républicaine à la race est en fait un aveuglement blanc aux formes de

racialisation. Il étudie alors la position ambivalente de personnes soumises à des assignations racialisantes qui adhèrent à l'exigence de *colorblindness* avant de conclure en discutant le lien entre aveuglement blanc à la racialisation et échec des politiques françaises de lutte contre les discriminations raciales.

Mots-clés : ethnographie de l'État, France, « race blindness », racialisation, condition blanche.

Sarah MAZOUZ

CNRS

CERAPS

1, place Déliot

59024 Lille

France

+33 (0)7 70 00 48 71

Sarah.MAZOUZ@cnrs.fr

Total word count: 9,048

February 21, 2005: A local prefecture of the Parisian area, interview with Alain Bernard, Chief Executive Officer of the prefecture, director of the Office of Citizenship and Head of the Committee for Equal Opportunity and Citizenship (COPEC), the state body designated to lead the fight against all forms of discriminations.¹ Bernard belongs to the highest rank of state employees. In his mid-forties at the time of the interview, he is also White and middle-class. Throughout our conversation, he shows signs of resistance to describing certain practices as instances of racial discrimination. He even suggests that only a person who is fully assimilated according to the standards of the prefecture staff could make a justified complaint of racial discrimination. He eventually makes his point as follows,

I'm not convinced that the fact that we don't allow women wearing the hijab to attend naturalization ceremonies constitutes discrimination.² There's a law, like that you have to stop at a red light.³ The majority of people accept it and obey it. On the same level, I don't think that the fact an employer chooses not to employ a woman wearing a hijab can be defined as racial discrimination.

February 6, 2006: Same prefecture. This time I am observing the taking of fingerprints as part of the process of issuing identity documents to newly naturalized French citizens. The street-level bureaucrats in charge are from the Office of Naturalization or the Office of Citizenship. They belong to the lowest rank of state employees and learn on the job, without having received any specific legal training in immigration and citizenship law. In this prefecture, they are all White and working-class. Danièle Durand is one of them. She greets a recently naturalized black woman, checking whether she brought all the required paperwork. When examining the photograph presented by the woman, Durand declares in a very friendly tone, "It's a lovely photo, but given that the background isn't light enough and you're black, we can't see you. Your son's picture is okay because he's lighter than you." Later on the same

day, Durand also makes many open and direct comments about Islam to men she imagines are Muslim, obviously assuming that they treat their wives as subordinates.

In a conversation about racial discrimination I have later with Durand, she systematically dismisses the testimonies and complaints about racial discrimination filed in her prefecture via a toll free number, arguing that enough has already been done to combat racial discrimination and that the majority of the complaints alleging racial discrimination are not true discrimination cases.

From the lowest to the highest ranks of state employees, a puzzling discrepancy exists between the bureaucrats' strong reluctance to recognize cases where people have been racially discriminated against and their own constant reliance on racializing categorizations and ascriptions for those they consider of a different ancestry. This inconsistency is especially bewildering as when the issue of racial discrimination is raised, the first reaction of the prefecture employers I interviewed is typically to remind me that the French Republic recognizes only citizens and is blind to individuals' origins, which is supposed, in their belief, to prevent racism. They go on to stress that their own practices are guided by this requirement of color blindness, thus asserting their abstract universalist position. In her seminal work, historian Joan W. Scott sheds light on how abstract universalism was an ideological mystification in the case of gender equality.⁴ In the case of race, far from being an ideology of inclusion, abstract universalism allows to particularize, and thus racially ascribe, persons perceived as non-White. In that sense, it appears to be a version of color-blind racism enabling its proponent to perform a non-racist position when in fact enacting racism.

Using Critical Race Theory and the philosophical construct of White ignorance, sociologist Jennifer Mueller showed how, in the case of the United States, colorblindness is an ongoing cultural and historical process grounded in an epistemology of ignorance that surrounds White privilege and structural White supremacy.⁵ In this article, I argue that

abstract universalism reveals, in the case of France, the contradictory claims of colorblindness. Not only does abstract universalism “[support] white[s]’ ability to ignore the significance of racial discrimination and white privilege,”⁶ but it also warrants particularizing and subordinating those seen as non-White, thus producing the political and epistemic silencing of race. How can one study and make sense of what appears to be a public secrecy⁷—a nation supposed to be race blind, yet in which race blindness serves to maintain racial discrimination unspeakable all the while allowing racializing categorizations to be routinely expressed by state representatives? My response is to explore bureaucratic practices and discourses so as to highlight the ties between this use of race blindness, republican abstract universalism, and Whiteness.

I use the term “racializing categorization” and “racializing ascriptions” to denote the process by which a real or presumed origin is essentialized, racializing the otherness of that origin, and minoritizing it. In this case, I choose the term “racializing” rather than “racial” to emphasize that it is a process. I also use the term “racial discrimination” because discrimination is one of the results of this process of ascription and categorization.

My main contribution is to transpose the concept of Whiteness to the French context in order to show how the belief of a socially realized race blindness produces a form of racial oversight and is thus an expression of Whiteness that makes racialization a public secrecy. In so doing, I identify what I call the particularizing logic of abstract universalism. This logic is at play when individuals who believe that they embody the universal feel entitled to racially ascribe people cast as belonging to a minority group. Abstract universalism and Whiteness interlock at this juncture. Following Ruth Frankenberg’s pioneering work, I consider Whiteness as a privileged status and standpoint relying on “unmarked and unnamed” practices and social markers.⁸ I argue that republican race blindness supports the very process of

unmarking what stems from this privileged location. To address Whiteness in the French context, I begin with its starting point, which is “the White condition.”⁹

In what follows, I employ Critical Race Theory,¹⁰ especially its critique of the idea that blindness toward race is the primary means of eradicating racism, bringing together literatures on Whiteness,¹¹ racial formation,¹² and racialization¹³ in Europe to demonstrate the salience of Whiteness in the definition of French race blindness.

Using the concept of racialization in the case of Whiteness does not mean that I consider the lived experience of White persons as racially equivalent or symmetrical to that of people of color. I only want to emphasize that, despite the fact that Whites often perceive themselves as non-racialized, they are part of a racially structured system that bestows them with racial privileges and oppresses other groups. To quote Frankenberg: “White people are ‘raced’ just as men are ‘gendered’”.¹⁴

To analyze the denial of race issues and its ties with race blindness and Whiteness, my arguments build upon Didier and Éric Fassin’s groundbreaking work on racial politics as well as the scholarship of other French social scientists who examined France’s difficulty in addressing racialization, racializing ascriptions, and racial discriminations, in particular Laure Bereni, Mathilde Cohen, Daniel Sabbagh, and Patrick Simon.¹⁵ Specifically, based on ethnographic research in a *préfecture* of the Parisian area, my work discusses how Whiteness is enacted through the analysis of the way in which French policies against racial discriminations have failed.

The article proceeds in four sections. The first section presents the research design. The second provides background information on how racial issues are kept unspoken in France. The third section focuses on the particularizing dimension of abstract universalism. Finally, the fourth identifies the specific position that abstract universalism may produce among people of color who define themselves as republican.

Researching Race and Racing Research in French Institutions

This article draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2004 and 2009 in a city located in the Paris periphery, which I have called Doucy in order to preserve the anonymity of my sources. Doucy is the administrative center of the prefecture in this *département* of the Île-de-France region, and is governed by a broad-left coalition of Socialist, Communist, and Green politicians. Its history is linked to the history of immigration in France. At the time of the study, 11% of Doucy's population were non-citizens, and a large proportion of the French population of the city originated from families who had emigrated from North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia.¹⁶

The heart of the data for this article consists of observations carried out in various departments of the prefecture, particularly within the COPEC and the Office for Naturalization, as well as at the Doucy City Hall. I also conducted interviews with bureaucrats from both departments of the prefecture as well as White bureaucrats and elected members of the municipal majority at the Doucy City Hall. By regularly attending naturalization ceremonies and fingerprinting sessions for the issuance of identity documents to new French citizens, I was able to make contact with people who have been naturalized and to ask them about their lived experience throughout the process. My ethnographic analysis of the naturalization procedure was also based on a participant-observation study, as I myself embarked on the path to naturalization in late 2005. My own encounter with naturalization allowed me to see how race, class, and gender interplay in the way in which the street-level bureaucrats of the Office for Naturalization assess the application and the applicant. In my case, not being evidently racialized as North African¹⁷ and being well educated did not meet their expectation of what a young Tunisian woman is. This discrepancy may have been the reason why some of them constantly diminished me in order to put me back in the subaltern position they considered to be the right one for me.¹⁸

In addition, for several months during 2006 and then in 2008, I led a sociology reading group in a young people's employment support center in the area of Doucy. The aim was to generate conversations about the participants' lived experiences of racializing ascriptions and racial discrimination.

There has been much discussion about how racialization plays in the conduct of the fieldwork and determines the research design.¹⁹ Legal scholar Mathilde Cohen has shown how her identity influenced the data collection and the interactions she had with French *magistrats* during her study of their beliefs about whether and how race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation inform their work.²⁰

In my case, investigating race in a colorblind context in which racialization is thought of as a form of stigmatization raised the concern as to whether I was replicating my research subjects' everyday experience of racial discrimination in my selection methods and research design.²¹ My own ambivalent racialization also made clear how Whiteness is linked to Frenchness.

As a relatively light-skinned person with a North African last name that nevertheless, when accompanied by my given name, does not reveal whether I am of Jewish or Muslim ancestry, who speaks French with a Parisian accent and belongs to the academic world, I was perceived throughout my fieldwork as White, and therefore categorized as French, despite the fact that at the time I was a Tunisian national only. This situation reveals how national and racial categories are superimposed upon one another or at least porous to one another.

The fact that I was not seen as belonging to a minority group offered me added flexibility in conducting my fieldwork. For instance, during this period, I chose to wait until my interviewees asked me—or until the issue somehow came up in the discussion—before revealing my origin and nationality. Initially withholding that information provided a heuristic benefit for research on a number of levels. In particular, it was helpful to note which

ethnographic respondents ended up inquiring about my ancestry and in which cases and why the question was missed or avoided.

In the case of the employment support center, I was almost systematically asked about my ancestry, perhaps due to the fact that my growing up in Tunisia and my knowledge of North African culture transpired in the conversations I had with the youth. Learning that I was Tunisian enabled them to feel suddenly closer to me. Some were finally able to call me by my first name, though I had insisted they should do so when I first arrived there. Others stopped taunting me as “Miss Sociologist.” Still others were led to reflect on what it was that nevertheless created a difference between them and me.

By contrast, in the Prefect’s office, even a member of the staff with whom I had a relatively close relationship never asked me about my ancestry or citizenship status. At the Office for Naturalization, the question never arose either. The fact that I was a doctoral student in Paris writing on the very theme of naturalization probably reinforced my racialization as White, making me appear French in their eyes. As I was racialized as White, I was also categorized as French.

Throughout the portion of my research relating to the naturalization procedure, the question never arose with the prefecture officials. Accordingly, being a non-citizen never created an obstacle for me to access the field.

Race and the French Republic: A Dismissed Recognition

The French Republic is defined as colorblind. The only relevant form of identification is supposed to be French citizenship “without distinction of origin, race or religion” (Constitution of 1958). Against this background, French policies addressing cultural pluralism only focus on the integration of immigrants and their offspring. The problems faced by first generation immigrants used to be interpreted as resulting from their lack of assimilation. The racial dimension of the unequal treatment to which descendants of immigrants are subjected

was denied on the ground that their French citizenship—typically granted by birth on the basis of *jus soli* and double *jus soli*—protected them. It was thus understood that only poorly integrated foreigners could be subject to racism or xenophobia (rather than racial discrimination).

Yet, by the end of the 1990s, the notion of racial discrimination was included in policies of integration. Mainly prompted by the European Union,²² the introduction of this new concept called for a novel policy of otherness that was to go beyond the previous analysis structured by the dichotomy between nationals and foreigners and the issue of the integration of immigrants.

French policies on combating racial discrimination thus have known three main stages. The first spanned from 1998-2000. 1998 was the year in which racial discrimination was established as a public problem with the creation of the Discrimination Study Group (*Groupe d'étude des discriminations*, GED), the establishment of CODAC (*Commissions départementales d'accès à la citoyenneté*), and the publication of the first charters between the state and social partners. During this second period (2001-2003), the focus shifted from the mere recognition of discrimination to the implementation of a policy for compensation. The GED became the Group for Studying and Combating Discrimination (*Groupe d'étude et de lutte contre les discriminations*, GELD), and a toll-free phone number (114) was set up to report instances of racial discrimination. This period also coincided with the incorporation into French law of two European directives. Directive 2000/43/CE of June 29, 2000 implemented the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of racial or ethnic origin and Directive 2000/78/CE of November 27, 2000 established a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation. The shift from recognition to compensation was met with the advent of resistance to taking concrete action to remedy racial discrimination among some representatives of the state and public institutions. In a third

phase (2004-2011), anti-discrimination policy was extended to discrimination on the grounds of gender, sexual orientation, disability, and trade union affiliation. This expansion saw the replacement of the GELD by HALDE (*Haute Autorité de Lutte contre les discriminations et pour l'égalité*) in December 2004 and of the CODAC by the COPEC (*Commissions pour la promotion de l'égalité des chances et la citoyenneté*) in January 2005. It was also during this period, which continued until HALDE was dismantled in May of 2011, that the notions of equal opportunities and diversity were introduced.

The report of the High Council on Integration (*Haut Conseil à l'intégration*, HCI) drafted by Jean-Michel Belorgey in 1999,²³ and the various statements by Martine Aubry, then Minister of Employment and Social Support in the left-wing coalition government led by Lionel Jospin,²⁴ mounted a clear challenge to the idea that the difficulties encountered by certain people are due to their failure to integrate.

These sources asserted on the contrary that there were internal blocks within French society that produced a specific form of unequal treatment: racial discrimination. They emphasized that the obstacles some were facing related to the way they were perceived. They also took this opportunity to point out that racial discrimination affected not only foreign nationals, but also French citizens—whether or not they were descended from immigrants, whether or not they originated from French overseas territories. Raising the issue of racial discrimination exposed the existence of boundaries within French society, calling into question the idea of equality between citizens, beyond the distinction between national and foreigner. This new approach required the introduction of a policy on otherness going beyond a reflection focused on borders and the integration of immigrants.

However, the acknowledgement of the existence of racial discrimination was rather ambivalent from the outset. First, antidiscrimination was conceived only as tool for a better and more effective integration. In fact, the articulation of these two policies—anti-

discrimination and integration—prevented politicians, stakeholders, bureaucrats, and even sometimes activists from grasping the notion of discrimination in its conceptual specificities. Mainly considered antidiscrimination as anti-republican on the ground that it might lead to the assumption that French society is divided in different groups, threatening the ideas of unity and indivisibility of the French Republic (“*la République une et indivisible*”). A number of them also perceived antidiscrimination as a rival notion to integration, jeopardizing their political expertise on integration.

Presented as a response to the crisis of the French model of integration, the policy against racial discrimination nevertheless presupposed questioning some of the principles on which this model was based. In particular, it implied a new analysis of the relationship between equality and difference. The integration model focuses on bringing communities seen as foreign into a single national body. In this sense, differences are conceived as a source of inequality that integration measures endeavor to level out by transforming those considered foreigners to fit them to the nation. By contrast, discrimination prevention is a policy of equality that focuses on the properties of the system rather than those of the individuals, with the aim of achieving substantive equality by correcting the unfavorable treatment that people experience despite the requirement for formal equality. While the ultimate aim of both policies is to achieve greater equality, the paths they take to meet that goal conflict with one another. In antidiscrimination, the aim is not to achieve equality by leveling out differences, and the responsibility for inequality rests with the “host” society and not with immigrants and their descendants (who may be insufficiently qualified or too distant culturally). In the integration model, differences are tolerated, but individuals should consider them as a private matter, and immigrants and their descendants are expected to make an effort to integrate.

Second, the existing vocabulary used to qualify racial discrimination was vague because it ignored any racial specificity. In other words, what was supposed to be acknowledged was in

fact kept unspoken. The expressions used were “discrimination on grounds of real or supposed origin” (*discriminations selon l’origine réelle ou supposée*) or just “discrimination” —without any other specification—as in the case of the Discrimination Study Group (GED), which later became the Group for Studying and Combating Discrimination (GELD), a working group specifically dedicated to understanding and combatting racial discrimination. The phrase “fight against racial discrimination” itself was usually avoided in favor of the broad language of citizenship. For instance, the first state organization set up in *prefectures* to fight racial discrimination was called “Département Committee for Access to Citizenship” (CODAC). The same was true when it came to talking about the victims of racial discrimination—they continued to be referred to with the terms “foreigners,” “immigrants,” “persons of immigrant origin,” “second-generation,” or even “third-generation.”

Finally, it was the question of the nation, and more precisely of the incorporation into the nation through naturalization, which framed the absent acknowledgement of racial discrimination. As a consequence of the focus on nation and state borders instead of internal (racialized) boundaries, naturalization, in particular naturalization ceremonies, became a privilege site to celebrate the incorporation into the nation and symbolize republican inclusion and equality.²⁵ State bodies such as the CODAC and then the COPEC systematically avoided the issue of racial discrimination, failing to recognize how systemic discrimination operates.

A White Particularizing Universalism?

Warda Ben Brahim is the daughter of a Moroccan immigrant family. When I met her in February 2005, she was in her mid-thirties and worked as a “Women’s rights” policy officer at the Prefect’s office. She belongs to the highest rank of state employees. After describing the specific duties of her role, she turned to the question of women who fall under a deportation orders because they lack proper documentation, or whose documents have expired.

She told us that it is difficult for her to appeal to the Prefect or the Deputy Prefect in defense of such cases.²⁶ After standing up to shut her office door, she explained why:

- Warda Ben Brahim: I can't do it because people would think that I was, I think it would be like, it would be taken... er... as... [...] People would take a dim view of it, you know? Because my name is Warda Ben Brahim. People wouldn't like it [...] and the fact that I, a woman called Warda Ben Brahim, come to plead the case for these individuals who are subject to deportation, they'd take a really dim view of that.
- Sarah Mazouz: *You think people would bring up your origins?*
- Oh yes, I'm sure they would. I see it in some cases concerning immigrant women specifically... There's a different attitude. I see it. (*She pauses.*) To be completely honest – Okay, this is between us: the other day, at the heads of section meeting... It's a meeting that happens twice a month, of all the heads of section in this *département* who come under the authority of the Prefect. It's a meeting just of representatives of the state; it deals with all the pressing issues, objectives, what's been happening, and so on. Last meeting, someone started talking about the Eid festival and the fact that the Prefect travelled around the *département* with the security and public health services to check it out (it's within his area of responsibility). Everyone was looking at me... (*laughing*). It was crazy! Forty or fifty people looking at me.
- Didier Fassin: *And when they turn to you like they did then, they turn to you as an expert, they turn to you thinking, she must know...*
- Warda Ben Brahim: They're waiting to see my reaction. Not as an expert, no: they're not even asking me the question. They wouldn't dare, and I think they know how I'd respond because I'd reply that I haven't any [expertise in the matter]. Same as them, actually! No, it's more that they want to see my reaction. (*With irritation*) I don't know what they want, whatever it is, they're looking at me! (*Laughing a little.*) I see

them all! Usually we're sitting around a square table in the famous meeting room, they don't look at me specially. On women's issues, of course, people turn to me. And that's what I'm there for: I'm there as head of the 'Women's Rights' service. So then why in that case [the mention of Eid] do they look at me? They look at me with kind of sympathetic smiles.

- Didier Fassin: *When in fact you're French*.
- Well yes! Like any state official, I'm French. Just like them.

Warda Ben Brahim's account, similar to other observations gathered in the course of my research, shows how people of color are reduced to a given racialized identity by their White colleagues, even when they do not claim that identity for themselves. Paradoxically, for the majority group,²⁷ the very gesture of assigning or reducing individuals seen as others to their perceived ancestry is rooted in, or justified by, a particular usage of universalism. Indeed, it is precisely because they believe they occupy a universal point of view that they think they can (in the sense that they have both the ability and the right to) say what is particular about others. I call this usage of universalism, "particularizing universalism."

Historically, the French republican tradition only recognizes citizens, that is, individuals who are able to transcend their particularities and act in the service of the general interest.²⁸ Abstract universalism denotes a state in which citizens are members of the political body without any reference to their origins. In that state, the principle of formal equality is supposed to be fully realized even though the theoretical construct fails to take into account the forms of inequalities produced by the processes of differentiation between social groups.

In other words, the attachment to the unity of the nation is translated into the refusal to think of the political and social body as heterogeneous and fragmented. As philosopher Françoise Collin notes, "the republican and democratic conception of the individual is incapable of considering heteronomy as constitutive factor of all social existence."²⁹

In a context in which the unity of the political body is based on its homogeneity, the expression of any difference is seen as a matter of privacy. It is therefore assimilated to the formulation of particularism and is disqualified as such in the public sphere. The demand for abstraction at the heart of the republican definition of citizenship paradoxically produces the very possibility of particularizing difference. In practice, this gesture of particularization also allows those who subscribe to the ideology of abstract universalism to particularize those they perceive as different, thus essentializing their differences and radicalizing their otherness.

The reduction to an identity is based primarily on essentializing that identity. The fact that someone is of North African ancestry is presumed to indicate that they automatically bear a certain set of characteristics. This is why the direct result of essentializing an identity is the radicalization of its otherness, making it something absolutely different. In the eyes of her colleagues, Warda Ben Brahim's ancestry, or that of her parents, implies by definition that she is Muslim, and consequently that she is more concerned and better informed about the rituals and practices of Islam, whether or not she demonstrates attachment to the faith.

Essentializing identities goes hand in hand with hierarchizing them—in this case, saying that an identity is radically different implies that it is inferior, or less desirable. In the scene she describes, Warda Ben Brahim is effectively subjected to a power relationship, a dynamic she underlies when she observes that her colleagues look at her sympathetically. Her subordinated position is also made obvious when she explains that she cannot offer support for undocumented women because her presumed proximity to them disqualifies her from taking a stance. In other words, Warda Ben Brahim is assumed to only embody a limited point of view, that of a North African woman, which affords her a partial understanding of the situation. By contrast, her colleagues' attitudes are imagined to obey universal principles, adopted outside of any individual or particularistic consideration. This disparity leads to another paradox: inequalities linked to group identities are not taken into account in the name

of abstract universalism even though universalism contributes to the process of ascription that essentializes group identities.

This second paradox of republican universalism is tied to its particularizing dimension. On the one hand, republican universalism enables some to particularize others. At the same time, the reference to the very idea of abstract universalism makes it possible to reject accusations of producing particularizing categories. On the other hand, as it particularizes, republican universalism produces racializing ascriptions. Yet, the very idea of abstract universalism is used to ignore the inequalities produced by these ascriptions.³⁰

These two dimensions are the driving force behind the process of denial that we see at work in France when it comes to racial and, more generally, minority issues as republican universalism claims to solve and even to transcend the problem it is in fact constantly producing.

Nicole François-Rose is a COPEC policy officer. When I meet her in 2005, she has been appointed at this post for a month. Danièle Durand, the member of the Office for Citizenship staff appointed as her assistant, is also present.

François-Rose, who is then in her thirties, has a master's degree in public law. As an executive officer of the prefecture and highest ranking civil servant, she was recruited in 2001. Her first assignment was in inter-municipality co-operation and state grants, before she was appointed a COPEC policy officer in 2005. Born of parents from Martinique, François-Rose grew up in the greater Paris region, but her father's job took the family to live in a sub-Saharan African country for a number of years. One of her uncles is a key figure in the local life of a town close to Fort-de-France, the capital of Martinique. Expressing regret that she did not receive specific anti-discrimination training, François-Rose explains that it is her personal experience that makes her "aware" of the issue.

Durand, as I previously noted, comes from a White working-class background and belongs to lowest rank of civil servants. She grew up in the greater Paris region as well. She holds a vocational school certificate in administration. After having worked in a private company that builds nuclear power stations, she entered the prefecture administration and was employed at the immigration department where she was mainly in charge of deportation procedures. She then joined the Office for Citizenship to assist Alain Bernard in the administration of the CODAC. At the time of the interview, she was in her forties.

During the interview, François-Rose and Durand describe the division of tasks between themselves and Alain Bernard, the director of the Office for Citizenship and Head of COPEC. In doing so, they both show a tendency to downplay their contributions compared to his. But in acting as if François-Rose's pedigree is on a par with her own, Durand elevates her own worth while at the same time further downgrading the qualifications of a person who is in fact her superior in the organization. In relaying this conversation and connecting it to other observations I made at the prefecture, my aim is to bring to the forefront the particular form of ascription François-Rose was subjected to as a highly qualified young Black woman from a relatively affluent background. I seek to show that Durand's remarks partake in a form of everyday racism,³¹ expressing her White standpoint. Philomena Essed points out that everyday racism is articulated or enacted all the more easily in societies that claim consensus around the principles of tolerance and anti-racism.³² The fact that Danièle Durand works in an organization designed to combat racial discrimination, which is located within an institution aspiring to colorblindness, no doubt encourages her to consider herself exempt from any suspicion of racism. This status allows her to ascribe Nicole François-Rose a racialized identity, by emphasising precisely what François-Rose strives to minimize.

- Nicole François-Rose (NFR): My mother is very light-skinned (*to me*), she's like your color, so actually a lot of people, when I was living in France, they thought I was mixed-race because I was lighter-skinned.
- Danièle Durand (DD) (*with surprise*): Really?
- NFR: Yes, I never used to go out in the sun so I was lighter-skinned, and with a mother who looks similar taking you around, people think: 'She's mixed-race.' That's all. So people took a different attitude with me and with my brothers and sisters.
- DD (*giving the impression she knows what she's talking about*): And your mother, is she Caribbean or mainland French?³³
- NFR: She's 100% French Caribbean.
- DD: OK, a mix...
- NFR: Yes, a mix of different... different mixtures. But compared with her brothers and sisters, she's that color (*gestures to me*), with roughly the same kind of hair (*ditto*), so that meant when people saw us they had the impression that 'Oh yes, she's not completely black, she's not completely White'.
- DD (*in a serious tone*): But you mean over there?
- NFR: No, here.
- DD: Oh, really. That's funny, I'd have understood it in the Caribbean, but here...

The way in which Durand asks questions supposed to elicit from François-Rose additional details to her narrative places her from the start in the position of the one who knows. In doing so, she confers the value of a universal norm to what is in fact simply her own point of view on the way François-Rose's mother might have been perceived. By making her remark appear normative, Durand exemplifies how living a White experience leads people not to see themselves as potentially racializable, while at the same time thinking that members of other

groups are systematically racialized. The framing displayed here is also one that assumes that Whites' views on any given subject are absolute and universal, unlike those of members of other racial groups, who merely express a point of view limited by their experience. Durand thus assigns herself the role of the one with objective knowledge, presenting herself as someone in the position to correct François-Rose.

Durand's stance illustrates what scholars of Whiteness Studies have highlighted as the three main ways in which Whiteness manifests itself as a social status. First, thinking of oneself as White usually implies that one is not racializable, while members of other groups are. Second, this can lead Whites to feel entitled to racialize members of these other groups, assigning them to a subaltern position in a subordinating move based on the assumption of a supposed radical otherness. Third, defining oneself as White often entails the belief that one holds a neutral and non-racialized viewpoint on the world, by contrast to "others" who are deemed irremediably tied to a given perspective determined by their race.

The republican race-blind context, where, as sociologist Jean Beaman points out, "silence about race and racism is also silence about whiteness,"³⁴ exacerbates these characteristics of Whiteness as it supports the entitlement to racialize, beyond any doubt, those seen as "others." Far from eliminating race and racism or producing a post-racial environment, the belief in a socially realized race-blindness makes invisible the ways in which racialization operates.

First, it contributes to and intensifies the unmarking of the White condition because in this context White condition is all the more thought as the norm as it is perceived as the quintessence of colorblindness.

Second, it allows members of the majority group to racialize those seen as the others, precisely because those who are perceived as different are considered problematic and regarded with suspicion for not fitting into the majority group.

Third, race blindness relegates the explicit and direct use of the concept of race to racist discourse. It thus prevents people of color to denounce the racializing ascriptions and racial discriminations they are subject to without being accused of being themselves the racists.

As shown by legal scholar Mathias Möschel in his critical race analysis of the *Conseil constitutionnel* and the Paris Court of Appeal's judgments, the use of race blindness reveals a bifurcated way to handle race. The word and concept of race are rejected when "used in a positive, anti-subordination, anti-discriminatory mode" but legitimated when used by the White majority, be it "in a repressive, criminalizing, negative, setting" or in routine expressions of everyday racism.³⁵ Claiming that race-blindness is realized is thus a means to consolidate the majority group's position, helping to reassert a White privileged condition.

What Is to Be a Racialized Republican?

Boubacar Diawara is "Social development, integration and prevention" policy officer for the mayor of Doucy. Originally from Mauritania, he began his college education at the Moroccan equivalent of the French National School for Administration (*École nationale d'administration*, ENA), before transferring to the Nanterre University in France, where he obtained a degree in "Public Administration." After graduation, he worked for about ten years for various NGOs. I met him in 2006, when he was in his mid-thirties and shortly after he had taken up his position. The discussion quickly moved to the types of action taken to combat racial discrimination.

- Boubacar Diawara: This involves the organization of steering committees with the various partners, whether the prefecture or NGOs, to implement tools that can be used to raise the awareness of both institutions and individuals in order to combat all forms of discrimination more effectively.
- Sarah Mazouz: *And when you work for example with the Local Plan for Integration and Employment, with NGOs, or even within the Doucy municipal*

authority, beyond acting to raise awareness, do you talk of the implementation of a reparation policy?

- Boubacar Diawara: Well, I have just started, so... But of course the fact that I have been recruited into the cabinet of the Mayor myself is a kind of... compensation for people of immigrant background who are discriminated against not because they are not competent, but simply because they are of immigrant background, and so there are clichés about them that make them discriminated against.... [...]
- *Your recruitment would therefore already be a kind of symbolic reparation...*
- Boubacar Diawara: [...] I think we first compensate and repair this way. Then, as I said at the beginning [of our conversation], I don't think people are asking for a free ride. [...] It doesn't correspond to the values we have taught them, to the values of the Republic. [...] They just want to be recognized for their value. I'm against affirmative action ("*discrimination positive*") in France because I simply think that if we first manage to break down all these stereotypes, to break down this mentality that says that a company director doesn't take someone from an immigrant background on his team because it is going to damage his image, it's completely stupid! [...] I therefore think that the fight against discrimination begins by acknowledging certain omissions made by both historians and politicians – we must have the courage to acknowledge this – and then not to resort to favoritism and quota policies. We do not need this in France. The secular school ("*l'école laïque*") has trained enough people in all areas that we do not need to resort to quotas to compensate for certain things. Today we have enough trained people who can correspond to all sorts of positions of responsibility or execution. This is not the United States in the 1960s, when they were coming out of slavery with a policy of discrimination. It's not the same thing. In the United States, in the 1950s

and 1960s, schools were separate, neighborhoods were separate, universities were separate, so we cannot compare this situation and then say we are going to make a little discrimination to try to compensate. I do not think it is brave. What is courageous is to break down these stereotypes and then favor companies [that do not discriminate].³⁶

Boubacar Diawara's remarks, like those of Mehdi Ameziane, the "integration and anti-discrimination policy" officer at the Doucy city hall, or of prefecture officials such as Warda Ben Brahim and Nicole François-Rose, raise a tension and a paradox. There is a tension in that they strive to affirm their commitment to fighting against racial discrimination, but they must constantly give proof of their allegiance to the republican ideology. They thus insist on their opposition to the implementation of affirmative action policies, which they equate, as often in French political and media discourses, with a quota policy.

Some of them, such as Mehdi Ameziane, also make a point of showing that their commitment to anti-discrimination is unrelated to their own experience of racializing assignment. At the same time, the symbolic impact of their recruitment to a particular position is, in most cases, meaningful to them. For their perspective, having been chosen is evidence of hiring or appointment practices that are indifferent to racializing ascriptions.

Sociologist Jean Beaman studied how French of color are not seen as French. She described how they wrestle with the definition of Frenchness as White.³⁷ I would like to end this article by focusing on another aspect of the lived experience of non-White French—the particular stance of those who define themselves as "republican," that is, as supporters of color-blind universalism. The aim is to examine how their claim of race blindness affects the position they hold.

I call this position of minority loyalism to republican race blindness “minority republicanism.” The stance of minority republicans consists in asserting their adherence to the French republic’s requirement of race blindness all the more vigorously because they anticipate the suspicion that could be generated by their remarks or positions on account of the origins to which they are reduced. The paradox of minority republicans is that they refuse to implement general anti-discrimination measures targeting groups defined by race and ethnicity in the name of the principle of formal equality and the requirement of abstract universalism. They nevertheless accept that they have been selected as tokens of race blindness, even when, as Boubacar Diawara, they admit that their presumed racial identity played a role in their hiring.

Minority republicanism is thus one of the possible ways for people of color to prove their Frenchness despite not being White. This position derives from the fact that race blindness is *White* blindness to the experiences of racializing ascriptions, racial discrimination, and abstract universalism as a tool of particularization. Some people of color may internalize the suspicion and the particularizing impulse they are subject to, claiming their attachment to republican principles such as race blindness and “*laïcité*” to put themselves in a good light.

Conclusion

This article has focused on race blindness and republican universalism in the context of interactions between members of public institutions designed to spearhead policies against racial discrimination, mainly in a prefecture of the greater Paris area. It has shown how that though White representatives of the state are reluctant to engage with the notion of racial discrimination, they are nevertheless prompted to ascribe racializing categories onto those they perceive as others among their colleagues or their organization’s clients. To unmark the White privileged condition, I have argued that this tension is made possible by the particularizing dimension of French abstract universalism and the fact that race blindness is a

White blindness to racial ascription and discrimination. Workers of color at these state institutions tend to adopt a minority republican position whereby they embrace the republican requirement of race blindness as an attempt to protect themselves from suspicions arising from their perceived identity. In practice, this stance internalizes a White view on them. To conclude, even when the issue of racial discrimination emerged at the end of 1990s, its half-hearted acknowledgment did not lead to a full recognition of racial inequalities and even less to systematic efforts to remedy them. On the contrary, the brief history of French policies against racial discrimination reveals how recognition was dismissed, turning racialization into a “public secrecy”—racialization was kept unspeakable precisely at the moment when it could have become speakable.

Sarah Mazouz is tenured researcher at the CNRS (CERAPS). Her main research topics are antidiscrimination policies in France and citizenship politics in France and in Germany. Her work draws on ethnography. It also leans on Critical Race Studies, Legal Consciousness Studies, and Critical Anthropology of Moral as well as the sociology of public policies. She is the author of *La République et ses autres. Politiques de l'altérité dans la France des années 2000*, Lyon, ENS Éditions, 2017 and the co-author of *At the Heart of the State. The Moral World of Institutions*, London, Pluto Press, 2015.

Notes

¹ In France, high-ranking civil servants called *préfets* represent the State and implement its decisions at the local level. The term *préfecture* refers to the territory over which *préfets* have authority, the town in which their authority is based, as well as to the administrative offices reporting to them. Throughout this paper, the term is used to refer to the administrative divisions in which naturalization applications are processed and where part of the COPEC

were implemented. All names of individuals and places have been changed in order to protect their anonymity.

² In 2004, two hijabis were refused access to another prefecture in the Paris region upon arriving to the ceremony where they were to be awarded their naturalization certificates.

³ Law 2004-228 of March 15, 2004 prohibiting the wearing of visible religious symbols in schools. The extension to all public places was introduced by the law of October 11, 2010 (2010-1192), prohibiting face-coverings in public space.

⁴ Joan W. Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 1997.

⁵ Jennifer Mueller, “Producing Colorblindness: Everyday Mechanisms of White Ignorance,” *Social Problems*, 2017, 64: 219-238.

⁶ *Ibid*, 221.

⁷ Michael Taussig, *Defacement. Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

⁸ Ruth Frankenberg, *The Social Construction of Whiteness: White Women, Race Matters* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 1-2.

⁹ In his seminal work, *La Condition noire. Essai sur une minorité française* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2008), Pap Ndiaye introduces the notion of “black condition” to designate the social fact of being black—and thus member of a minority group—in France. Following him, in this article, I understand Whiteness as the social fact of being White—and thus member of a majority group—in France. See also the introduction of this issue (pages TBA).

¹⁰ Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller and Kendall Thomas, eds., *Critical Race Theory* (New York: The New Press, 1995).

¹¹ Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters*; Alice McIntyre, *Making Meaning of Whiteness: Exploring Racial Identity with White Teachers* (Albany, Suny Press, 1997); David Roediger,

The Waves of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class (London and New York: Verso, 2007 (first edition 1991)) and “Whiteness and race” in *Oxford Handbook of American Immigration and Ethnicity*, ed. Ronald H. Bayor, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 197-212. For a study of Whiteness in the French context, see Maxime Cervulle, *Dans le blanc des yeux. Diversité, racisme et médias* (Paris : Éditions Amsterdam, 2013), Jean Beaman, “Are French People White? Towards an Understanding of Whiteness in Republican France”, *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 26 (5): 546-562 and Angeline Escaffret-Dubet, “The Whiteness of Cultural Boundaries in France,” *Identities*, 26:5, 563-578.

¹² Michael Omi, and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

¹³ Karim Murji and John Solomos, eds., *Racialization. Studies in Theory and Practice*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Didier Fassin and Éric Fassin, eds., *De la question sociale à la question raciale. Représenter la société française* (Paris : La Découverte, 2006); Didier Fassin “Ni race, ni racisme. Ce que racialiser veut dire”, in Didier Fassin, ed., *Les Nouvelles Frontières de la société françaises* (Paris : La Découverte, 2010), 147-172; Karim Murji and John Solomos, eds., *Theories of Race and Ethnicity. Contemporary Debates and Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

¹⁴ Ruth Frankenberg, *The Social Construction of Whiteness*, *op. cit.*: 1

¹⁵ Didier Fassin and Éric Fassin, *De la question sociale à la question raciale. Représenter la société française* (Paris : La Découverte, 2006); Laure Bereni, “La valeur professionnelle de l’identité. Racialisation, genre et légitimité managériale à New York et à Paris”, *Sociétés contemporaines* (forthcoming); François Bonnet, “How to Perform Non-Racism? Colour-Blind Speech Norms and Race-Conscious Policies Among French Security Personnel,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 40 (8), 2014: 1275-1294; Mathilde Cohen, “Judicial

Diversity in France: the Unspoken and the Unspeakable”, *Law & Social Inquiry*, 43 (4), 2018: 1542-1573; Daniel Sabbagh, “The Rise of Indirect Affirmative Action: Converging Strategies for Promoting ‘Diversity’ in Selective Institutions of Higher Education in the United States and France”, *World Politics* 63 (3), 2011: 470–508; Patrick Simon, “The Choice of Ignorance. The Debate on Ethnic and Racial Statistics in France,” *French Politics Culture & Society*, 26 (1), 2008: 7–31.

¹⁶ Source: memo of the Doucy municipal office dated July 3, 2003.

¹⁷ Because my skin tone is light, and the conjunction of my first and last name is not clearly marked as (Muslim) North African. See below.

¹⁸ Sarah Mazouz, “The Value of Nation,” *French Politics, Culture and Society*, 37(1), 2019:147.

¹⁹ France Winddance Twine and Jontahn W. Warren, eds., *Racing Research, Researching Race* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

²⁰ Mathilde Cohen, *art. cit.*: 1546.

²¹ Sarah Mazouz, “Les mots pour le dire. La qualification raciale de l’enquête de terrain à l’écriture” in Didier Fassin and Alban Bensa, eds., *Les Politiques de l’enquête Épreuves ethnographiques* (Paris, La Découverte, 2008), 81-98.

²² French social scientists, such as Philippe Bataille, who published in 1997 *Le Racisme au travail (Racism at work)*, also helped raise the question of racial discrimination in French society. See Sarah Mazouz, *La République et ses autres. politiques de l’altérité dans la France des années 2000* (Lyon : ENS Éditions, 2017), 46-52.

²³ HCI, *Lutte contre les discriminations: faire respecter le principe de l’égalité*; Jean-Michel Belorgey, “Lutter contre les discriminations,” Report for the Minister of Employment and Social Support.

²⁴ Jospin was the prime minister leading a coalition of Socialists, Communists, and Greens from 1997 to 2002.

²⁵ Sarah Mazouz, “Une célébration paradoxale. Les cérémonies de remise des décrets de naturalization”, *Genèses. Sciences sociales et histoire*, 70, 2008: 88-105.

²⁶ Interview with Warda Ben Brahim, Doucy, Prefect’s office, February 7, 2005. This interview was conducted jointly with Didier Fassin.

²⁷ By “majority” and “minority,” I designate not a statistical reality, but the position occupied within a power relationship. See Louis Wirth, *The Ghetto* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1928).

²⁸ Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition” in Amy Gutman, ed., *Multiculturalism. Examining the “Politics of Recognition”* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1994), 25-73. Eléonore Lépinard, *L’Egalité introuvable, La parité, les féministes et la République* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po), 250.

²⁹ Françoise Collin, “Mythe et réalité de la démocratie”, in Éliane Viennot, ed., *La Démocratie “à la française” ou les femmes indésirables* (Paris : Publications de l’Université Paris VII-René Diderot, 1996), 30 (translation mine).

³⁰ In her article “Racial ideology or racial Ignorance? An Alternative Theory of Racial Cognition,” (*Sociological Theory*, 2020, 38(2): 142-169), Jennifer Mueller compares what she calls Theory of Racial Ignorance (TRI) to color-blind theory (CBT). She highlights the way in which TRI addresses racial ignorance instead of focusing on racial ideology, thus grasping ongoing historical processes rather than “era-defined structures.”

³¹ Philomena Essed, *Understanding Everyday Racism* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1991—I think?); see in particular the introduction and chapter 5, pp. 144-184.

³² Much of Essed’s field work was conducted in the Netherlands in the late 1980s.

³³ Overseas citizens are now full French citizens under the law, but many in mainland France continue to distinguish citizens from the mainland (“*métropolitain*” or its abbreviation “*métro*” as Danièle Durand says at this moment of the interview) from those from the overseas territories.

³⁴ Jean Beaman, *art. cit.*: 550.

³⁵ Mathias Möschel, “Race in Mainland European Legal Analysis towards a European Critical Race Theory”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 34 (10), 2011:1659. See also his contribution to this issue.

³⁶ Interview with Boubacar Diawara, Doucy City Hall, February 9, 2006.

³⁷ Jean Beaman, *art. cit.*