THE MEDIA, ISLAM, AND POPULISM IN THE FIFTH REPUBLIC

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Introduction

The programs of French anti-racist protest groups like the *Blédards* and the *Indigènes de la République* indicate the existence of a striking incompatibility that plagues French democratic society: its commitment to republican values of *liberté, egalité, fraternité* on the one hand, and its entrenched islamophobia on the other. Although this tension is obvious to most observers, the factors contributing to its development and vitality remain less clear. French islamophobia is historical and has existed in contravention of the country's republican values since the imperial era, beginning with the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt in 1798. However, the aftermath of World War II generated a resounding condemnation of the fascist and racist lines in European politics, leaving French far-right groups on the fringes of French society. Interestingly, recent developments in French politics suggest a reversal of this trend. Marine Le Pen's far-right *Front National* has found particular success by preying on a distorted understanding of Islam and offering a discourse of securitization in opposition to Muslim minorities leading up to the 2017 presidential election. In this paper, I directly implicate the French media in the resurgence of far-right populist and authoritarian politics in France. The French context substantiates Neo-Gramscian accounts of the relationship between the media and society provided by Michel Foucault, Edward Said, Noam Chomsky, and Stuart Hall. Ultimately, I theorize that the sustained and disproportionate conflation of Islam with violence by the French media manufactured a habitat for Le Pen's populist rhetoric to thrive.

Theoretical Bases: Foucault, Said, Chomsky, and Hall on the Media and Representation

I proceed by briefly outlining the Neo-Gramscian position on the relationship between media, politics, and society, which I believe to be the most relevant and useful for understanding the development of French politics in such a counterintuitive way to embrace previously condemned far-right ideologies. The post-Grasmcian position emphasises the tendency of the

media to engineer a narrative of the "other" that serves both to represent and reinforce a hegemonic *Weltanschauung* or world view. Michel Foucault provides a necessary introduction to the circular relationship of power and knowledge in an interview entitled "Truth and Power" (1977). In it, he discusses the productivity of power in that it produces knowledge and discourse (p. 120). Developments in communication during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries resulted in an "economy of power" which allowed for the circulation of knowledge and discourse in a "continuous, uninterrupted, adapted, and individualized" manner that was more efficient than the coercive methodologies that preceded it (p. 120). For Foucault, special attention must be paid to the political and economic apparatuses that produce and control truth (that is, government, media, military, universities, and empirical academic disciplines) because they manufacture a "regime of truth" by determining the types of discourse society accepts as true (p. 131). This "discursive regime" reinforces itself by satisfying demands for truth by means of education and information (pp. 114-115; 131). In this way, the media not only represent accepted societal truths, but are complicit in creating these assumptions.

Edward Said provides an account of the strength of media consensus in the West on Islam in his *Covering Islam* (1981), demonstrating that negative depictions of Muslims are not just a post-9/11 phenomenon. He notes that media coverage, as well as contributions from the Western intelligentsia, has created an "unrestrained and immediate" perception of Islam that has resulted in its religionization through the homogenization of ethnicities and nationalities (Arabs, Iranians, Pakistanis, Turks, et cetera) into the singular category of "Muslims" (p. 38). Further, discourse about Islam exists in a contextual vacuum free of "political complications" like democracy, socialism, and secularism (p. 38). For Said, the media function to reduce an extensively complicated reality into intelligible news by capitalizing on the uniform assumptions

of their audience, which the media are complicit in generating (p. 45). In this way, media

consensus in the West has led to a monochromatic view of "*Homo islamicus*" (p. 57) that is

inconsistent with reality and is incompatible with ideas of normalcy (p. 39, 41).

While Said concedes that the media in Western liberal democratic states are not a central

propaganda apparatus due to theoretical freedom of the press, he posits that the corporate

interests of the media lead to a convergence of thought despite ideological diversity (p. 46).

News coverage is the result of a deliberate process of selection and expression by journalists,

news agencies, and networks. There is an implicit and influential human element that leaves

news coverage at the mercy of the internalized assumptions of these journalists, editors, and

owners of media networks (p. 46). In this way, the media functions to simultaneously represent

and inform popular opinion on what counts as news, and how this news should be understood. In

particular, Said notes that media plurality compresses as press independence is subordinated by

"implicit expressions of loyalty and patriotism" in response to perceived threats to the social

order (p. 47). This privileges certain images over others and creates a political context based on

an unconscious ideology which the media disseminate (p. 45).

Noam Chomsky writes about "corporate media" and their commitment to a coherent

political elite in his *The Culture of Terrorism* (1988). His writing, while limited to the American

context, is useful in understanding the relationship between the press and the liberal democratic

state. Chomsky postulates that the media function to legitimize government action through

historical engineering that depends on the selective focus and interpretation of current events and

the suppression of any evidence that threatens the underlying political system (pp. 11-16). The

state propaganda system functions to enforce a "narrow conformism" (p. 204) of the media and

"willful ignorance" (p. 18) of injustices within the state that results in a depiction of the state as unconditionally benevolent (pp. 21, 49-50). Chomsky provides:

> Adherence to doctrinal truth confers substantial reward, not only acceptance within the system of power and a ready path to privilege, but also the inestimable advantage of freedom from the onerous demands of thought, inquiry and argument (p. 21).

There is little room for "sectors of non-elite opinion" (p. 16) to exist, as those who question the underlying political system are required to meet unrealistically high standards of evidence. In this way, critical thought is subordinated as its conclusions are unconventional and rarely seen (p. 21). This leads to the marginalization of any serious challenge to hegemonic ideology and the convergence of the media to a single "totalitarian" consensus (p. 209).

Stuart Hall emphasizes the centrality of meaning to media representation in his lecture "Representation and the Media" (Patierno & Talreja, 1997). He contests the common view of media representation as passive in its reflection (or distortion) of reality. This view is based on the notion that meaning is endogenous to events and that the media literally "re-present" that meaning. However, Hall argues instead that meaning is exogenous and is constructed by the media through representation based on socialized "conceptual maps" through which we classify and differentiate. He describes the media as "one of the most powerful and extensive systems for the circulation of meaning" (Patierno & Talreja, 1997), and notes that power and ideology determine signifying practices that privilege certain tropes and caricatures that inundate society and create a naturalized perception of stereotypes.

In his *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (1997), Hall posits a "racialized regime of representation" (p. 249). Drawing on the contributions of Said and Foucault, Hall provides an extensive account of the role of stereotyping in the maintenance of the

social and symbolic order. According to Hall, this "racialized regime" is underpinned by the

reductionist, naturalizing and ethnifying symbolic power of the media which mobilize the fears

and anxieties of the population to entrench a culturally hegemonic narrative. These "politics of

representation" (p. 226) attempt to affix meaning to images and language based on a binary that,

in the French context, generates positive connotations associated with the Franco-French and

opposing negative connotations associated with French Muslims. The "other" is subjected to

polarized tropes of good and bad, civilized and primitive, ugly and excessively attractive,

different and exotic, and is seen to permanently embody the negative categories while being

expected to live up to the positive ones. Minority groups are thus incapable of fulfilling the

racialized notions of "Frenchness" because the expectations placed upon them are impossible to

fill.

A synthesis of these accounts of the media provides two key characteristics of the media

that are substantiated by the French context and implicated in the later-discussed resurgence of

right-wing populism in France. The first is the tendency of ideologically diverse media to

converge in their coverage of events perceived as threatening to the socio-political hegemonic

order. This generates a seldom-challenged narrative surrounding certain events or people and

enforces a uniform perception of those events. The second is the tendency of the media to ascribe

meaning to events and people through over-simplification and stereotyping that eases audience

interpretation but has the effect of ostracizing particular groups of people and precipitating their

oppression in society. In the following section, I will elucidate these claims using empirical

evidence collected on the French media.

Empirical Evidence: Muslims and Violence in the French Media

Stefan Mertens (2016) provides a framework for assessing European media coverage of

Muslims that is useful for drawing empirical conclusions that support the Neo-Gramscian

account of the media. Mertens hypothesizes that left-wing press would be less saturated with violence-related articles on Islam and Muslims than its right-wing counterparts based on a pluralist perspective of the media that contrasts with the Neo-Gramscian perspective (p. 63). The pluralist perspective emphasizes political parallelism, advocating that ideological pluralism should prevent the emergence of a dominant political narrative that oppresses Muslim minorities (Lisle, 2014, pp. 164-165). Rozane De Cock and Koenraad Du Pont (2016) employ Mertens's framework in the French and, less vital to this paper, the Walloon contexts, finding that the French media resists the tendency of political parallelism while making other key conclusions that further bolster the Neo-Gramscian account.

De Cock's and Du Pont's findings substantiate the two theoretical characteristics of the Neo-Gramscian media discussed above: the convergence of media coverage in defence of the socio-political hegemonic order, and the use of reductionism and stereotyping in the pursuit of corporate interests to ease audience interpretation. De Cock and Du Pont discuss at length the preoccupation of French journalists, editors, and perhaps owners of major media sources with covering stories regarding French Muslims that focus on politics (44.4%), war (12.4%), terrorism (10.9%), religion (9.3%), justice (5.1%), crime (3.7%) and economics (3%) (p. 122). The proportion of stories on Muslim education, employment, and discrimination are comparatively low, with each of the three categories accounting for less than one percent of stories covering Muslims (p. 122). These findings are illustrative of the politicization of French Muslims and the conflation of Islam with violence that operates within French society. They also suggest a general apathy of French media sources for the conditions faced by oppressed French Muslims. Instead, the French media capitalize on latent assumptions within the French population to construct negative meanings about Muslims that ease interpretation of events transpiring within

the country. The origins and development of these latent assumptions will be discussed in the following section.

The second finding of note is the lack of an appreciable difference in the coverage of violence between right- and left-wing presses within France. De Cock and Du Pont focus their study on two popular newspapers in France: *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro* (p. 111). They indicate that *Le Monde* was selected to represent leftist media, while *Le Figaro* was selected to represent conservative media (p. 111). However, regardless of ideological position, one in three articles on Islam published by either periodical were found to report on violent events (p. 126). This suggests that French media resists the tendency of political parallelism, contrary to Mertens's hypothesis, and that the French media is not functioning to provide a measured view of Islam in France based on the plurality of political beliefs within the country. One would expect left-wing press to provide a fairer portrayal of Muslims based on principles of prioritarianism, social equality, and social justice. However, left-wing press in France is also implicated in the development of a hegemonic narrative regarding Muslims and their disproportionate association with violence in the media. If Islam within France is taken to constitute a threat to the French socio-political hegemonic order, this convergence of left- and right-wing presses serves to substantiate the former characteristic of Neo-Gramscian media.

Further Inquiry: Orientalism, Islamophobia, and Post-Imperial Psychologies
De Cock's and Du Pont's findings suggest the vitality of a hegemonic and violent narrative associated with French Muslims that is strong enough to resist the tendency of political parallelism. I continue my account of the French media by inquiring further into the origins and development of this hegemonic and violent narrative in both French society and the French media. Such a narrative did not spontaneously come into being, but is historically linked to two major contexts of interaction between the Franco-French and French Muslims. The first was the

French colonization of Northern Africa and its subsequent jostling for control over colonial territory, markets and raw materials in the "scramble" for Africa during the imperial era. Said (1979) identifies the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt in 1798 as the precedent-setting event for the "truly scientific appropriation of one culture by another, apparently stronger one" (p. 42). The resulting twenty-three-volume *Description de l'Égypt* provides the scene for a stylized and exoticized understanding of the "Orient" (p. 84). Its *préface historique*, authored by Jean-Baptiste-Joseph Fourier, lays out French early imperialism's dealings with "unadultered" cultures destined for European annexation (p. 84). This idea is captured in contemporary French literature, including Chateaubriand's *Itinéraire*, Lamartine's *Voyage en Orient*, and Flaubert's *Salammbô* (p. 88).

Nineteenth and twentieth century Western thought regarding Muslims inherited these exoticized conceptions of the "Orient", combined with notions of biological racial hierarchy, to create an "ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority" (Said, 1979, p. 38; 42). Said quotes Lord Cromer's *Modern Egypt* to articulate the stereotypical characteristics attributed to Arabs within the European consciousness; Cromer variously describes them as "devoid of energy and initiative" and "lethargic and suspicious", concluding that "the Oriental generally acts, speaks, and thinks in a manner exactly opposite to the European" (1979, pp. 38-39). The racial hierarchy of imperial France is reflected in the status of "French nationals" given to Algerians within the French empire under the 1862 decision of the Court of Algiers and the 1865 *sénatus-consulte*, granting them no civil or political rights (Saada, 2011, p. 225). Algerians would not be granted citizenship until the adoption of the 1946 Constitution and were not enfranchised until the *loi-cadre* of 1956 which established universal suffrage (Saada, 2011, p. 228). Early French nationalism developed in concurrence with the

legislative and institutional delineation between the concepts of the French "citizen" and "subject" (Saada, 2011, p. 227). Some groups, particularly the *Indigènes de la République* argue that this distinction lingers in French psychology today (Giry, 2006, p. 98).

The second major context of interaction between the Franco-French and French Muslims was the post-war migrations of French colonial subjects to continental France. French industry was largely dependent on colonial populations for staffing, leading to the liberalization of immigration policy for French colonial subjects to accommodate this dependence (Lewis, 2011, p. 236). This policy of economic immigration was suspended in the aftermath of the 1974 oil crisis and the associated economic recession, precipitating the beginning of the scapegoating of Muslims by the media (Kaya, 2009, pp. 64-66; Said, 1981, p. 33). While OPEC countries sought egalitarianism with their former colonizers through their embargo, Western nations interpreted the proposed "ominous interdependence" as a disruption to the world order (Said, 1981, pp. 34-35). Edward Said (1981) provides:

> We could not drive our cars the way we used to; oil was much more expensive; our comforts and habits seemed to be undergoing a radical and most unwelcome change (p. 37).

This consumerist reaction was coupled with an increasing visibility of Islamic states in the general consciousness through extensive yet reductionist media coverage (Said, 1981, p. 37). Meanwhile, visibility of North Africans domestically in France also increased through family reunification (Kaya, 2009, p. 65). While mainstream French politics maintained that it was "allergic" to the racist and xenophobic line, Jean-Marie Le Pen (Marine Le Pen's father) and his *Front National* gained momentum during this era through its xenophobic platform of *communautarisme* (Lewis, 2011, p. 239). The platform of *communautarisme* condemned the

tendency of ethnic groups within France not to assimilate, but instead to form "secessionist territories bristling with forces hostile to the French nation and to the republican general interest" (Viguier, 2011, p. 262).

The contemporary conditions of French Muslims reflect the vitality and influence of the violent caricature of Muslims manufactured by the French media. Most French Muslims are concentrated in the periphery of urban centres (Kaya, 2009, p. 62), with disproportionately high populations occupying suburbs called *banlieues* that are associated with socio-economic stagnation, social isolation, and high rates of unemployment (Viguier, 2011, pp. 262-263). French Muslims of Algerian and Moroccan descent grapple with an unemployment rate of thirty percent, as compared to the ten percent unemployment rate of the total French population (Giry, 2006, p. 94). Individuals with North African names are six times less likely to be offered job interviews than their Franco-French counterparts (Giry, 2006, p. 94). The lack of economic opportunities for French Muslims has created a reputation of laziness and delinquency that have contributed to their endemic criminalization by the French state. While data is imprecise due to the French policy of *lacïté* which forbids the collection of data on religion, figures suggest that French Muslims comprise seventy percent of prison populations despite only accounting for eight to ten percent of the total French population (Ferguson, 2017; Atran & Hamid, 2015; Alexander, 2015; Moore, 2008). French Muslims are also forced to contend with a perception formed by international terrorist events (Kaya, 2009, p. 4), leading to a discourse of securitization associated with Islam, with media outlets seeking to capitalize on the fear value of the word "Islam" in a phenomenon that can be regarded as the engineering of islamophobia (Charb, 2016, pp. 21-22).

Implications for French Politics

I digress from my discussion of the French media's sustained disparagement of French Muslims to account for recent developments in French politics. Recall that the development of a violent profile for Muslims in the French media began after the 1974 OPEC oil embargo and the resulting economic recession (Kaya, 2009, pp. 64-66). Contemporaneous developments in French politics saw the revival of the far-right in the person of Jean-Marie Le Pen and his *Front National* (Lewis, 2011, p. 239). These processes reinforced one another, as I will attempt to show using theoretical presuppositions provided by Hall in his *The Hard Road to Renewal* (1988).

Hall contends that particular crises develop organically in the state and provide the opportunity for political realignment and reconstruction of social relations (p. 104). Specifically, crises that mount challenges to the dominant hegemonic social order induce the disillusionment of the masses and the recognition by the political elite that the old ways are obsolete, allowing for "epochal transitions" (p. 96) away from liberalism and social democracy and toward a stronger authoritarian state (p. 125). The media is complicit in these sudden transitions and discontinuity through what Chomsky calls the "change of course doctrine" wherein negative views toward the state based on its historical failures are framed as misguided because the state has changed direction and has arrived at the only eligible solution to the crises (1988, pp. 16-18). In the most recent context of these political realignments and transitions, we witnessed marked movements away from social democracy in Europe, resulting in an interregnum of sorts where European politics struggles to define the ideological bases of the new political system. The right and left have both undertaken extensive efforts to reconstruct and redefine themselves, emphasizing more authoritarian approaches to resolving these crises. Interestingly, the reinvention of French right- and left-wing politics mirror the account that Hall gives of the

British Thatcherite era, suggesting broader implications about the relationship of politics to crisis (pp. 125-126).

While several potential crises exist within the French state, I choose to focus primarily on the crisis of security. The unprecedented string of contemporary Islamic terrorism in France, including the January 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, November 2015 Paris attacks, and the July 2016 Nice attack, have brought the capacity of the French state to guarantee security for its citizens into question. It is worth noting here that these attacks have been subject to the French media bias towards conflating Islam with violence and insecurity, generating a perception of the security crisis as a crisis of Islam and allowing for the framing of potential solutions through that lens. It is this crisis that provided the context for the 2017 French presidential election, which saw the expansion of the authoritarian and islamophobic register of French politics that this paper is interested in.

Marine Le Pen's rhetoric during her presidential campaign confirm Hall's predictions about the restructuring of the political right to emphasize reformation of the political system rather than the typical conservative clinging to traditional approaches (p. 125). Her proposed solutions attempted to coopt popular elements in order to resolve the security crisis from the bottom (p. 146). Le Pen's campaign slogan, "In the name of the people," illustrates her attempt to project herself as the leader of the masses as opposed to a representative of elite interests (Poole, 2017, May 7). However, embedded within this notion of "the people" is an implicit racial component that actively excludes French Muslims. Hall identifies that the appeal of the right lies in its ability to penetrate the traditional ideological conceptions of the masses (p. 141). In the French context, this manifested in Le Pen's capitalization on the islamophobia engineered by the French media. In the aftermath of the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, Le Pen denounced the "murderous

ideology" of Islamic radicalism and later proclaimed her intention of offering a referendum on

the death penalty, an especially dangerous prospect considering the endemic criminalization of

French Muslims (Watt, 2015, January 7). In response to the Paris and Nice attacks, Le Pen

criticized government inaction and urged an attack on the "ideology" on which she claimed the

Islamic radicalism was based (Nossiter, Breeden, & Benhold, 2015, November 14; Jaigu, 2016,

July 15). Le Pen demonstrated a tendency to resort to a discourse of securitization regarding

Islam that both reinforced and took advantage of the disproportionate conflation of Islam with

violence in the French media. In this way, the French media created a habitat in which Le Pen's

populist rhetoric thrived.

Of course, Le Pen was not successful in her presidential campaign, though she obtained

significant support across France. At the same time the political left in France has shown

concerning redefinitions that conform to Hall's predictions that the left would evolve to include a

type of "authoritarian statism" that relies increasingly on coercive methods (p. 136). Then-

president François Hollande, leader of the *Parti Socialiste*, instituted an *état d'urgence* in

response to the Paris attacks which lasted nearly two years with six extensions (Osborne, 2017,

October 31). This state of emergency gave the French government the authority to arbitrarily

conduct house arrests, police raids, and bans on public assembly without judicial warrant

(Kassem, 2016, August 4). Hollande's state of emergency regularized the violation of the human

rights of Muslim citizens without acknowledgement by the French government and without

large-scale challenge by the French people (Kassem, 2016, August 4).

Incumbent president Emmanuel Macron seems to have inherited Hollande's approach to

counterterrorism, leaving little hope for the amelioration of the conditions of Muslims in France

during his term. Although he formally ended the state of emergency, he has also passed a

counterterrorism law that expands the arsenal of French police in their fight against extremism (Osborne, 2017, October 31). The law gives greater authority to police to conduct searches, close religious facilities, and restrict the movements of those suspected of extremism (Osborne, 2017, October 31). Considering Macron's emphasis on "the Republic" throughout his presidential campaign (Poole, 2017, May 7), his counterterrorism law ironically sacrifices the republican values of *liberté, egalité, fraternité* in favour of a "fair balance between security and freedom", as Interior Minister Gerard Collomb describes (Osborne, 2017, October 31).

French politics is not devoid of opinions that seek to address the oppression of Muslims by the French state. Anti-racist protest groups like the *Blédards* and the *Indigènes de la République* represent the disillusioned Muslim demographics in France and their demands for a reversal of imperial psychologies and the upholding of republican values (Giry, 2006, p. 98). However, these opinions operate on the fringes of French society and have yet to exercise any real influence on the development of contemporary French politics. Instead, the islamophobia engineered by the French media remains a more influential force. As long as the media continues to conflate Islam with violence, Muslims will continue to be interpreted as a threat to French security and will continue to be represented through securitized discourse.

Conclusion

The redefinition of French politics, emphasizing security in contravention of traditional republican values, is intimately linked to the disparagement of Muslims and the conflation of Islam with violence by the French media. The tendency of the French media to resist political parallelism and to produce a singular, monochromatic narrative about Muslims that employs the islamophobic assumptions and stereotypes of the masses has created a political climate that allows for the securitization of Muslims by mainstream French politics. These two developments (that is, the development of the French media bias against Islam and the securitized discourse

about Muslims) were personified by Marine Le Pen and her *Front National* during the 2017

presidential election campaign as she capitalized on the fears harboured by Franco-French racists

in an attempt to mobilize the masses in the pursuit of a populist agenda. Although Le Pen was

defeated by Emmanuelle Macron and his *La République En Marche!*, prevailing French politics

still demonstrate tendencies that are concerning for the condition of French Muslims. The

increasing reliance of the French state on authoritarian measures that restrict individual liberties

and present an affront to equality within French society are problematic trends that leave little

hope for the state of democracy in France.

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