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# On the Edge of Diversity: Anti-Muslim Racism and Discrimination in White Diversity Spaces

Milena Doytcheva\*

*This article traces back the development over the last decades in France of anti-Muslim racism and discrimination within professional and organisational fields. It shows how, in the wake of 2004 law banning religious symbols in schools, new demands for religious neutrality have spread far beyond educational grounds, to permeate a variety of institutions, including those purportedly designed to fight against discrimination and achieve equality. Drawing on a longitudinal, qualitative analysis of workplace diversity policies, I show the eviction of faith diversity from corporate diversity procedures through the implementation of “white diversity” concepts, based on two tenets. First, patterns of Muslim racialisation, as faith options are turned into “personality styles” and “identity problems”. Second, the perceived legitimacy and widespread social acceptance of this “respectable racism”, woven into claims upon meritocracy, and disguised as “corporate culture”.*

It was not till the early 2000s that the language of diversity (Ahmed, 2007) entered French professional and organisational fields. In the context of an emerging EU legislation against racism and workplace discrimination, some pioneering initiatives championed by big business leaders sought to translate the new legal and policy framework into categories for institutional change. Launched in 2004, by a nationwide corporate social movement in favour of workplace diversity (Alaoui and Doytcheva, 2010), the Diversity Charter was a landmark initiative in the field. Further texts of voluntary commitment, also prompted by companies, included the LGBT Charter (sponsored by Accenture in 2011), a Parentality Charter (promoted by L’Oréal in 2008); then a state-owned protective labour standard, the Diversity Label, set up by public authorities with help from human resource professional organisations. Mimicking the paths first taken by US and multinational firms, this set of initiatives has shaped the formation of an ever-expanding corporate diversity field, revolving around two principles: 1/ moving away from legal ideals and social justice causes towards for-profit rationales for equal opportunity and privatised governance forms; 2/ stretching the concept of diversity management far beyond the legal anti-discrimination frame to embrace a variety of grounds and categories (Médard-Inghilterra, 2018), upon which to perform organisational change.

In the French, but also EU settings, these trends were however fuelled by some major features of the novel communitarian antidiscrimination framework, based on the assumption of what legal experts termed the “legal universality” (Lanquetin, 2004) of non-discrimination. Though antiracism was core to the EU’s emerging endeavour to racial justice and equal opportunity, a turn towards universalisation soon occurred in the construction of these concerns, providing within the same legal system, and in an undifferentiated manner, for a variety of grounds of non-discrimination<sup>1</sup>. Referred to in retrospect as a “diversion strategy” (Guiraudon, 2004), the

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<sup>1</sup> Initially six in Article 13 of the 1997 Amsterdam Treaty which granted the EU new regulatory powers to combat racism and discrimination (e.g. “sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age

move received support from NGOs as well as from EU officials and authorities, in an attempt to neutralise resistance against and deflect attention from migrant communities who “not always enjoyed the greatest sympathy”, to say the least, among European deputies and national governments alike.

As early as the mid-2000s, corporate diversity procedures embraced universalised – also called “global” or “inclusive” – notions of diversity, mixing issues of race, sex, gender, health, and disability to achieve equal opportunity. Although formally generic or inclusive, these procedures relied on de facto highly selective tactics (Doytcheva, 2009). Wielding a language of “priorities”, organisations remained free to engage, as if from a menu, with only a few items and status categories, which they considered “meaningful” or “high priority”. Yet, building on such *à la carte* tactics, diversity policies soon proved to be predominantly *white*: by taking precedence over race and racism at first, they eventually yielded more binding visions about “good” and “bad diversity” (Doytcheva et al. 2008, 2015; see also Lentin and Titley, 2011), with the latter, such as race but also faith diversity, being almost completely banned from corporate action plans.

As I will argue in this paper, faith diversity in particular forms a major blind-spot in this perspective, as issues of religiosity are commonly construed as antinomic to public spaces and activities, under an assertive conception of public secularism, termed “combat laïcité” (Roy 2005). Methodologically, I draw on a qualitative, longitudinal approach, based on of more 80 in-depth semi-structured interviews (N=86 see table 1 for breakdown). Within this extensive dataset, I draw here in particular on interviews and observations with “diversity brokers” and professionals (such as coaches, mentors, but also diverse workforce intermediaries and experts); and, to a lesser extent, with “diverse candidates” or a racialised workforce trained and mentored through specific schemes, and a service provided for companies willing to flesh out their engagements.

In what follow, first I trace back the way in which new demands for “religious neutrality” have spread, since the early 2000s, from public schools to supposedly private corporate spaces, to consistently expand “spatialities of secularism” (Hancock, 2008); while mostly concentrating, on the other hand, on Muslim-related issues and practices. Next, I turn to the analysis of work done by “diversity brokers” and intermediaries (Doytcheva, 2011) to show how, despite their vocal commitment to social justice and equal opportunity, they widely adhere to the ban of religious symbols and practices, exposing once again primarily, if not exclusively, Muslim faith and identities. Finally, I argue how this in turn bolsters processes of racialisation of these latter identities and populations (Hajjad and Mohammed, 2013), as they are notably excluded even from the spaces designed to purportedly “redress” harm and discrimination. As such, while more broadly reinstating racism and hostility towards migrants, “white diversity” (Doytcheva, 2018, 2020a) also acts to significantly mainstream Islamophobia (Mondon and Winter, 2017) in organisational spaces.

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or sexual orientation”), there were 17 protected classes in the 2000 EU Charter of Fundamental Rights ; 12 in the French law n°2001-1066 of November 16, 2001 on the fight against discrimination – which was the first to transpose the novel EU’s legislation ; and up to 25 under current French law, including but not limited to : sex, family status, physical appearance, surname, health condition, disability, morals (*moeurs*), sexual orientation, age, political opinions, religious beliefs, union activities, genetic characteristics, pregnancy, residence or address, language, social precariousness, “actual or perceived affiliation or non-affiliation with an ethnic group, nation or race”.

## ***Laïcité*, a legal principle enforced with (less and less) “empiricism”**

Dating back to the 1905 Law separating Churches and State, *laïcité* poses that “the Republic does not recognize, wage or otherwise support any religious worship.”<sup>2</sup> However, this founding principle and a pillar of the work done by governments of the Third Republic, heir to the revolutionary will to unite and modernise France, was reputedly enforced “with empiricism” (Stasi, 2003, p. 13). It was not until the late 1980s, then, that minority religious practices sparked resentment and hostility and were framed as a “threat” to republicanism. In October 1989, the exclusion pronounced against three middle school pupils in the suburb of Creil, who refused to remove their headscarves in class triggered the first in a series of controversies known as the “veil affairs” (Scott, 2009; Tevanian, 2012; Bouamama, 2004). At the government’s request, the Council of State – a body acting as both a legal adviser of the executive and a supreme court for administrative justice – ruled for the first time on these matters. Taking into account international law as well as domestic sources (in particular the recently enacted 1989 school orientation law, which enshrines the principle of freedom of expression for students), the Council recognised the freedom of pupils to wear religious symbols on school grounds; provided that they do not display an assertive (*revendicatif*) or ostentatious (*ostentatoire*) character and do not undermine the school’s mission, both in terms of curriculum and attendance<sup>3</sup>.

Some fifteen years later, however, this position came to a spectacular reversal, in the aftermath of 9/11 and the context of global securitisation of both migrants and migrations. A new “civilizational discourse” on tolerance (Brown, 2008: 6), nevertheless, increasingly pitted against each other “Occidental” and “liberal values” and “democracies” and their supposedly “barbaric” immigrant, and mostly Muslim, communities: “the tolerant, and the civilized on one side, and the fundamentalist, and the intolerant, on the other”. It is noteworthy that it was at the time of the release of the report by the Stasi Commission (2003), which recommended the legal ban of religious symbols on school grounds<sup>4</sup>, that the diversity rationale first made it into the French national political and media mainstream; wherein it was almost uniquely used till then to refer to the U.S. or British situations (Dalibert, 2008; Doytcheva et al. 2008). For the authors of the Stasi report, the repressive strand of the law was to be coupled indeed with a more positive one, aimed at “valuing the diversity” of French society by, among other things, introducing holidays appropriate to different worships into the school calendar. While only the repressive strand of their report was passed into the law, arguably, such formation speaks a lot to the paradoxes ahead of diversity’s institutional and political career, as those I shall expand upon in this paper.

To engage with, I draw here on a Foucault-inspired conceptualisation of diversity that frames it as a *dispositif*, i.e. a “system of relations” to be considered within “a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, regulatory decisions, laws,

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<sup>2</sup> My translations.

<sup>3</sup> “[ ... ] this freedom [of expression] cannot allow students to display symbols of religious affiliation which, by their nature, by the conditions in which they are worn individually or collectively, or by their ostentatious or assertive nature, would constitute an act of pressure, provocation, proselytising or propaganda, would violate the dignity or freedom of the student or other members of the educational community, jeopardise their health or safety, disrupt the conduct of teaching activities and the educational role of teachers, or disrupt order in the establishment or the normal functioning of the public service.”

<sup>4</sup> French Law 2004-228 of March 15, 2004 regulating, in accordance with the principle of *laïcité*, the wearing of religious symbols or clothing in public schools.

administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical and moral propositions” (Foucault 1980, p. 194). Considering diversity as a *dispositif* – an “apparatus of security” – allows us to bring together ideational, and actual social, as well as technological fields, which otherwise are often siloed in academic discussions. Following Matejskova and Antonsich (2015), what such perspective helps account for in the first place is the “commonplace at-oddness and contradictoriness of practices, policies, uses, and deployments of diversity”. However, from my position here, such analytical perspective should be also more strongly moored to critical approaches to diversity, a burgeoning field that emerged since the mid-1990s as a reaction to the re-appropriation of equal opportunities by business (Zanoni et al. 2010); despite their distinct perspectives, critical diversity approaches share a common opposition to the instrumental view of differences inherent in much of this paradigm’s organisational applications. It should be more strongly linked, on the other hand, to critical race and critical whiteness theories, emphasising the pervasiveness of racist structures and power relations in white racialised organisations (Ray, 2019; Bonilla-Silva, 2018); as well as their ability to produce every-day, organisational, and structural dominance based on “epistemologies of ignorance” and other “epistemic maneuvers” by hegemonic whiteness (Mueller, 2020; Mills, 2014; see also Garbes, 2021) to hamper social change. With these theoretical backgrounds, the critical approach, which I advocate for, pays moreover particular attention to the intertwining of scholarly and practical articulations of the diversity paradigm (Doytcheva 2020), not least by considering language as practice, at the interface of structures of cognition and action (Fairclough, 2013).

### **Table 1: Research design, sample and data analysis**

I draw here on a qualitative, longitudinal approach to corporate diversity policies in France, based on three surveys conducted between 2006 and 2014 (2006-2008, 2011 and 2014, respectively). Relying mainly on in-depth sociological interviews (N= 86), the research design also includes ethnographic work, based on participant observations, documentary study and analysis of grey literature (official reports, practical guides), and communication materials (brochures, booklets, flyers, internet sites).

Overall, one of the main objectives of the research design is to include a multi-actor, multi-site (local and national), and multi-temporal approach in order to 1/ confront corporate commitments and aspirational policy statements with the practical outcomes of their diversity work 2/ address these concerns over the medium term (i.e. the decades 2000 and 2010, from the inception of the diversity corporate social movement to present). It builds on a sample of participants stratified by the various profiles of stakeholders at play: 1/companies and companies’ professionals (managers, diversity officers) 2/ business and political leaders, state officials 3/ diversity intermediaries and experts 4/ “diverse candidates”, modestly referred to as “diversity applicants” (*candidats issus de la diversité*), i.e. a workforce trained and monitored through these schemes.

Constructed and updated incrementally, these relatively autonomous yet connected datasets have been fully transcribed and analysed, favouring a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) method, aimed at considering discourse as social practice, at the interface of structures of cognition and action (Fairclough, 2013).

## The new demands for workplace “religious neutrality”

Although the ban of religious symbols in secondary schools was justified by a particular understanding of *laïcité*'s role in education<sup>5</sup>, by the mid-2000s, new demands for “religious neutrality” spread quickly beyond these specifically educational contexts into public spaces, as with the 2010 law banning full-face covering<sup>6</sup>; but also, into theoretically private spaces, as notably the workplaces, wherein a contentious politics on faith and religion was already increasingly at stake. Similar to school debates, workplace conceptions of neutrality unfolded in France along a dual line. On the one hand, while framed as general and universalistic – i.e. not targeting a single community – they involved in practice overwhelmingly Muslim employees; singling them out once again as the “primary figure of undesirable otherness” (Liogier, 2012), while placing, in particular, an undue burden on female Muslim employees, with the wearing of the *hijab* stirring again the most heated debates.

On the other hand, new claims for neutrality only concerned private businesses, as public agents were already bound by a “duty of restraint”, including the ban of any religious or ethnic sign in the course of their activities. Starting in 2008, the impressive judicial career of the “Baby loup” case (Hunter-Henin, 2015; Hennette-Vauchez and Valentin, 2014), bore witness to this new conflictuality over workplace religious claims. After multiple upheavals (six years of litigation and four prior rulings on the case), in 2014, the Court of Cassation eventually reached a final decision by upholding the dismissal of a childcare worker, who refused to remove her *hijab*, despite the general religious neutrality requirement adopted by its employer<sup>7</sup>. In 2015, a correspondence study first highlighted the breadth and scope of anti-Muslim hiring discrimination with religious Muslims submitting twice as many applications as religious Christians before being called back (and up to four times for male applicants only: Valfort, 2015, 2020)<sup>8</sup>. Particularly high, these rates place France at the EU's forefront in terms of hiring discrimination against immigrants from Muslim-majority countries, but also ahead of countries such as Australia and the United States on a global scale.

Anti-Muslim sentiment and rhetoric are nowadays conveyed in the workplace by a wide variety of actors, ranging from managers and human resource professionals to workforce intermediaries, and public service agents alike. Under the guise of secularism, they were expressed with varying degrees of restraint or acuity by a fair share of my respondents, nonetheless reportedly committed to fighting employment discrimination:

[...] In the company, religion is a no-no! Of course, I have my personal convictions, but in the company, it's a no-no!

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<sup>5</sup> According to it, mere religious pluralism is not enough to build a “neutral” and tolerant space for citizens' education, which rather needs a complete “neutralisation” of religious prescriptions and norms in order to open up a “common critical space” (Kintzler, 2014), a place for deflection, withdrawal and doubt, which is a constitutive *dispositif* of liberty.

<sup>6</sup> French Law n° 2010-1192 of 11 October 2010 prohibiting the wearing of full-face concealing clothing in public spaces.

<sup>7</sup> Plenary of June 25, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> A follow-up survey confirms that the signal used to convey applicants' religiosity is not only viewed as relevant but is also correctly interpreted by employers. Samira and Mohammed, Esther and Dov, Nathalie and Michel are the six profiles tested, respectively Muslim, Jew and Catholic: all six grew up in the same neighbourhood of Beirut, before convincing their parents after high school to continue their studies in France. All of them have acquired French nationality and are 23 years old in the testing. While Mohammed experiences the hardest “penalty”, religiosity works as a premium for Christians, with Michel's call-back rate being boosted when he exhibits it.

**Q:** I mean, legally speaking...

I don't even ask myself this question! We're in a company where we talk about relationships, relations. When I have someone... I can't talk to them... so it's a no!

**Q:** And for you, diversity does not include religion?

Not, because... For me it's an anti-freedom. We're in a company, in a collective space, the first thing is to respect the other; we should respect the other in what he or she is and as we are all different, at some point, we have to learn to make compromises. So, when you go from one extreme to the other, whether it's the veil, or I don't know... like crosses everywhere, which is another form of extremism, this isn't respecting others! We should all make compromise (HR Director at a large company in clothing industry)

When I receive a young girl wearing a chador for an interview on the approach to the job market, I try to make an *overture*, but that's all ...; if such is her way of thinking, that's all, we just stop there ... the interview wouldn't go any further.

**Q:** "Make an opening", what do you mean?

Tell her: "You know, with this type of presentation, you risk not being received in much companies." I hope I'm wrong and that she will be admitted, but still there is a constraint (Public service for executive employment, department "young graduates")

Yet positions like these become all the more problematic since, in contemporary immigration societies, and modern France in particular, religion is one of the privileged signifiers of differentiation, often and perhaps more and more frequently converted socially into ethnic minority affiliation (De Rudder et al., 2005). To put it another way, Muslim faith is not only a confessional option, but also a social condition – and therefore a sociological category (Joly and Wadia, 2017) – that speaks to highly minorised and racialised communities.

Here I refer to raci(al)isation (Poiret, 2011) as the process of naturalising and essentialising socially constructed differences, be they based on "culture", religion, history, or physical and phenotypic traits. The proper of racial thinking being to introduce a strict determinism between social behaviour and individual attributes, be they "chosen" or assigned, these latter attributes are considered as forming an essence, or an intrinsic difference, whereby culturalism joins biologisation to enclose into a radical otherness (De Rudder et al. 2000, p. 32; Guillaumin, 1972).

Ironically then, although freedom of conscience forms an integral part of fundamental freedoms and a core component of the novel EU legislation on equal treatment and non-discrimination, faith diversity is hardly targeted by companies (as instanced, among other things, by its remarkable erasure from the Diversity Charter's text I trace below, see table 2); nor is it fully admitted, or only providing it is rendered invisible through discrete and segregated spaces – illustrating then how repertoires of diversity are being caught up in hegemonic rearticulations, as we shall see next.

**Table 2: The six commitments of the Diversity Charter:  
Erasing faith, race, and ethnicity from corporate diversity spaces**

<p><b>The initial text of proposition</b> Sabeg and Méhaignerie (2004, p.151)</p>	<p><b>The definite agreed upon text</b> www.diversity-charter.com</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Acknowledge France’s multi-ethnic dimension and, in this regard, commit to valuing and promoting equity and the respect of diversity in recruitment, career development, and wage policy;</li> <li>2. Enact equality between men and women by promoting gender equality through recruitment, career development and wage policy;</li> <li>3. Include a non-discrimination clause in recruitment, on the basis of equal merit, skills and qualifications or talents;</li> <li>4. Commit to equitable career development and prohibit any prejudice, bias or oppression, and any form of discrimination, based on race, ethnicity, skin colour, <b>religion</b>, culture, gender, class or sexual orientation;</li> <li>5. Include pictures of the company's top 20 to 30 executives and the details of diversity initiatives and their results in social reporting;</li> <li>6. Carry out awareness-raising and training in diversity management for executives, HR managers and employees to provide a climate conducive to the recognition, respect and dignity of all individuals within the company in their cultural, <b>ethnic and religious diversity</b>. [emphasis added]</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Raise awareness on non-discrimination and diversity issues among top management and staff involved in recruitment, training and career development and educate them in these matters;</li> <li>2. Respect and promote the application of the principle of non-discrimination at every stage of the human resources management, in particular in the recruitment, training, promotion and career development of employees.</li> <li>3. Endeavour to reflect the diversity of the French society in all its forms, at every level of the workforce.</li> <li>4. Communicate to all employees and encourage their adhesion and commitment in favour of non-discrimination and diversity.</li> <li>5. Make the development and implementation of the diversity policy a subject of dialogue with the employees’ representatives.</li> <li>6. Insert a chapter in the annual report describing commitments to non-discrimination and diversity: measures implemented, internal procedures and results achieved.</li> </ol>

## Managing with “pragmatism”

Indeed, just as much as race and ethnicity, religion in the workplace falls along social division of labour lines: if intolerance is up within a head office and in management positions, wherein corporate branding is built in a privileged way, it is seen with more “pragmatism” in so-called “operative jobs”. This is not to say that religion is admitted or, moreover, positively viewed and treated in such jobs; but while still considered a problem, the company resolves to “manage it”, as if it were the natural attribute of a workforce, from which company “cannot cut off” (De Rudder et al. 2005; see also Doytcheva, 2015). As one female interviewee, going through a process of diversity mentoring and workforce and intermediation to access job, puts it:

I have a female cousin who has a degree in psychology and who works as a cleaning woman. And, in fact, as a cleaner, things are going very well! In other words, French companies, if you want, on certain jobs, they don't care if you're of North African origin or whatever, if you're fat or thin... on some positions only, with no qualification, of course. Fatima, she works as a cleaning woman and it goes pretty well, no worries: nobody tells her, “you're going to shock with your scarf,” “you're going to shock with your accent”, or with your physical appearance, your colour of skin ... But for me, it goes bad because what I want is a position in the company, a position that comes to complement the corporate image and brand.

In the mid-2000s, this is a typical situation among large scale retail companies, such as *Carrefour*, *Auchan* or *Casino*: religion is the focus of both “a secular consensus” and “a practice of compromise” (De Rudder et al. 2005, p. 71). Compromises essentially arise from individual treatment, on a case-by-case basis, relying on the goodwill of managers: if they are “quiet”, they might accede to the employee's request (by adjusting schedules, granting a work transfer, or holydays). In large-scale distribution, it is generally at checkouts that the most acute questions arise; while, once again, the wearing of Muslim headscarves concentrates the most heated debates<sup>9</sup>. *Hijabs* are usually prohibited in stores by way of general workplace regulations, as they are considered conspicuous religious signs, likely to “shock the *clientèle*”<sup>10</sup>. As the authors of the report point out, however, the exact appreciation of what an “Islamic headscarf” is and of its “obviously ostentatious” character is far from settled. When worn “discreetly”, as a “bandana”, the scarf can be assimilated to a fashion accessory and the employees may benefit from an *effet de mode*.

In the wake of the 2004 law banning religious symbols in schools, these local arrangements have been however gradually construed as “uncertain”, and a source of “embarrassment” for companies (Doytcheva, 2015); whose managers and diversity officers complained of feeling “disarmed” as the trade-offs and possible compromises to be drawn reportedly appeared to them as “less and less clear”. By the end of the decade, they started writing to the HALDE (High Authority for the Fight against Discrimination and Equality)<sup>11</sup> asking for clarifications

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<sup>9</sup> Other demands include the arrangement of working schedules to break the fast during the month of Ramadan or for Friday prayers, the avoidance of contact with pork, rarely the installation of a workplace prayer room.

<sup>10</sup> For instance, Carrefour's workplace regulations read: “It is reminded that out of respect for customers and in order not to offend any of the sensibilities that they may represent, staff in contact with the public may not wear any obviously ostentatious signs of a political, union or religious kind.” (quoted in De Rudder et al. 2005, p. 58)

<sup>11</sup> Created under EU directives on race equality and equal treatment in employment and occupation (Council Directives 2000/45/EC and 2000/78/EC, respectively), the *Haute Autorité de Lutte contre les*

about how to address these situations in daily working life. As a diversity manager at a major food retail chain observed: “We wrote to the HALDE saying, listen, there was this Stasi report that addressed issues of secularism in schools. But there is nothing about the private sector at all!”

At the same time, personal professionals organisations such as ANDRH (National Association of Human Resource Directors), which is in theory proactive towards the workplace diversity agenda (chairs the National Committee of the Diversity Label), undertook work to clarify the challenges raised by religious claim-making and provide guidance on how to accommodate them (or not). But as of 2011, according to the opinion issued by the High Council for Integration (HCI), these initiatives had not led to a “decisive clarification” and “a lack of responses” persisted regarding the application of *laïcité* in the workplace (HCI, 2011, p. 10; see also Hajjat and Mohammed, 2013). Calling for legislative action in its turn, HCI has fostered corporate demands for an extensive reading of neutrality principles, much like the regulation adopted for schools, to be enforced in workplaces. According to Liogier (2006), such situation is highly representative of French secularism, which, rather than a strict separation or restraint of intervention, entails the process of *political construction* of “neutrality”, as the cornerstone of public action.

### ***Laïcité* in reverse?**

There are, however, companies where issues of religiosity seem to operate in reverse, or at least to a certain extent, since these organisations are eager to build their employer image and recruitment policy partly on the argument of “some tolerance”. In field observations, this was especially the case for call centres or telemarketing companies – but one could hypothesize and extend this analysis to other back-office jobs (in the hotel or restaurant business), i.e. having no visibility and no “contact with customers”. As a human resource manager at a telemarketing company based in Roubaix explained, “I know that in many call centres people can work dressed in their normal veil”. In the terms of workforce intermediaries, for women who wish to dress in a hijab there are only two options: “either the cleaning or, at the very least, the telephone”.

When it first opened offices in Roubaix, a city in Northern France, where according to some municipal estimates more than 40% of the inhabitants are of immigrant descent, mostly from Muslim majority countries<sup>12</sup>, this telephone consulting firm had to recruit a large number of employees at the same time; consequently, it had to “drain” numerous applications. The company was faced then with the “veil problem”, as the human resource manager for the Roubaix site, also in charge of the internal diversity policy, explains:

Our company stands for *laïcité*. However, it was a bit particular here at the beginning for female employees who wore a headscarf, due to the method we used to recruit in large numbers, based on a particular hiring procedure, which is called “hiring by skills” (*recrutement par les habiletés*)<sup>13</sup>... So, I asked them to tie their headscarf in a bun, and that it be colourful. In short, that it not be significant, or at least not ostentatious. And then,

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*Discriminations et pour l'Egalité* (HALDE) is an independent administrative body, in charge of receiving and mediating complaints of discrimination; similar to the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) or the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) in the U.K., its powers are however strictly extra-judicial in France (Latraverse and Doytcheva, 2018).

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.mediaticites.fr/enquete/lille/2017/12/01/roubaix-terre-de-religions-et-de-conversions/>  
See also: *Autrement dit*, 15 March 1996; *La Voix du Nord*, 10-11 March 1996; *Nord-Eclair*, 10-11 March 1996.

<sup>13</sup>

everything went very well, it went really well! We have some girls who have their pink scarves, who have their coloured scarves, and then it's pretty, isn't it!

This represents approximately 5% of our workforce ... Out of 450 people, there must be about 20 young women concerned. But it's true that in the company, we rather promote *laïcité*. So now, when I have people in a recruitment session, I ask them if they don't mind taking off their scarf or tying it in a bun to come to work.

Then the women tell me: if they want to take it off, they work without it, and in this case, we are completely neutral. If they prefer to wear it in a bun, they can do so, but I am quite vigilant on this point, when I see people who are starting to be more and more... [e.g. wearing a veil that covers their shoulders] I try to see them in private...

I know that in Roubaix-Tourcoing, there are many call centres where women can work wearing their usual veil. It depends on companies. Here, we prefer that it be without the veil, that is completely *laïque*. Now we have a kind of tolerance.

As observed in other companies faced with significant recruitment needs in sectors where the labour market is tight and a high workforce turnover prevails, corporate diversity policies are framed internally as a way to “make sense” of workplace relations; and as such are expected to function as employee retention schemes. This is particularly the case in areas such as telemarketing, debt recovery, but also credit and insurance, the banking sector for receptionist jobs, restaurant and food retail chains. The corporate ambitions displayed by organisations in line with their managerial diversity policies are thus not only to sell more, but also, and in a less-expected way, to hire more, at least on certain very specific positions – with low to intermediate qualifications and skills. As explained by another diversity officer, eager to leverage diversity for employer branding, “today people who are looking for jobs, especially young people, are really seeking for companies that are able to give a sense to their work.”

However, and without prejudging the potential interest of the work done in this matter by companies, it prompts questions about the political and social meaning of diversity being deployed in such way. Although diversity claims in this setting take on the meaning of stigma reversal, from a sociological viewpoint, they also appear as being constructed in a discretionary and segregative manner, i.e. 1/ relegated to certain jobs and occupations, where “diversity already exists”, in the very terms of its professionals (who nevertheless chose to concentrate efforts therein); 2/ invisibilised and concealed by means of technology and the absence of face-to-face relations, making thus sure not to “shock client sensitivity”, on the other hand. To make it short, this is the story of Fatima, recruited by a call centre, where she was soon asked to change her name to Michelle<sup>14</sup> (given that it will be disclosed to customers' attention).

Highly paradoxical articulations of diversity are given free way under the guise of non-discrimination, contributing to hegemonic rearticulations, and working to de facto reinstate racist structures and power relations within the very spaces designed to pursue equality. That is what I have referred to as “normalised diversity” (Doytcheva, 2018, 2020) – not least based on governance techniques it takes upon, namely those of standardisation, which is termed normalisation in French; one of its most prominent characteristics is that of being predominantly white. The concept of *white diversity* is thus intended to highlight the ways in which business re-appropriation of equal opportunity intersects with racist structures and power relations to uphold hegemonic whiteness. As we shall see next, religion, and Muslim identities

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<sup>14</sup> See Léa Balage, “La fin des discriminations au travail, c'est pour quand?”, <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/edition/les-invites-de-mediapart/article/170516/la-fin-des-discriminations-au-travail-c-est-pour-quand> accessed April 20, 2021.

in particular, lie at the core of “good” versus “bad diversity” divide, which is how race hierarchies are being re-embedded in organisations.

### “Good” and “bad” diversities

The way in which religiosity and Muslim faith, in particular, operate as factors of racialisation (Hajjat and Mohammed, 2013) has been made particularly visible in fieldwork through processes of diversity mentoring and workforce intermediation, aimed at supplying companies with “diverse candidates”, or candidates “from diversity” as they are called in French (*candidats issus de la diversité*); and thus help them to flesh out their diversity action plans. As I have argued elsewhere (Doytcheva, 2011, 2015), in French-style corporate diversity management, “diversity brokers and intermediaries” – i.e. structures developing such specific, diversity labelled, mentoring schemes – are key players, insofar as they allow organisations to outsource the management of some particularly “problematic” topics, including, but not limited to, racism and the management of ethnoracial categorisations. Furthermore, I hypothesise that the work done by intermediaries, in as much as it relies on an explicit articulation of employer norms and expectations, provides a productive vantage point from which to try and open up the black box of discrimination in organisational processes.

Based on primary field observations, these players exhibit contrasted profiles: while the majority are non-profit associations, a few act as recruitment firms; among the non-profits, some assert an activist and anti-racist approach, yet the majority come from social and philanthropic strands of employer-led social movements, gathering under the banner of “corporate patronage” (*mécénat social, mécénat d’entreprise*)<sup>15</sup>. Within this growing network of foundations, institutes, think-tanks and business groups dedicated to diversity management, some self-identify as “left-wing” or “progressive”, while many others display strong connections with employer unions, and sometimes even position as their “social showcase”. Voluntarily re-appropriating challenges of equal opportunity in the early 2000s, in the wake of the Diversity Charter movement, their interventions have appeared as quite significant of the above-mentioned “good” versus “bad diversity” divide.

Indeed, while diversity brokers and intermediaries lack the overall capacity to effectively place their trainees and mentees in jobs, they engage nonetheless in a harsh *normative work*, aimed, in their own words, at “acculturating [minority job-seekers] to the manners of French companies”, and sometimes even to French culture itself. Based on the procedures and schemes observed in fieldwork, this work is premised on a deficit model, assuming “a wide gap” between “corporate culture” and minority youth graduates. Under “neutral”, deemed “meritocratic” organisational language – conveying notions of *competency*, *employability*, and *interpersonal skills* – it is above all the lack of *savoir-être* (which can be imperfectly translated into soft-skills) that is blamed on minority applicants; and this, even when they reach the highest educational levels, including PhD. Furthermore, in French-style competency management, a thriving personnel professional rhetoric on *savoir-être* actually overlaps with another key category, namely that of “personality”. Yet, as demonstrated by the interviews excerpts below, in hiring and human relations, personality issues, not surprisingly, are very quick to acquire a prominent “identity-related” dimension; based on cultural and even more so religious dynamics, this latter dimension distinctively embodies the very logic of organisational racism and anti-Muslim discrimination, in particular:

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<sup>15</sup> For a more detailed presentation, see Alaktiff and Doytcheva (2018)

Some can't find a job because of a lack of network, but others ... well, you know, I'd say rather cause of identity problems.... I'd say there's about 20% in each promotion we accompany every year. These are the people who have the hardest time finding a job... Well, there's the veil, there's the person who's very hurt and has difficulty accepting a remark ... then there's also the gaze (*la manière de regarder*), the way of presenting oneself, the way of sitting through the interview, the handshake... At this point, I must and speak up: "careful there, with regard to the norm, you have to re-centre and make an effort." [...]

A lot of HR managers and directors won't hire because of the veil, because it signals a kind of personal rigidity, you know; so, they would say, she will have difficulty adapting within a group; or if she's looking for a job in the communication business, they will say no right away; if her job is in commerce, they will say no [...]

So, I tell the candidates frankly: in the company, you must leave everything you have of your culture, your private life at home; so as when you arrive there, you should first serve the company and get a salary in exchange; **you really need to make this break and to arrive at work being yourself, and without cultural baggage**. And this, they either understand it, or for those who don't, I tell them honestly: we can't network together, I'm sorry; I won't introduce you to companies; as long as you are unwilling to acknowledge that, we couldn't move forward. [diverse workforce volunteer coordinator at one large non-profit organisation, emphasis added]

## A respectable racism

The cases profiled above are part of a broad dynamics towards shifting selection devices and categories and their embedding into organisational processes framed as merely "neutral" and "meritocratic", for relying on notions of competency, employability, and corporate culture<sup>16</sup>. Against the backdrop of new civil rights awareness and legislation, racism as ideology that excludes minorities is vocally condemned, while the latter minorities and Muslims in particular are no less seen as "culturally unsuitable", or otherwise "deficient" (Bonilla-Silva, 2018); and having therefore to accomplish an important "work on themselves" (Doytcheva, 2015) in order to integrate. As shown by the case study, this pejorative image of oneself and the injunction to "work on oneself" is significantly interiorised by some job applicants, especially those who, first, are closest to highly selective educational careers; and second, to whom it partly offers a self-protective coping strategy to deal with racism. As Hamza, a 25-year-old business school graduate, puts it:

Finally, I became aware in the process [of mentoring] that **there was indeed something wrong with my way of being** (*ma manière d'être*) throughout interviews, while conducting my job research; I was actually, if you want, conveying a kind of victimised image of myself, that doesn't define me at all and that sometimes even hurt me a little... What I'm saying is that, for the problems I encountered, I don't feel like applying them to my origins. Now, I could tell you that I have been discriminated against but I don't want to feel it, I don't want to see this thing because, otherwise, it's just too horrible<sup>17</sup>. [emphasis added]

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<sup>16</sup> As recently as the early 1990s, indeed, explicit racial nomenclatures, coding BBR for *bleu, blanc, rouge*, i.e. "French white jobseekers only", were found in French public employment services, complacent with openly racist employers (Doytcheva et al., 2008, p. 172). But the issue will hardly surface in public debates at that time.

<sup>17</sup> It should be noted that at the time of field interviews, "candidates" are not yet in job, but in the process of being coached by diversity intermediaries, whose work I have argued is strictly non-binding for companies (i.e. with no obligation of hiring or other results, see Doytcheva 2015, p. 168, 171).

Based on field observations, within nevertheless diversity labelled set-ups and schemes, participants perceived as “too religious” – i.e. in this case Muslim – are automatically discarded from the selection processes; while the discriminatory nature of this exclusion remains unacknowledged, for being disguised on the one hand under supposedly rational or merely technical considerations, meant to derive from “corporate culture”; while coalescing, on the other hand, with new concepts of *laïcité* and secularism.

On the one hand, the naturalising and differentialistic assumptions that underpin the selection outcomes are to be understood in the terms of what Bonilla-Silva (2018) frames as a “colorblind racism” or “racism without racists”, or what has been more recently referred to as “not-racism” by Lentin (2020). Evidence that the majority of lived experiences of workplace racism nowadays encompass situations where bias and discrimination get “subtle”, insidious, or otherwise embedded in socially sanctioned rationales, is prevalent. Embodied in day-to-day realities, mundane and repetitive practices, this “everyday racism” (Essed 1991; Feagin and Sikes 1994), becomes “respectable” (Bouamama, 2004) towards Muslim, as it involves socially admitted phenomena, increasingly framed as legitimate.

On the other hand, this broad sociological dynamic of evolving patterns of racism deeply intersects with the crystallisation, in recent years in French settings, of new constructions of secularism. Termed “axiological” (Degirmenci, 2018), these new constructions of *laïcité* no longer embody a legal principle, but rather a moral and political “value”, which consequently should be enforced in every single practice and activity. Still the ambitious and far-reaching project of “neo-laïcité” (Hennette Vauchez and Valentin, 2014; Dawes, 2015) – portrayed as “rigid” and “disciplinary” (Hajjat and Mohammed, 2013) or otherwise “invasive” (Tessier, 2018) – is far from being the prerogative of French republicanism alone. Across national borders, a politics of repression and widespread anti-Islamic hostility towards those assigned by religion is mainstreamed and deployed on a global scale (Liogier, 2012; Mondon and Winter, 2017). As put by Liogier (2012), Islam has become the “negative integrator” of an unfolding spectrum of “unexpected” new European right-wing movements: self-presenting as egalitarian, feminist, concerned with homophobia and anti-Semitism, they have not only revitalised national far-rights, but now provide them with a shared, pan-European, and transnational cause.

Following the analyses by a Belgian jurist, Lacorne (2019, p. 188) points out the ongoing construction of new conceptions of neutrality in ECHR (European Court of Human Rights) decisions. Between an *exclusive* conception (forbidding all public display of religious symbols outside of places of worship), and an *inclusive* one that allows public space to be filled with a pluralistic array of such symbols, a new path is now explored, based on “neutrality of compensation”. Neutrality of compensation acknowledges State’s right to invoke an “old tradition”, whether cultural or “identity-linked”, in order to give a “predominant visibility” to the majority religion. This position was reflected in several recent Court rulings, such as the upholding of the display of Christian crosses in public school classrooms in Italy; the recognition of France’s right to enact legislation banning full-face covering clothing in the public space for the sake of protecting a harmonious “living together” and ideals of “republican fraternity”<sup>18</sup>.

Yet such developments also have a very clear and direct impact on workplace relations and employment discrimination. In 2016, the newly passed French labour law explicitly reasserted the possibility for employers to enforce workplace religious neutrality by way of general

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<sup>18</sup> ECHR 1 July 2014 SAS v France Application No 43835/112014

internal policy requirements<sup>19</sup>. While recent decisions by the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) committed to provide some general guidelines for the purpose: not all businesses may adopt such internal rules, which must be justified by a “legitimate aim” and rely on “appropriate and necessary” means<sup>20</sup>. In November 2017, the French Court of Cassation confirmed this ruling, retaining in its turn “the contact with customers” as a legitimate condition under which an employer can introduce neutrality requirements on religious, philosophical or political grounds<sup>21</sup>. Although the CJEU decision was criticised, including in France, it was no less directly inspired by a French concept of secularism, which is now shown to be expanding and even “triumphing” (Tessier, 2018) at European scale.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have argued how the development, over the last decades in France, of specific anti-Muslim racism affects professional and organisational fields, but also a wide array of social spheres and activities. I have emphasised the undue burden it places on female employees; while, it is towards male Muslims that this religious penalty is the strongest in hiring, with nearly four times less chance of being called back following an application. In French organisational settings, this situation is unfolding under present day conditions based on an extensive reading of *laïcité* principles which, in the wake of 2004 law banning religious symbols in schools, have been applied with ever less empiricism. While the law’s passage was justified by the need to prevent international judicial action against France, we are witnessing, some twenty years later, the extent to which the ban rationale has permeated a variety of institutions, including those that do not fall strictly speaking within the public space. Adding new territories to spatialities of secularism, it has been used in turn to bolster and justify the unfolding of specific, anti-Muslim racism.

Based on a longitudinal, qualitative research on workplace diversity policies, I have shown how the widespread hostility and discriminations it triggers coalesce around two tenets. First, patterns of racialisation: while the disqualification of Muslims from white corporate spaces is presented as stemming from “general” and merely “neutral” requirements, not targeting a single community, empirical evidence reveals on the contrary their very strong racial imprint; as faith options are systematically turned into “personality styles” and “identity problems”. Second, the perceived legitimacy and widespread social acceptance of this “respectable racism”, woven into claims upon meritocracy, and disguised as “corporate culture”. While exposing once again the power dynamics of white racialized organisations, these findings from my position here gain further significance, as they involve actors and procedures explicitly designed to fight discrimination and promote workplace diversity. Repertoires of what I term “white diversity” uphold and re-instate organisational whiteness by dismissing race issues and hierarchies – deemed “low priority”, “unsuitable”, or “coming up next” – but also and even more so faith issues and diversity. As such, it testifies to the pervasive, deeply entrenched, and gaining public legitimacy nature of such exclusionary practices. With secularism moving nowadays from legal

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<sup>19</sup> French Law n°2016-1088 of August 8, 2016. See Art. 2 in particular, codified at Art. L1321-2-1 of the Labour Code.

<sup>20</sup> Although the Court leaves it up to each State to set the criteria of “legitimacy”, it gives an example likely to concern many companies: Employers’ “desire to project an image of neutrality towards both its public and private customers” is deemed legitimate under the “freedom to conduct a business” recognised in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights; the Court considers that this is notably the case where the only workers involved are those who come into contact with customers: CJEU Press release No 30/17 of March 14, 2017: <https://curia.europa.eu/jcms/upload/docs/application/pdf/2017-03/cp170030en.pdf> accessed April 20, 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Cass. Soc. judgment no. 2484 of November 22, 2017.

principle to moral value and political and ideological creed, this situation is ultimately, I argue, less and less local and French, and increasingly global and European – although France continues to embody in some respects a “textbook case” of these trends.

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