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The contemporary uses of the 'values of the Republic' in the French naturalisation process

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Abstract:

The state promotion of 'common values' in public discourses and policies as a response to a so-called 'crisis of immigrant integration' has become a widespread phenomenon in contemporary European societies. This article analyses how shared values are promoted by the French state in the implementation of migration policies, and whether such promotion introduces anything new in the approach to immigrant integration. Our analysis concentrates on the recent reconfiguration of 'assimilation interviews' in the French naturalisation process. Once essentially aimed at measuring applicants' fluency in French, since 2011 the interviews are meant to test applicants' 'adhesion to the values of the French Republic'. Drawing on an empirically informed analysis of the French naturalisation policy, we show that the emphasis placed on adhesion to the 'values of the Republic' has contributed to a twofold process of moralisation of citizenship which fuels state intrusion into private lives, and of culturalisation of citizenship which nourishes ethnocultural stereotypes against Muslims. By contrast with arguments that associate the case of France to merely 'civic' conceptions of integration, we show that the French promotion of common values does give ground to a culturally-oriented state perfectionism that builds on past institutional practices and ideas about national integration.

Introduction

Perceptions that immigrant integration has 'failed' and that European societies should reinvigorate their attachment to national identity have become widespread over the last 30 years. Notions of 'shared values' in the UK, '*Leitkultur*' (i.e. dominant or majority culture) in Germany, '*valeurs de la République*' (i.e. values of the Republic) in France have been presented in public discourses and policies as remedies for the diagnosis of a so-called 'crisis of integration'. The rise of assimilationist purposes based on the rhetoric of 'common values', largely referred to as a 'civic turn' (Mouritsen, Jensen, and Larin 2019a; Hachimi-Alaoui et al. 2020), has translated into the introduction of seemingly similar policy instruments across European states, in particular (though not exclusively)

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in immigration policies, as illustrated by the multiplication of citizenship tests and integration programmes (Joppke 2007; Van Oers et al. 2010; Rea et al. 2018; Goodman 2019; Sredanovic 2022).

The significance of the change introduced by the diffusion of the rhetoric of common values and civic integration requirements is still very much disputed in scholarship. While some scholars present the civic turn as a major transformation of citizenship and immigration policies across Europe (Joppke 2007; Kostakopoulou 2010; Goodman 2014), others are more sceptical and argue that civic integration requirements are in continuity with historical practices of state regulation of immigration and citizenship (Meer and Modood 2009; Bonjour and Lettinga 2012; Mouritsen 2013).

France raises interesting questions in terms of policy change and path dependency. The French Republic is reputed to have a long tradition in grounding citizenship and national identity on a set of common values (Brubaker 1992; Favell 2002), and we can question whether the convergent emphasis that European states have placed on attachment to common values resulted in anything new in France. Moreover, there is a specific interest in reassessing the 'national model' of integration that France represents. Drawing on classical analyses (Greenfeld 1992), the so-called 'republican model' is still presented as the paradigmatic example of a model of integration characterised by a public promotion and moralist inculcation of the values of the majority group (Larin 2019); and it is further argued that this model would have become predominant in other Western European countries in recent years (Jensen and Mouritsen 2019). However, the idea that France effectively corresponds to such a model is often taken for granted in extant research and needs re-evaluation (Jensen 2019). This article will precisely interrogate the visions of integration that the French state promotion of common values contributes to spreading in migration policies, and whether these uses of common values introduce anything new in both the conception and the implementation of French citizenship.

The article concentrates on the recent reconfiguration of 'assimilation interviews' in the French naturalisation process, a reconfiguration that has not yet been investigated.¹ Once essentially aimed at measuring applicants' fluency in French, since 2011 the interviews focus on applicants' knowledge of French society and 'adhesion to the essential principles and values of the French Republic'.² The very wording of the assimilation condition in French nationality law – as defined in article 21–24 of the Civil Code – raises the question of whether naturalisation is not made conditional on the control of applicants' beliefs and attitudes, and which categories of immigrants are the most suspected of non-compliance with the so-called 'values of the Republic'.

We aim to examine whether the French promotion of the 'values of the Republic' in the field of naturalisation policies is part and parcel of a possible twofold process of 'moralisation of citizenship', consisting in the reaffirmation of the moral preconditions for the national community's survival, and 'culturalisation of citizenship', making certain ethno-cultural minorities more or less suspect of non-loyalty to 'common values'.

Theoretical background: Debating 'civic integration'

In the literature, scholars have provided two main interpretations to the state promotion of shared values in migration and citizenship policies. Some argue that the collective

identity promoted through the defence of common values is grounded on a set of universal principles and that this hardly qualifies as nationalism, understood as an exclusionary ideology. Should the concept of nationalism apply, this could only be a 'civic' form of nationalism (Joppke 2008, 2010), but ethnically or culturally exclusive expressions of nationalism would be absent from the public defence of common values. Following this line of reasoning, European states do promote a 'new identity', but it only entails a 'minimally transformative process, advocating common values and skills for autonomy without sacrificing home culture' (Goodman 2014, 32). By way of contrast, other scholars argue that the promotion of a value-based collective identity in Western Europe develops a moralisation of citizenship (Schinkel 2008; Schinkel and Van Houdt 2010; Kipling 2015) emphasising standards of 'good' attitudes and beliefs as preconditions for national membership. Some add that this moralisation has exclusionary effects on specific minorities and/or ethnic groups (Kostakopoulou 2010; Tonkens and Duyvendak 2016; Chin 2017; Mouritsen et al. 2019b). Concepts such as 'femonationalism' (Farris 2017) and 'homonationalism' (Puar 2013) for example capture the recent affirmation of gender equality and LGBTIQ* emancipation as core values and even national traditions in European societies. These calls for preserving national identity target mainly Muslims perceived as advocates of an opposite value-system that would allegedly prevent them from becoming 'good citizens'.

In scholarship, the diagnosis of a culturally-biased moralisation of citizenship, whose strongest expressions would legitimise state intrusion into private lives and cultural stereotypes against minority groups, has often been confined to the introduction of specific migration policy instruments in a few outlier cases. More precisely, the integration programme from abroad, launched in the Netherlands in the early 2000s, and the Bade-Württemberg citizenship test, run between 2005 and 2008, have been held as the very examples of a 'perfectionist' integration policy, also qualified as 'illiberal liberalism' (Joppke 2007; Orgad 2015, 130 and 137-143). Perfectionist approaches to integration consist in the public promotion of a particular conception of the 'good life' and the 'moral virtues' of the 'good citizen'. When aimed at reproducing national identity, these approaches prioritise the commitment to the values of the majority culture over the recognition of minority differences.

Contemporary analyses testing the existence of a culturally-oriented state perfectionism justifying the control of immigrants' inner dispositions, particularly Muslims immigrants' personal beliefs and attitudes, remain very much concentrated on the level of public discourses/legal arrangements (Farris 2017; Mouritsen et al. 2019b). Studies examining the significance of the phenomenon at the policy level (i.e. in the concrete everyday implementation of public policies) are scarce, with some notable exceptions (in the field of integration policies, see Hajjat 2012; Mazouz 2017; Suvarierol 2021; Hachimi-Alaoui and Pélabay 2020; in the field of citizenship revocation policies, see Fargues, Winter, and Gibney 2020). Building on an empirically informed analysis of the French naturalisation policy, this article aims to interrogate whether the state promotion of common values translates into conceptions of integration legitimising a perfectionist understanding of 'good citizenship' that itself evidences ethnocultural biases against minority groups targeted as 'ethical dissidents' (Pélabay and Sénac 2020, 113), and whether this represents any novelty. (Tables 1 and 2)

Methodology and data

To determine the type of control that the French state legitimises through the rhetoric of adhesion to ‘Republican values’, this paper draws on in-depth fieldwork research conducted in three different prefectural boards between March 2016 and July 2017.³ The fieldwork was conducted mainly in one prefectural board (PR1) located within a Paris suburb.⁴ Several sessions of observations were made there in March and May 2016, as well as January, June and July 2017, counting for 15 full days in total. Other observations have been conducted on shorter periods in another prefectural board within another Paris suburb (PR2), and in another located in a major city in the South of France (PR3), respectively in June and July 2017. This investigation allows for a comparative perspective on how French naturalisation policies are implemented at the street-level. The fieldwork has mainly consisted in the non-participatory observation of assimilation interviews as well as 17 semi-structured interviews with prefectural agents conducting assimilation interviews. Nine of these interviews were conducted at PR1, three at PR2 and five at PR3. We have also collected documents shedding light on how the condition of ‘adhesion’ is translated into soft law (guidelines; guides to good practice; interview grids). In addition to the bureaucratic practices of assimilation interviews,⁵ the article thus combines the analysis of publicly accessible documents (public declarations; laws, decrees and circulars; case law) and of a literature issued by the French central administration to help civil servants at the local level. The combination of these sources allows testing the normative impact of the public defence of assimilation and common values on the everyday negotiation of national boundaries at the street-level of an institution (Bertossi 2016).

In this article, we firstly consider whether the implementation of the ‘assimilation condition’ reveals a perfectionist approach to immigrant integration, justifying incursion into people’s conceptions of a ‘good life’ to ensure that these comply with what the state presents as the ‘common good’. We thus analyse whether the state promotion of the ‘values of the Republic’ in the French context points to the larger moralisation of citizenship that scholars have noticed in other domestic settings (Schinkel 2008; Kipling 2015; Mouritsen et al. 2019b). By requiring that immigrants sincerely endorse certain universal principles transformed into particular beliefs and by allowing bureaucrats to conduct checks on this endorsement, the French state would indeed legitimise a ‘moral’ conception of integration that goes beyond respecting legal norms and political rules.

In the second section, we examine whether the rise of the rhetoric of ‘Republican values’ in the French naturalisation procedure results into a culturalisation of citizenship that has exclusionary effects on specific minorities and/or ethnic groups, while simultaneously homogenising the citizenry on a cultural basis. According to this hypothesis, the emphasis placed on the preservation of the majority culture’s values in the moralisation process leads to the designation of certain groups – particularly Muslims – as more suspect than others of not sharing the collective ethos seen as constitutive of national identity (Tonkens and Duyvendak 2016; Farris 2017; Mouritsen et al. 2019b).

Conditioning naturalisation upon adhesion to ‘Republican values’: the moralisation of French citizenship

Before being enshrined in the article 21–24 of the Civil Code in 2011, the ‘values of the Republic’ emerged as a category of public discourse in the 1980s. ‘National republican’

intellectual figures (Lacroix 2002), such as Régis Debray or Alain Finkielkraut, invoked the notion to support an elective conception of the nation, following which membership in the national community should be conditioned by the endorsement of its values (Chabal 2015, Chapters 2 and 3). The notion gained traction in integration and citizenship policies at the end of the 1980s, more specifically during the debates over a new nationality law in the Marceau Long commission (1987-1988), as well as in the introduction of the ‘Welcome and Integration Contract’ (*Contrat d’Accueil et d’Intégration* or CAI) in 2003 (Lochak 2006; Hachimi-Alaoui 2012). Interestingly, in the reports of the *Haut Conseil à l’Intégration* (HCI – High Authority on Integration),⁶ we notice a shift from the promotion of ‘political’ integration (HCI 2003, 110) to a more value-based approach to integration (HCI 2009, 2012). More specifically, the HCI claimed that *knowledge* of the ‘values of the Republic’ should be expected from early arrived immigrants, while *adhesion* should be required from permanent residents or applicants for citizenship (HCI 2009, 6). After the 2003 law, which created the requirement to have ‘knowledge of the rights and duties of the French citizen’ for naturalisation, members of the HCI elaborated an interview grid to help prefectural agents assess whether the ‘assimilation condition’ has been satisfied. In this grid, knowledge and adhesion to ‘Republican values’ were not differentiated and most of the questions – still in use in present assimilation interviews – were meant to test applicants’ knowledge (e.g. ‘What is the French capital?’, ‘Do women have voting rights?’, ‘Are you free to practice your own religion?’). However, other questions were more ambiguous as it was not entirely clear whether they were meant to test applicants’ knowledge or whether they aimed at controlling private beliefs and behaviours, as analysed below.

The introduction of the requirement of adhesion to the ‘values of the Republic’ for naturalisation in the Civil Code in 2011 marked the diffusion of more intrusive controls in prefectural boards, going as far as to check applicants’ personal convictions. Questions that featured in the interview grid elaborated by the HCI in 2009 took on a more inquisitive formulation in some prefectures. More precisely, questions that were meant to test applicants’ knowledge of the law were transformed into interrogations of applicants’ private behaviours and beliefs. For example, one question from the 2009 HCI grid on the liberty to consult the doctor of one’s own choice, e.g. ‘Is your husband/wife free to consult the doctor of his/her own choice?’, took a more personal tone in 2011 prefectural grids: ‘*Would you accept* that a doctor of the opposite sex treats your partner?’ (emphasis is ours).⁷ Other questions also enquired into applicants’ personal convictions regarding the legitimacy of the law and its moral foundations: ‘*What do you think about* the law that forbids the wearing of the headscarf at school?’ or ‘Can you define secularism [*laïcité*]? Is it a *good principle*?’ (emphasis is ours).⁸ With the introduction of such questions, bureaucrats were invited to control the conformity of applicants’ personal opinions in relation to gender equality and *laïcité* presented as ‘essential values of the Republic’.

After a parliamentary report pointed to important disparities in the implementation of assimilation interviews (Assemblée nationale 2012), the French government sought to homogenise prefectural practices by issuing new policy documents and organising training for prefectural staff.⁹ Despite this top-down effort towards more homogeneity, significant variation remains in terms of the implementation of assimilation interviews and the strong perfectionist meaning the adhesion to the ‘values of the Republic’ took on in the early 2010s persists to this day.¹⁰ The fieldwork research indeed confirms

that, for a significant proportion of the bureaucrats interviewed (both prefectural agents and senior administrative officers), the evaluation of adhesion is not limited to the mere knowledge of said values but aims to probe whether or not there is sincere endorsement.

Many of the prefectural agents agree that asking the question ‘Do you adhere to Republican values?’ directly is pointless. According to them, measuring the quality of adhesion is a matter of ‘feeling’ and they consider themselves entitled to dig into applicants’ privacy to detect what they conceive of as indicators of ‘good’ vs. ‘bad’ assimilation. Senior administrative officers encourage inquisitive practices to make sure that applicants sincerely adhere to ‘Republican values’. For instance, the head of the office for foreigners at PR1 insisted on the necessity of digging into applicants’ privacy, and further justified the control of their opinions:

How do you assess adhesion to the values of the Republic if you don’t have a few more specific leads? [Questions] need [she insists] to be on privacy, which is why assimilation interviews are confidential, and no one other than the agent and the applicant should attend. Because we go into privacy, into applicants’ ideas, even if it is not transcribed [in the minutes of the interview]. (Interview with D., head of the office for foreigners at PR1, 06/07/2017)¹¹

Yet, there is no unanimity among prefectural agents as to how assimilation interviews should be conducted, nor what their content should be. One prefectural agent interviewed at PR1, for instance, disagreed with one of her colleagues who – in her opinion – went too far into privacy:

She goes into details where we [i.e. the colleague who shares the office with her and herself], we don’t go into. She really goes into people’s privacy. I don’t think it’s our job. We are here to find out whether they [i.e. naturalisation applicants] are integrated into French culture, and whether they know France at all. But me, go and ask questions like, “Are your girls allowed to go out?”, “Do they play sports?”. It’s not our job. (Interview with Z., administrative officer at PR1, 05/01/2017)

Although the reluctance expressed here by this administrative officer was not widely shared at PR1, it still shows that bureaucrats disagree over what assimilation entails and how far its control can go.

The question of whether, and how far, the bureaucrats conducting ‘assimilation interviews’ are ready to go into privacy to assess adhesion to the ‘values of the Republic’ is of crucial importance as it has direct consequences on the decision to grant citizenship. Indeed, the information that prefectural agents collect to evaluate applicants’ adhesion to ‘Republican values’ is used to motivate decisions to refuse naturalisation, as recent case law shows. In 2015, a decision from the Administrative Court of Appeal in Nantes – a jurisdiction that specialises in nationality law – confirmed the rejection of a naturalisation applicant on the grounds that:

Mr. A. says he is obliged to conform to Republican values, and in particular to secularism, for fear of penal sanction; he does not appear to be assimilated to *French customs and traditions* (...); Mr. A. has expressed his will to enter the French community *only to follow the example of his wife and of his brothers and sisters*; Mr. A. (...) recognises the removal of the veil in public places, especially at school, *only because it is prohibited by law*.¹²

This type of decision legitimises the idea that anyone applying for French nationality should not reduce the 2004 law prohibiting the wearing of religious symbols at school

to a simple legal norm. Applicants need to demonstrate that they adhere to the value-based dimension attached to this law and share it personally, as an inner conviction, if they want to be part of the national community as citizens. The injunction of adhesion to the 'values of the Republic' requires that naturalisation applicants – and some more than others, as the following section shows – proclaim their attachment to the common values that make the law a 'good' law, based on a 'good' vision of the world. Knowing and abiding by the law is not enough.

While such legal and administrative practices may be similar to policies developed by other European countries under the label of 'civic integration' (see Goodman 2010), the French case presents contextual specificities that reveal strong historical continuities stemming from both the French colonial past and a moralistic conception of the Republican state and the citizenry, originated in the French Revolutionary philosophy *à la* Rousseau. These two legacies converge in the persisting importance attached to the way applicants behave in the private sphere as a crucial element of appreciation to assess their assimilation. As early as the 1930s, the French colonial administration in Senegal used questionnaires that presented the control of assimilation as an 'analysis of applicants' intimate self' (see Hajjat 2012, 71). At the same period, in Indochina, similar questionnaires enquired into how applicants dressed themselves, how they organised their house, hygiene, etc. More specifically, for both the applicant and his wife (women's nationality being at the time entirely dependent on the husband's nationality), bureaucrats were invited to '(...) provide any concrete and tangible observations in order to assess their appropriation of the norms characterising the French way of life, their desire and capacity to genuinely adapt to these norms' (see Saada 2005, 223). In the French colonial context of the 1930s, evaluating assimilation meant measuring a sincere endorsement of certain standards of civility presented as typically French. Questionnaires used in the *métropole* over the 1920s/1930s also enquired into applicants' 'customs' and 'ways of life' to determine one's degree of assimilation. In addition to fluency in French, bureaucrats were invited to conduct checks on applicants' social relations (whether they spent more time with French people than with foreigners). These questions were not limited to the applicant but extended to his family members (children in particular, see Gauci 1999, 190).

While the expression of a perfectionist approach to immigrant integration is not new in the French naturalisation process and precedes the emergence of the rhetoric of the 'values of the Republic', the contemporary emphasis placed on the (sincere) adhesion to said values as a condition to become part of the national community contributes to intensifying the moral dimension of French citizenship. Over the last 30 years, the control of applicants' personal conceptions of the 'good life' and their conformity to the values shaping the nation as a 'moral community' has become a central feature of French naturalisation policies. This intensification of the role played by criteria of moral conformity to separate undesirable from desirable applicants should be seen more as an incremental change than the expression of a real 'turn'.

The culturalisation of French citizenship: Muslims suspected of being opposed to the 'values of the Republic'

Due to the emphasis placed by the 'Republican values' rhetoric on similarities and differences between the 'national ethos' and other 'value systems' and related ways of life, the

control of the ‘assimilation condition’ is likely to result into exclusionary effects on specific minorities and/or ethnic groups. These effects have long been discussed in literature, and in particular the possible targeting of Muslim applicants or, at least, applicants categorised as such. As early as the 1980s/1990s, the sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad underlined this targeting, analysing the way the ‘values of the Republic’ are invoked in French public discourse:

(...) we have never spoken so much in France of ‘Republican values’ as to denounce the deviant behaviour of Muslim immigrants with respect to the social and political morals of French society: wearing the headscarf, discriminations against women, political use of religion which we designate under the name of fundamentalism, etc. (...). [The immigrant] who is aware of the suspicion that weighs upon him and from which he cannot escape needs to dispel it continuously, to prevent and dissuade it by means of repeated demonstrations of his good faith and good will (Sayad 1999, 404).

The above observation made by Sayad has proved consistent over time. Analysing the uses of the ‘values of the Republic’ by the HCI over the 2000s, Beaugé and Hajjat (2014) have noticed that the alleged lack of integration applies mainly to Muslim immigrants and their descendants. Secularism or ‘*laïcité*’ as well as equality between men and women have been defined as ‘essential Republican values’ and put into contrast with social practices related to Islam, especially the wearing of ‘the veil’ (Scott 2007; Laborde 2008).

The construction of Muslims as representatives of a culture that would conflict with so-called ‘Republican values’ is clearly visible in the framing of the assimilation requirement in ministerial instructions. As early as the 1990s, non-adhesion to the ‘values of the Republic’ emerged as a suspicion directed specifically at Muslims in the ministerial instructions sent to prefectural boards on the implementation of the assimilation condition. The first occurrences of the notion applied either to male individuals that the public authorities considered as ‘Islamist fundamentalists’ or women wearing the *hijab*, perceived as a potential sign of separatism or ‘*communautarisme*’ (see Hajjat 2010a, 2010b). More recent ministerial instructions also abound with references to practices traditionally used in public discourse to ‘otherise’ Muslims as members of a culture that is incompatible with ‘Republican values’. This is perceptible in the interview grids used in French prefectural boards in the early 2010s that we mentioned earlier (with questions on the freedom to choose one’s doctor for example), but also in a circular written by the former Minister of Immigration, Integration, National Identity and Solidarity Development, Eric Besson, in 2011 to clarify the situations denoting a ‘lack of cultural assimilation’. Although the document remains silent regarding the sex or the religion of the persons it incriminates for not sharing the French ‘way of life’, the practices denounced (refusal to shake hands with someone from the opposite sex, confinement of women at home, forced marriages, etc.) refer indirectly to Muslim men whose hostility to women’s rights is presupposed:

The principle of equality between men and women is key among the essential values of the French Republic. Therefore, the daily adoption of discriminatory attitudes towards women, such as refusing to shake hands with them, reveals a lack of assimilation; *such a way of life*, even if it is based on religious precepts, is *incompatible with the values of the Republic*. The same applies to the abusive authority of the declarant on his wife, his daughters, or his sisters, marked for example by the interdiction to participate in social life, by home

confinement, forced marriage, the interdiction to remain in education, or the interdiction to sign the Welcome and Integration Contract. (Ministère de l'Intérieur, *Circulaire n° NOR-IOCCN1114306C*, 2011. Emphasis is ours)

The 'Guidance for assimilation interviews', developed by the central administration in 2015 and 2016 for the use of prefectural agents, adopts the same formulations as the circular written by Eric Besson in 2011 and reveals a striking continuity in ministerial instructions when it comes to 'adhesion to Republican values'.

Recent case law also reveals that rejections of naturalisation based on an alleged 'lack of adhesion to Republican values' focus on practices that are frequently used to otherise Muslims in Western societies. In previous research, Hajjat (2012: 236) noticed that three situations typically characterise the 'lack of cultural assimilation' in French jurisprudence: polygamy, wearing the *hijab/niqab*, and being suspected of membership of an Islamist organisation.¹³ This still holds true in recent decisions taken by administrative courts. Updated research in the case law of the Administrative Court of Appeal of Nantes shows that, since 2012, the lack of adhesion to the 'values of the Republic' has been invoked at least nine times either against male applicants suspected of living in a situation of polygamy, or female applicants suspected of being themselves in relations with polygamous men; six times against applicants suspected of participation within 'Islamist' movements; three times against individuals who provided instrumental motivations in their naturalisation applications.¹⁴ Additional research in the jurisprudence of the Council of State, covering the period from 1998 to 2022, highlights that out of 35 decisions based on a lack of assimilation for 'rejection' or 'lack of adhesion to the essential values of the Republic', more than half (20) are based on comments and/or attitudes deemed hostile to secularism or to equality between men and women, while 11 are based on notes from the intelligence services incriminating the links of the applicants with 'Islamism' or 'Islamic fundamentalism'.¹⁵

Table 1. Decisions of naturalisation refusals based on an alleged lack of adhesion to Republican values, appealed before the Administrative Court of Appeal of Nantes (2012-2022).

Motivations	Decisions
Polygamy	N° 17NT02281, 23/07/2018 N° 16NT03197, 29/01/2018 N° 16NT02312, 14/11/2017 N° 15NT03368, 13/02/2017 N° 15NT01724, 29/03/2016 N° 15NT01402, 26/01/2016 N° 15NT01407, 26/01/2016 N° 14NT03235, 20/10/2015 N° 12NT01246, 18/01/2013
Applicants suspected of participation within 'Islamist' movements	N° 16NT00558, 18/09/2017 N° 16NT00699, 08/03/2017 N° 14NT03056, 10/07/2015 N° 14NT00996, 14/11/2014 N° 13NT01208, 25/10/2013 N° 12NT00441, 07/12/2012
Individuals who provided instrumental motivations in their naturalisation applications	N° 16NT00128, 09/01/2017 N° 15NT02287, 18/07/2016 N° 14NT03291, 10/07/2015

Table 2. Decisions of naturalisation refusals based on an alleged lack of adhesion to Republican values, appealed before the Council of State (1998-2022).

Motivations	Decisions
Links of the applicants with 'Islamism' or 'Islamic fundamentalism'	N° 411499, 20/12/2017
	N° 301711, 13/02/2008
	N° 279543, 13/11/2006
	N° 294072, 13/06/2006
	N° 224538, 29/07/2002
	N° 209577, 31/01/2001
	N° 203987, 20/12/2000
	N° 184713, 09/06/1999
	N° 178449, 07/06/1999
	N° 187526, 07/06/1999
	N° 175186, 14/12/1998
	(decision based on 'involvement within (...) a movement promoting principles that contradict the essential values of the French society', without further indication on the movement incriminated)
	N° 419662, 13/02/2019
	N°459548, 22/06/2022
Comments and/or attitudes deemed hostile to secularism or to equality between men and women	N°436763, 27/11/2020
	N° 436548, 09/11/2020
	N° 411561, 27/05/2019
	N° 418734, 05/04/2019
	N° 417523, 05/10/2018
	N° 414832, 04/07/2018
	N° 411735, 20/12/2017
	N° 410276, 07/12/2017
	N° 409527, 04/12/2017
	N° 403452, 17/05/2017
	N° 385652, 25/02/2015
	N° 377572, 20/10/2014
	N° 366548, 05/05/2014
	N° 365587, 27/11/2013
(decisions taken without any reference to assimilation interviews)	
N° 412705, 14/12/2018	
N° 412060, 14/12/2018	
N° 350119, 27/06/2012	
N° 297355, 21/12/2007	
Polygamy	N° 443462, 03/02/2022
	N° 434778, 25/03/2020
No further indication on the motivation	N° 417585, 31/12/2018

Both the observation of 'assimilation interviews' in prefectures and the interviews with prefectural agents reveal ethnocultural biases against Muslims in the control of adhesion to 'Republican values'. For example, one of the prefectural agents interviewed at PR1 explained that he checked for adhesion to 'Republican values' only in certain situations, i.e. when he noticed that the applicant wore 'Oriental clothes' as opposed to 'Western clothes':

Agent: If the applicant is wearing Western clothes, if children go to the public school, etc., we don't bother too much with those questions [on adhesion to 'Republican values']. However, if the applicant is wearing Oriental clothes, etc., clothes from the country of origin, we ask questions about activities with the partner (...). We move on to children: "Do you take care of your children?". We also ask: "If you go to the swimming pool, do the mixed changing rooms bother you?", "If you go to the doctor and the doctor is a man, does that bother you?", etc., etc. ... In these situations, we concentrate on adhesion to Republican values. (Interview with D., administrative officer at PR1, 05/01/2017)

In the three prefectures where fieldwork was conducted, several administrative officers explained that certain nationalities pose a specific problem vis-à-vis certain practices and attitudes set up as national values. So-called 'Arab' countries were often opposed to European countries. At PR3, the Moroccan partner of a French citizen came for an interview as part of his application for citizenship acquisition through marriage. Following the prefectural agent who conducted the interview, the applicant's nationality of origin obliged her to ask questions on adhesion to the 'values of the Republic', while this was not necessary for the British man who came up before:

Agent: Well, there's someone coming from Morocco now, so I'm going to focus more on equality between men and women.

Researcher: Oh, why is that?

Agent: Well ... in Morocco, it is not like England [in reference to the previous applicant], I didn't need to ask questions on gender relations ...

R.: Okay, do you mean that you ask those questions only when applicants have certain nationalities?

A.: No, no, that's not what I meant ... but, in a certain sense, yes. (Interview with A., administrative officer at PR3, 20/07/2017.)

Another prefectural agent interviewed at PR3 similarly declared that he did not need to ask questions on adhesion to 'Republican values' when applicants come from Western countries. Quoting Samuel Huntington, this agent connected questions on 'Republican values' with the 'clash of civilisations':

Agent: The common values with countries like Holland, England, Australia ... it's all the same, there is no need to ask questions [on Republican values].

R.: Do you mean that the condition of "adhesion to Republican values" applies specifically to certain nationalities?

Agent: It's a question of civilisations, it's a matter of clash of civilisations. Who wrote the book about this again? [the interviewer asks the agent if he is referring to Samuel Huntington and the agent confirms] Well he saw it right! (Interview with F., administrative officer at PR3, 20/07/2017.)

Administrative officers of a higher hierarchical rank also shared the view that certain nationalities associated with Muslim immigrants pose a specific problem of adhesion to 'Republican values' and justified the targeting against them. The head of the office for foreigners at PR1 for instance explained:

Civil servant: We see applicants who clearly don't respect the values of the Republic [insisting on "clearly"]. We ask questions about the place of women in society and, well, we find out that she has no place. We know very well when people have a problem of adhesion. What is difficult is to assess what they mean by 'values of the Republic' [i.e. how applicants understand those values]. And I think that the condition of adhesion to Republican values was created with this objective [i.e. to find out how women's equality is perceived]. (...)

R.: Would you say that adhesion to Republican values is mainly about secularism and gender equality?

CS: Yes, exactly. Some nationalities – I am not afraid to say it – some nationalities have a real problem with the place of women in society. When we are told that women have no rights, there is little doubt that people don't adhere to the values of the Republic.

R.: So, you think that some nationalities create more problems than others?

CS: Yes, but it is not only about Maghreb, uh? However, Maghreb features among the countries that create problems. (Interview with D., head of the office for foreigners at PR1, 06/07/2017)

Suspensions of non-adherence to 'Republican values' apply to both men and women perceived as contributing to the rise of 'political Islam' within French society. Prefectural agents often look for indicators in applicants' appearance to detect potential signs of non-adherence. Men who have beards or marks left on the forehead by prayer are particularly suspect, while women who wear the *hijab* will often be subject to interrogations on secularism and gender equality. At PR1, women wearing the *hijab* were even subject to a series of tests meant to check whether they adhered to 'essential Republican values', such as shaking hands with a man or removing their headscarves in front of prefectural agents (men or women). In the minutes that the prefectural staff had to fill in at PR1 for every naturalisation application, agents were invited to answer a question dealing with the 'wearing of religious symbols' and they had to tick a box to indicate whether women wearing the 'veil' (*sic*) had agreed to removing it in front of them. These instructions had been introduced at PR1 by the former head of the office for foreigners, but the senior executives interviewed during fieldwork had not changed them. The head of the office for foreigners at PR1 further justified the preservation of such instructions to adapt to a generational change that she perceived in the practice of Islam among French immigrants. Following her, a benevolent Islam characterised older generations of immigrants, while younger generations were more subject to 'fundamentalism'. She explained that she could see this change in the dress style of Muslim women. She opposed the 'good' *hijab* – colourful and covering less – that she identified as an attribute of the older generations, and the 'bad' *hijab* – black and covering a great deal more – that she considered as an attribute of the younger generations (interview with D., head of the office for foreigners at PR1, 06/07/2017).¹⁶

Importantly, not every prefectural agent interviewed at PR1 asked Muslim women to unveil themselves. The justifications provided against this practice were often based on legal considerations (e.g. refusing to unveil oneself cannot be considered sufficient grounds for rejecting a naturalisation application) or on instructions prefectural agents received from their superiors (e.g. the central administration asked prefectural agents to stop the practice). At PR2 and PR3, responses provided by prefectural staff as to whether women wearing the *hijab* were subject to similar injunctions were somewhat ambivalent. All the prefectural agents interviewed at PR2 explained that the only circumstance in which naturalisation applicants can be expected to unveil themselves is when prefectural agents need to confirm their identity, but this has nothing to do with the assessment of assimilation and adherence to 'Republican values'. At PR3, senior executives provided similar explanations. However, one of the civil servants conducting assimilation interviews said that he sometimes 'played' with women applicants that he thought 'covered their faces too much' by asking them to remove their *hijab* (interview with T., administrative officer at PR3, 17/07/2017). Another agent explained that, though he

had never asked any woman to unveil herself while conducting interviews, he might do so in the future as he felt ‘offended’ by applicants who – in his eyes – affirm a ‘political vision of Islam’ (interview with F., administrative officer at PR3, 17/07/2017).

Such administrative practices and representations concerning the wearing of the ‘veil’ contribute to the targeting of applicants whose Muslim identity is associated with the danger of ‘political Islam’. They remain grounded on the presupposition that there is an incompatibility between Islam and the ‘Republican values’, which was already at the core of the French colonial state.

To be treated as full ‘French citizens’, populations of the colonies needed to apply for naturalisation and renounce their local legal status. In Algeria, Muslims were excluded from full French citizenship, and had to renounce their ‘Muslim personal status’ to naturalise (Blévis 2001; Saada 2003).¹⁷ The condition of assimilation (previously called ‘criteria of civilisation’ or ‘requirements of civilisation’) played a major function in the perpetuation of the ethnocultural hierarchies structuring the French empire (Hajjat 2012). Proving one’s assimilation meant showing that one had renounced certain cultural practices that were associated with indigeneity (Saada 2005). Applicants needed to demonstrate that they behaved according to the standards of ‘French civility’ (*civilité française*) and very few were granted French citizenship (Blévis 2001).

The existence of such a legacy reveals that the contemporary implementation of the ‘assimilation condition’ echoes the colonial construction of Muslims as members of a radically different culture. The all-pervasive reference to ‘Republican values’ in the French politics of citizenship over the last 30 years might well correspond to an innovation in political discourse and administrative practice, but one that feeds into pre-existing processes delineating the boundaries of the national community along ethnocultural lines.

Conclusion: The stability of the French naturalisation policy

In this article, we have explored the recent emphasis on adherence to the ‘values of the Republic’ within French naturalisation policies and examined the conceptions of citizenship and integration that this emphasis contributes to spreading. Our findings align with interpretations of the ‘civic integration’ paradigm as a policy framework that both moralises and culturalises citizenship, underlining the moral and cultural requirements for membership in the national community (Schinkel 2008; Tonkens and Duyvendak 2016). The French-style ‘politics of common values’ reflects this paradigm by: (1) expanding the standards of ‘good citizenship’ to personal values and behaviours, (2) shifting the responsibility of integration from the state to the individual, (3) encouraging ‘desired mind sets and practices through incentives, or through more moralistic, disciplinary interpellation of individuals’, and (4) linking integration attempts and immigration control through the ‘screening of “desirables”’ (Mouritsen, Jensen, and Larin 2019a, 601). All of these processes are aimed towards reproducing the value system declared to be foundational of the national identity.

However, the perfectionist approach to immigrant integration does not represent a ‘turn’ in the specific case of France. Indeed, French citizenship remains grounded on a ‘civic republican’ model inherited from the Revolution, which gives strong moral

connotations to national membership (Renaut 2005; Wahnich 1998). Joining the national community through naturalisation requires compliance with standards defining how immigrants should behave as ‘good citizens’, showing ‘moral virtues’ and sharing ‘national values’. This approach to integration is not a novelty, even though – as shown in this article – the current rhetoric of the ‘values of the Republic’ openly endorsed by political and institutional actors makes it more explicit.

Although a universalist ambition characterises these ‘Republican values’, the way they are invoked and controlled in the implementation of naturalisation policies shows how they can be used to discriminate between applicants and justify refusals based on a criterion of civilisational conformity that perpetuates ethnocultural stereotypes. Our investigation indeed demonstrates that the moralisation of citizenship is inseparable from a process of othering that associates Muslim applicants with a value system perceived not only as different from ‘ours’ but incompatible with that of the French Republic.

We thus observe a twofold process of moralisation and culturalisation of citizenship in the sense that the values that are meant to be at the core of the national community serve to designate and exclude immigrants from a presumably opposite culture. To meet the assimilation requirement, Muslim applicants (or at least people perceived as such) must prove that their personal convictions and attitudes are in conformity with the ‘national ethos’, and that they sincerely believe in the goodness of the common values. Interviews with administrative officers and observations of assimilation interviews in prefectural boards show how pervasive is the idea of a ‘civilisation clash’ *à la* Huntington between Islam and French (or Western) culture.

Compared to other countries (such as the UK or Belgium analysed by Sredanovic 2022), the French system gives a wide margin of interpretation to street-level bureaucrats in terms of how integration should be understood and measured. In this paper, we provide several examples that illustrate this margin of manoeuvre (e.g. limiting the assimilation interview to questions on knowledge of French society and avoiding digging into applicants’ privacy, or refusing to ask women wearing the headscarf to unveil themselves). However, we clearly see a strong continuum between the conceptions of integration that we find in the guidelines issued by the Ministry of the Interior to prefectural agents and those advocated by prefectural agents themselves. The guidelines that prefectural agents receive contribute to legitimising the control (and exclusion) of naturalisation applicants based on conceptions of integration that have strong perfectionist features. By insisting on the continuum between government guidelines and administrative practices that push very far the control of applicants’ personal convictions and predominantly target Muslims, we want to emphasise that these practices should not be understood as the result of individual agents’ interpretation or personal biases but rather as a systemic issue. This highlights the importance of examining and addressing institutional factors that perpetuate inquisitive and potentially discriminatory screenings in the implementation of immigration policies, beyond the specific case of French naturalisation policies.

Notes

1. Available research (Spire 2005; Hajjat 2012; Mazouz 2017) on the French naturalisation process is all based on data that have been collected before the reconfiguration of the assimilation condition in 2011 and did not fully engage with the comparative debates that we address in this paper.
2. Before 2011, prefectural agents were responsible for the evaluation of naturalisation applicants' proficiency in French, which was the main purpose of assimilation interviews. This changed in 2011 with the introduction of language tests and diplomas as proof of applicants' proficiency in French and the rewording of the assimilation condition in the French Civil Code to include a requirement of 'adhesion to the essential principles and values of the French Republic'.
3. This fieldwork research was conducted as part of a doctoral thesis approved by the Sciences Po School of Research (Fargues 2019), and executed in line with the applicable regulations. Access to prefectural boards was officially granted by the heads of staff within each locality. All the interviews were preceded by an explanation of the details of the research and formal verbal consent by the interviewees; most were audio-recorded, except when the interviewee preferred not to be recorded. In all circumstances, before each interview and observation, civil servants were reminded that they were under no obligation to participate and that they could withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions.
4. To protect the anonymity of the civil servants working in these services, we are not naming the precise places.
5. The paper also draws on observations of the interviews required for applicants for registration through marriage with a French citizen, in order to compare them with the mandatory assimilation interviews in the ordinary naturalisation process (called naturalisation by decree – '*naturalisation par décret*' – in French law).
6. The High Authority on Integration (*Haut Conseil à l'Intégration* – HCI) is an advisory and review body, working in conjunction with the Prime Minister, which provided policy recommendations on questions related to integration of immigrants and citizens of foreign origin. It was dissolved in 2012.
7. These questions are taken from the grids that two prefectural boards, located within Paris area, used in 2011. A copy of these documents is available in Fargues 2019, 537–538.
8. All the policy documents mentioned in the article were collected during fieldwork.
9. These policy documents included the 'Guidance for assimilation interviews' (*Guide de l'entretien d'assimilation*), developed by the central administration as early as September 2013, and the 'Ministerial Instructions' (*Orientations ministérielles*), a 60-pages booklet first edited in 2015 to explain how the different naturalisation criteria should be interpreted in prefectures. Several training sessions in prefectures were also organised nationwide by the SDANF from March 2015 to March 2016.
10. For example, some prefectural boards still conduct second assimilation interviews, using the same grid that the central administration issued in 2010–2011. Others do not, claiming that they received instructions from the central administration to stop this practice. The discretion that prefectures retain to organise the timing and content of assimilation interviews is likely to have an impact on the number of rejections of applications, with important variations from one board to another. For instance, at PR1, in 2015 and 2016, the number of unfavourable decisions invoking a 'lack of cultural assimilation' counted for more than 30% of the total of unfavourable decisions, while they represented only 16% of the unfavourable decisions at PR3 (Fargues 2019).
11. All translations of interviews and policy documents have been done by the authors.
12. Administrative Court of Appeal in Nantes, n° 15NT01542, 27/11/2015 (emphasis is ours).
13. The notion of 'Islamist organisation', as it is used in French case law on citizenship, has a very broad reach, and applies not only to organisations that international bodies such as the Council of Europe consider as 'terrorist' (Al Qaeda, Hezbollah, etc.), but also to cultic or cultural associations the French intelligence services label as 'Islamist' (see Fargues 2019).
14. These results were obtained through research combining the words 'naturalisation', 'adhesion' and 'values' in the database of the Administrative Court of Appeal of Nantes accessible from the website legifrance.fr for the period 2012–2022. The full list of decisions is presented in Table 1.

15. As in the previous case, the results were obtained by combining the same words, ‘acquisition’, ‘nationality’ and ‘values’, in the database of the Council of State available on legifrance.fr. Two decisions (Council of State, 25/03/2020, 434778 and 03/02/2022, 443462) were based on polygamy, and another (Council of State, 13/02/2019, 419662) on ‘involvement within and adhesion to the ideas of a movement promoting principles that contradict the essential values of the French society, in particular equality between men and women’, but does not provide any further indication on the movement being incriminated. The full list of decisions is presented in [Table 2](#).
16. On this opposition between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ *hijabs*, see Hajjat [2010b](#).
17. Interestingly, French citizens who converted to Islam were not able to pass from a ‘civil law status’ to a ‘Muslim personal status’ (Saada [2003](#), 210).

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