

who counts as “them?”: racism and virtue in the united states and france

In the United States, black Americans are the typical targets of discrimination. In France, the victims are usually Arab immigrants. In both cases, prejudice against minorities has less to do with the color or national origin of the ostracized than with the need of whites and natives to preserve their own sense of moral self-worth.

Both France and the United States had revolutions that championed equal treatment, freedom, democracy and human rights, and each has claimed a special destiny as an exemplary nation. For instance, the French historian Michelet once described France as a “universal fatherland” whose role was to “help every nation be born to liberty.” More recently, 9 out of 10 Americans told a national survey that we should teach our children that America from its beginning “has had a destiny to set an example for other nations.” Yet both societies have produced high levels of racial violence and hatred.

In the United States, the progress to full equality for African Americans has been exceptionally slow and painful. Over the past 50 years, though the movement to integrate blacks into American society has celebrated many victories, racial segregation persists. The Civil Rights Project at Harvard recently found that school segregation has increased since 1986, and rates of black marriage to non-blacks remain low. In France, 28 percent of voters have supported the openly racist, anti-Semitic and xenophobic National Front political party at least once since it became a national player in 1983.

To understand these contradictions, we need to examine how members of different racial groups see one another. To that end, I have spent considerable time talking with ordinary Americans—blue-collar workers and lower level white-collar workers—and have become convinced that racist beliefs arise from the moral frameworks that people use to evaluate one another. Racist people, unlike more tolerant people, believe that members of a particular racial minority fail to meet these moral standards. In France, the main objects of critique are North African immigrants, while in the United States they are blacks. Nonetheless, in both nations, prejudice arises from a set of specific codes about what makes for a moral life.

In the early 1990s, I interviewed 150 working-class men living in the suburbs of Paris and New York. Instead of asking them directly about racism, I invited them to describe the kinds of people they like and dislike, the kinds of people they feel similar to and different from, and the kinds of people to whom



A poster for the National Front party exhorts French citizens to defend themselves from the dangers of electing immigrants to government positions. Twenty-eight percent of French voters have supported this openly anti-immigrant party at least once in the past 20 years.

they feel inferior and superior. The moral order through which workers rank others emerges when, for example, they declare that, of course, it is more important to be honest than to be refined, or that money cannot measure a person’s value. In both countries, when defining “people like us,” the men referred to basic moral qualities that allow them to meet the challenges of their own lives—for instance, a strong work ethic

and sense of responsibility. Workers use these virtues, which are central to their sense of who they are, to condemn other groups who they perceive as falling short—for the French, typically Arabs, and for Americans, typically blacks. While American and French workers often draw moral boundaries and racial boundaries with the same distinctions, the two nationalities emphasize somewhat different aspects of morality. White Americans value self-reliance and object that blacks fail to demonstrate self-discipline. French natives worry that Arab culture is incompatible with Western values, and that Arabs get more than their fair share of governmental subsidies.



Photo by Arthur S. Siegel, Farm Security Administration, Library of Congress

Detroit, Michigan, 1942. When asked to describe “their type of folks,” American workers are much more likely than French workers to mention race or skin color.

the american “them” are black

Tony Sansone is single, owns a two-family house, dreams of driving a tractor-trailer, and says he is successful because he made it to 30 and has always been able to feed himself. He has long hair, makes a point of only wearing blue jeans, and describes himself as a “renegade.” He works in a refrigerated dairy warehouse, where he loads and unloads trucks, and he sometimes delivers sour cream on Long Island. At work, he is the only white man. Tony contrasts his goals and work ethic with those of his co-workers:

Black people, they’re happy they’ve got a job where they make a couple of bucks and they can go out and drink or do whatever they want. Like the guys I work

with. They’re happy working in the warehouse and to them they’ll do it the rest of their lives. I don’t even want to drive the trucks. Hopefully, like in 10 or 15 years, I won’t have to work. Hopefully, my family townhouse will make more money... Maybe I’ll get my own truck. They don’t want to move up... Like when 5 p.m. comes, everybody punches out and goes home and I’m saying “What else do you need done?”

When asked to distinguish between “the type of people they like” and “the type of people they don’t like much,” many white American workers say that they like people who strive to be self-sufficient. Frank Thompson from Hempstead, Long Island, said that if he had to draw a line between superior and inferior people, he would draw it against “some people out there [who] I think could do better and don’t try. There’s nothing wrong if you don’t want to become something, but don’t blame somebody else for it.”

Another worker from Linden, New Jersey, who does not have a college degree, said that he feels superior to “people who have no control over their lives. If a person just does nothing to help themselves, I am very hard on these people.” After declaring proudly that he is a diehard Republican, one of the men I talked to explained that being a Republican means that you “Don’t give anything for nothing. Incentive... Go get a job... [We should not] make it so easy to stay on unemployment and welfare.” Another man explained that he is a conservative Republican because he does not “like people who try to take advantage of things and take, take, and give nothing back.” These men are angry that they have to pay high taxes to support the poor who “don’t work at all and get everything for free.” They often stress traditional aspects of morality, such as the Ten Commandments and the traditional work ethic.

Most of the white American workers I spoke with did not distinguish clearly between drawing moral distinctions and drawing racial ones. The rhetoric they use to draw boundaries against blacks is strikingly similar to that they use to reject the poor: an alleged lack of work ethic and sense of responsibility. They also claim that blacks fail to educate their children properly, particularly in moral matters. A civil servant I interviewed accused blacks of “getting away with murder... with things that I wouldn’t even think of doing.” An electronic technician saw African Americans as “having a tendency to... try to get off doing less, the least... possible as long as they still keep the job, where whites will put in that extra oomph.” Another electronics technician summarized the way many of these men perceive the situation:



An Arab shop in Paris. French political culture does not condone racism based on skin color, but it does emphasize distinctions between people who share French culture (the “natives” or “French race”) and immigrants who do not.

I work side by side constantly with blacks, and I have no problem with it. I am prejudiced to a point.... What is a nice way to say it? I know this is a generality and it does not go for all, it goes for a portion. It is this whole unemployment and welfare gig. What you see mostly on there is blacks. I see it from working with some of them and the conversations I hear.... A lot of the blacks on welfare have no desire to get off it. Why should they? It's free money. I cannot stand to see my hard-earned money going to pay for someone who wants to sit on his or her ass all day long and get free money. That is bull, and it may be white thinking, but, hey, I feel it is true to a point... You hear it on TV all the time: "We don't have to do this because we were slaves 400 years ago. You owe it to us." I don't owe you, period. I had nothing to do with that and I am not going to pay for it.... Also, I don't like the deal where a black person can say anything about a white, and that is not considered prejudice. But let a white person say even the tiniest little thing about a black person, and bang, get up in front of Reverend Al Sharpton and all the other schmucks. That is bull. That is a double standard all the way along the line.

For some American workers, then, moral and racial boundaries work hand-in-hand, in such a way that the community of "people like us" is defined very narrowly and certainly excludes blacks, who are largely seen as living off working people. Strong boundaries excluding blacks undoubtedly persist because in the minds of many Americans blacks are associated with poverty, while whites are associated with middle-class status. As I shall show later, immigrants are not ostracized nearly as often as blacks. For whites, blackness and poverty mark the limits of cultural membership in America, and this trend is likely to accelerate as Americans increasingly contrast blacks to all nonblacks, regardless of their race (see "Beyond Black and White: Remaking Race in America," *Contexts*, Summer 2003).

the french "them" are muslim immigrants

Eric Dupuis works for a heater repair shop in an old working-class suburb south of Paris. His job consists of servicing homes in the metropolitan area. He defines himself as a hardworking person and vehemently condemns lazy people ("laziness is the mother of all vices"). His apartment building, also in the suburbs



Photo by Marion Post Wolcott, Farm Security Administration, Library of Congress

A black man approaches the “colored” entrance to a Mississippi movie theater in 1939. Over the past 50 years, the movement to integrate blacks into American society has made much progress. Yet racial segregation persists. The Civil Rights Project at Harvard, for example, has recently documented that school segregation has increased since 1986.

of Paris, is inhabited by a number of Muslim immigrants. The building is owned by the state, which subsidizes rent and ensures a “proper” ethnic mixture among the resident population. A proper ethnic mix means, by law, a maximum of 15 percent immigrants living in the building. Eric perceives these Muslim neighbors as slothful and irresponsible. In one of his rants against laziness, Eric echoes almost word-for-word the comments of many white American workers about African Americans:

Parasites... I hate all of them. All those people who don't have a sense of responsibility. We work so hard to support them. When you look at your pay stub and you see all that is taken away! How can I explain it? When you go to welfare offices, it is not *Gaulois* [descendants from France's original settlers in Roman times] who take advantage of it... And we break our backs for these people. I am very familiar with them. They don't work. They only know the way to the unemployment insurance office.

Like many of their American counterparts, French workers care about self-reliance. For instance, when asked what

kinds of people he dislikes, Eric gives the example of his brother-in-law who lives at the expense of others. For him, being responsible means adopting a line of conduct, sticking to it, and doing what is needed to achieve one's goals: “If you get off the rails, you will hurt yourself. You have to be responsible and go on working.” French workers also resemble American workers in that both crave moral order in the world, and they criticize minority groups for undermining that order by lacking a work ethic and a sense of responsibility. In both countries, economic recession, intergroup competition, and anxieties over loss of national status feed into racist feelings.

French workers differ from American workers in that they are more concerned about the fact that Muslims, in their view, take an inordinate share of France's many social benefits (such as family support payments and subsidized housing). This violates French workers' sense of their own position in the national pecking order. French workers seem less upset than their American counterparts with welfare programs in general, probably because they also benefit from many of them, and would lose much if the programs were abolished. The sense of threat is expressed by George Desjardins, a fireman. He

resents that the children of immigrants are the primary users of a new soccer stadium:

When I was young, we did not have so many things to play with, but them, they have a lot, and we have to give them more. We have to give them a stadium. But the stadium is there and it is totally destroyed.... And you should see who plays at the stadium. Only immigrants, they don't accept French kids.... At the school here, there was a team for older kids. Someone tried to have his kid play on the team, but he was refused because he was told that the boy was not good enough. There are only a few French kids, well I don't know if they are French but they are whites.... I feel invaded.

Like Eric Dupuis, French workers often believe that the money taken every month from their paychecks goes directly into the pockets of North Africans. They also view Muslim immigrants as lacking the moral qualities that they themselves value most, namely "responsibility" and "courage."

If French and American workers resemble one another in the types of moral standards they value most and the virtues they identify as lacking in minority groups, they differ in the groups they single out as moral offenders. Indeed, when talking to French workers, I found that very few mentioned race when asked to describe "their type of folks" and "those they

don't like much." This suggests a form of racism that is surprising to many Americans; it does not center on skin color per se. French workers expressed negative feelings mainly toward immigrants, and North African immigrants in particular, rather than blacks from sub-Saharan Africa.

race or culture?

There are several reasons why French blacks are not targeted as much as French Muslims. Most North Africans are first- or second-generation immigrants, while many blacks have much longer roots in France. Blacks living in France are also more religiously diverse than are the North Africans. For instance, Senegalese are predominantly Muslims whereas Congolese are Catholic. (Although North Africans include a small Jewish population, they are often presumed to be homogeneously Muslim.) This variety clouds distinctions between "we French" and "those blacks."

Muslims are also more numerous—almost 5 percent of the French population, compared to less than 2 percent for blacks—and thus more visible. Decolonization was much more peaceful in French sub-Saharan Africa than in North Africa—the French fought a bitter war in Algeria in the 1950s—and this sustains more positive images of blacks than of North Africans.

Finally, many black immigrants came from elite backgrounds and moved to France for education. Thus they assimilated more easily than did poorly-skilled North African



Cartoon by Chris Panatier

In both the United States and France, racists believe that with rare exceptions, members of certain minority groups lack particular, highly-regarded virtues.

workers. Negative views of Muslims increased in France after the attacks of September 11, 2001, as well.

The more recent arrival of many black immigrants from West Africa may be making blacks more vulnerable to French racism, however. The policy of family reunification that was put into place after 1974 brought in many black African families from Muslim regions, which focused public attention on polygamy and traditional female genital mutilation. Nevertheless, the diverse characteristics of blacks living in France mitigate any clear polarization between “Frenchness” and “blackness,” as has happened for North Africans. Racial “others,” such as Asians, have also assimilated successfully, which contributes to downplaying racial differences as a basis for discrimination and prejudice within French society.

French social scientists often argue that Republicanism, the foundational myth of French political culture (the French equivalent of the “American Dream”), impedes racism because it emphasizes civic participation regardless of group differences. So, for example, the French government does not collect census information on racial groups. Yet, while French political culture discourages racism based on color, it strengthens another kind of prejudice by clearly distinguishing between those who share the common Republican and French culture (the “natives”) and those who do not (immigrants). This distinction is reinforced by traditional anti-Muslim feelings in Christian France, by the long-standing faith that French culture is superior, and by a colonial history that the French believe puts them above people from their former colonies.

In the United States, conversely, concern for immigrant assimilation is much less acute. Immigrants may follow different patterns in adapting to life in the United States, but in principle they can participate in civic life and politics without having to abandon their culture of origin and identity. For example, voter ballots are provided in various languages. Accordingly, American workers scarcely mentioned immigrants when I asked them who they feel inferior and superior to. Public opinion polls confirm that although Americans have negative feelings toward immigrants, these feelings are not strongly held. Their attitudes toward immigrant policies are inconsistent, lack intensity, are not well organized and are ineffectively articulated. They tend to approve of immigrants who pursue the American Dream. In fact, Mary Waters finds in her study of West Indian immigrants, immigrants themselves are more accepting of their peers who they perceive to be pursuing the shared dream of moving up in America.

As my conversations with workers in America and France show, the reality of racism is illuminated by studying the cultural framework of prejudiced people. People’s concepts of self-worth shape the moral boundaries that they draw. Thus,

ethical and racial distinctions are solidly intertwined, but in different ways in different nations. Like a pernicious weed, racism can emerge in a wide variety of soils by adapting to local environments. ■



Photo by Aurelie Khaldi

One of many Arab stalls in “La Puce” (the flea market) in the Paris suburb of Montreuil. Muslims are more numerous than blacks in France.

recommended resources

Favell, Adrian. *Philosophies of Integration: Immigration and the Idea of Citizenship in France and Britain*. London: MacMillan, 1997. An insightful discussion of French Republicanism, its contradictions, and its impact on the integration of immigrants in France.

Espenshade, Thomas, and Maryann Belanger. “Immigration and Public Opinion.” In *Crossings: Mexican Immigration in Interdisciplinary Perspective*, ed. Marcelo Suarez-Orozco. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998. The authors provide a nuanced view of American attitudes toward immigrants.

Gans, Herbert. “The Possibility of a New Racial Hierarchy in the 21st Century United States.” In *The Cultural Territories of Race: Black and White Boundaries*, ed. Michèle Lamont. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999. Gans predicts a growing polarization between blacks and non-blacks in the United States.

Lamont, Michèle. *The Dignity of Working Men: Morality and the Boundaries of Race, Class, and Immigration*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000. A fuller description of the study described in this article.

Simon, Patrick. “Nationality and Origins in French Statistics: Ambiguous Categories.” *Population: An English Selection* 11 (1999): 193-220. This article explains the place of racial categories in French statistics in relation to questions of integration and discrimination in France.