

Levels of Analysis: *Banlieues, Violence, and Ethnocentric Diversité in France*

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This paper analyzes state violence in the police brutality context, which endangers the futures of the racially/ethnically marginalized, young, and usually poor or working class in multiple countries. I will use levels of analysis to explain the issue: by uncovering, on the global level, the legacy of colonialism in France and former French African colonies, the end of colonialism and global power shifts, international human rights pressure on France in response to human rights abuse at the state's hands within its borders, globalization, and diasporic awareness in response to incidents of French police brutality. On the state level, I will investigate discriminatory legal and political frameworks, the conditions of the policing and security state, French Republican ideals versus their practice, and the political culture of secularism and Islamophobia within France. On the individual and community level, I will explore instances of police violence and local resistance, French community identity and disillusionment, perceptions of *laïcité* among French Muslims, and marginalized cultural expression and response. My case study will be in France, referring to incidents in the suburbs of Paris. I will draw on the body of research investigating lopsided laws in France, including the work of Alec Hargreaves, Madeleine von Hassel's senior thesis *#justicepouradama*, and Francesco Ragazzi's investigation of community surveillance and policed multiculturalism.

Global

France's participation on the global stage is defined by its exploitation of the African continent for resources and people. French colonizers deposed indigenous systems of government, imposed arbitrary borders across ethnic groups, and created political and economic division across the continent. Subjects of French colonies' participation in French life and history was both established and mandatory decades before the current migration from postcolonial

French territories to France. For example, in Senegal, the Tirailleurs fought in World War I and World War II for France. However, they faced discrimination and little recognition (von Hassel, 2025, pg. 8). As the French colonial era came to an end, global power shifted, owing to the Cold War and American and Soviet battles for dominance. France became concerned with both communism and the French Communist Party (which threatened France's system of capitalism economically and their value system of liberal humanism,) and the increasing military, economic, and cultural hegemony of the United States (Hargreaves, 2015, pg. 227). The PCF denounced the *coca-colonisation*. As the Iranian Revolution occurred in 1979, French media began to elicit concern about perceived Islamist agendas resembling Iran's, and attention was drawn for the first time to the fact that most postcolonial migrants to France were Muslims—though they were Sunnis, largely from West and North Africa, and bore no political allegiance to Ayatollah Khomeini.

The oil crises of 1973 and 1979 also exposed France's vulnerability to pressure from the oil-rich, and now freer, Middle East. Defensive to these global power shifts, France adopted explicitly Islamophobic policies and legislation starting in the 1970s. In 1974, there was an official ban on labor migration from non-Europeans. In the wake of the post-World War II economic boom, there came to be a shortage of labor, which was filled by North and sub-Saharan Africans. The French began to perceive them as drains on social support financially and blamed them for their widespread unemployment. By the 1980s, France had the largest Muslim population in Western Europe. The Front National (FN), blaming immigrants and their descendants for French problems, experienced a surge in popularity, which remained stable over past decades. In 1985, the UDF and RPR made a pledge to exclude children of immigrants from automatic access to French citizenship if their cultural differences made them seem disloyal to

France—essentially anyone connected to Islam. This was an attempt to reform the very laws of nationality (Hargreaves, 2015, pg. 228).

France has faced pressure and disappointment from international human rights organizations meant to uphold global norms, such as equal treatment of migrants and justice for incidents of excessive force. In 2024, the United Nations Human Rights Committee criticized France on the global stage for systemic police brutality (for example, the case of Adama Traoré) and for France's lack of accountability and reforms in the wake of such incidents (von Hassel, 2025, pg. 31). Adama Traoré was killed by police force in Beaumont-sur-Oise while being arrested. He was handcuffed, and three officers were on top of him. One of the three officers testified as such. When emergency services arrived, he was lying on his stomach with his hands cuffed behind his back. He had no pulse and was under respiratory arrest. In court, it was concluded that Traoré died from cardiogenic edema; however, the Traoré family enlisted a private expert doctor who reported he had died from positional asphyxia from the officers pinning him during the arrest. The French courts dismissed the case against the officers involved (von Hassel, 2025, pg. 19). The Adama Committee holds an annual march in Beaumont-sur-Oise to honor and demand justice for victims of French police violence.

Another global lens through which to view state violence in France is the diasporic awareness that has developed among minority communities in France, in part due to globalization. Lacking an adequate discussion of racism in France, French minorities look at American civil rights language to understand the racism and exclusion they face in France. France maintains a policy of color blindness, effectively dismissing any deeper self-reflection of their domestic and international production of both race and racism (von Hassel, 2025 pg. 23).

State

On the state level, various policies and French norms facilitate targeting and decrease social mobility of ethnic minorities in France. The formal legal and political frameworks of France, such as *laïcité*, a 1905 law which safeguards civil rights to express religious beliefs, verbally and in other ways, both in the public and private spheres, are now blatantly weaponized against Muslims in France. For example, the headscarf ban of 2004, which banned the wearing of conspicuous religious symbols (including hijabs) in public schools in France, and the burqa ban, which prohibited full-face veils in public spaces (excluding private vehicles or places of worship), are enforced by €150 fines or mandatory citizenship education courses.

In 1985, citizenship laws were revised to restrict automatic citizenship for children of immigrants (Hargreaves, 2015, pg. 229). Article 78-2, first passed on September 4, 1986, allowed police to get proof of identification from anyone if there was evidence they committed or attempted to commit a crime, were going to commit a crime, if they could provide useful information to a crime's investigation, or if they were subjected by judicial authority. The article was amendable to prevent breaches of the so-called public order, especially the safety of people and property. The article was amended multiple times to expand police identification checks, particularly targeting ethnic minorities. The seventh amendment of Article 78-2 expanded identity checks to be conducted on anyone, regardless of behavior; it was amended in 2003. The eighth amendment of Article 78-2 expanded the scope of identity checks among international borders and railways, allowing checks on international trains less than 20 km beyond the borders of France (von Hassel, 2025, pg. 13).

There also exists institutional discrimination in housing, leading to residential segregation and compounded stigma of ethnic minorities. Similarly exclusive realities exist in the spheres of

education and employment for North and West Africans in France. The denial of race-based data in lawmaking and policymaking in France exacerbates this legal and political neglect. Policing and security measures in France are also transparently aimed at targeting and isolating immigrants and their descendants, particularly Muslims. The *Plan Vigipirate* is a total-society approach to terrorism, encouraging actors across the state, local authorities, public and private operators, as well as citizens, to take part in vigilance and security across society and protect French citizens, territories, and interests against terrorist threats (von Hassel, 2025, pg. 13). Black and North African communities are also targeted systemically through the aforementioned identity checks and surveillance. France's cultural identity is tied to French Republican ideals of universalism. However, France practices differentiated citizenship.

The separation of religion and state is unclear in the fact that thousands of Catholic schools in France and dozens of Jewish schools receive state funding, while only two Islamic schools do (Hargreaves, 2015, pg. 233). Post-2000, France instituted diversity as a cosmetic reform in order to normalize their cultural protectionism. Leaving behind the language of “the French Exception,” they adopted the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity. This occurred as a result of politicians’ late-90s fear of threats to public order from disaffected ethnic minorities who had received discrimination in France.

Counterintuitively, France’s diversity policy did not commit to multiculturalism, which remained a taboo. By forgoing effective steps against discrimination, riots broke out in 2005, and networks of jihad proliferated across France in 2015 (Hargreaves, 2015, pg. 230). Politically, France’s attitude towards immigrants is engendered by the rise of the FN. The French government orchestrated public debates on the so-called national identity from 2009 until 2010 rather than addressing discrimination through policy or otherwise. The debates, unsurprisingly

and without government opposition, became a hotbed for xenophobic vitriol. The apprehension towards America and the Soviet Union has recently been replaced by blame on the European Union for France's economic failures, while the French Muslim community receives blame for France's loss of identity (Hargreaves, 2015, pg. 229).

Individual

On an individual and community level, the racially/ethnically marginalized young and working class in France are largely disillusioned and unsatisfied with the state of affairs in France, and seek solace within the larger international community, whether through identification with religion or music. Following the case of Traoré, his sister Assa Traoré became a national spokesperson against the realities of racism and violence at the hands of the French state. As a result of Traoré's individual case, French newspapers and television began to unveil the difficulties Arabs and Black people experience in France in the search for apartments, jobs, stigma within the schooling system, and abuse at the hands of the police (von Hassel, 2025, pg. 24). Yearly marches and public demonstrations against police violence arose in Adama's wake. Human rights organizations offered their support. In response, Article 78-2 was amended to further expand police's ability to conduct identity checks (Hassel, 2025, pg. 25).

Facing racial profiling and exclusion from French identity, the predominantly French-born youth of the *banlieue* are perceived as outsiders and participate in politics at very small scales. In the wake of *Charlie Hebdo*, many students in schools in the *banlieue* refused to observe a moment of silence in respect for the victims, with thousands tweeting *#JeNeSuisPasCharlie* in the following days (Hargreaves, 2015, pg. 233). In the face of secular rejection and outright hostility, some embrace an assertively Islamic identity. The perceptions of

laïcité among French Muslims are still positive when referring to its original 1905 decree.

However, hypocrisy in its current application may be the cause for young Muslims' allegiance to religious law (sharia) over that of the French Republic. This may not stem from fundamentalism, but from witnessing injustice (Hargreaves, 2023, pg. 176).

Lastly, under what is a state of constant racial gaslighting, cultural expression has emerged as a last frontier of equality and identity for people of French postcolonial descent born in France. In the 1990s, French rap emerged as a challenge to the racist status quo and an affirmation of the experiences and artistry of Black and North African working-class French youth. It became the most popular form of music among young people in France, among both those of majority and minority ethnic origin (Hargreaves, 2015, pg. 237). Though many postcolonial writers born in France exist, the realm of publishing and academia segregates French literature and so-called "Francophone literature," which has a lesser status and is specific to French writing from former French colonies (who have not been born and raised in France). By this structure, there is no space in the French-language literary canon for second-generation immigrants (Hargreaves, 2015, pg. 236). In France, there is still no major Muslim political party, and the largest share of the national vote belongs to the FN (Hargreaves, 2015, pg. 233). Among French intellectuals, theories such as "The Great Replacement" (Renaud Camus) are given validity and urgency.

Across levels, Islamophobia in France is produced by national (*state*) laws, reactions to *global* power balances, and everyday, *individual* reactions. The economic oppression of *banlieues* is a result of state policies, global postcolonial echoes, and is resisted by grassroots activism at an individual level (such as Assa Traoré's movement.) The police lethality (individual/state level) has prompted international concern from human rights organizations,

including the UN. Ultimately, discrimination is a reality of immigrant life in France, shaped by both the history of colonialism, discriminatory laws, policies, and “security measures,” and the excessive pursuit of secularism at the cost of integrating Muslim immigrants, despite their largely primary identification with France, and the lack of visible counter-narratives to the effective second-class status of Black and Arab people in France. These policies of exclusion and neglect enable Black and Arab youths’ murder at the hands of the French state and force youth to seek community any and elsewhere, thus directly planting the seeds of extremism.

Annotated Bibliography

Hargreaves, A. G. (2015). Introduction: Still French? *Nottingham French Studies*, 54(3), 227–237. <https://doi.org/10.3366/nfs.2015.0123>

Alec G. Hargreaves, Emeritus Winthrop-King Professor of Transcultural French Studies at Florida State University and specialist on the political, cultural, and media experience of postcolonial minorities in France, critically examines the 1985 cover story of *Le Figaro magazine*, which asked readers, ‘Serons-nous encore français dans 30 ans?’ He examines French creation of a distrusted and socially excluded “other,” feared despite the French Empire’s role in the very creation of its dynamic, diversity as a mitigative solution to public order disruption, the inaccurate, racist predictive science behind “replacement,” and blatant Islamophobia in French politics.

Hargreaves, A. G. (2023). Lop-sided Laws: French Muslims and Laïcité. *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 27(2), 171–184.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17409292.2023.2185404>

Hargreaves examines the unequal application of separation of religion and state towards Muslim communities compared with others in France, how it maintains second-class status for ethnic minorities within the country, and ultimately grooms both aggressors and victims of violence.

Ragazzi, F. (2023). Counter-radicalization, Islam and Laïcité: policed multiculturalism in France’s Banlieues. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 46(4), 707–727.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2022.2032248>

In this article, Francesco Ragazzi, a Universiteit Leiden faculty, examines findings of research in the Pantin and Villeneuve-Saint-George suburbs of Paris as

indicative of everyday anti-terror policing encouraging violence through “policed multiculturalism,” wherein diversity is ruled with a lens of risk and security. He questions the efficacy of dedicating social, youth, and educational work to suspicious measures which explicitly reinforce assimilation as the sole option for immigrants’ participation in French social life, under threat of extrajudicial killing as punishment.

Von Hassel, M. (2025) *#JusticePourAdama : The Problem of Police Brutality with French Police Targeting Former French African Colony Immigrants*. (Senior thesis, Fordham University.) Fordham Research Commons.
research.library.fordham.edu/international_senior/187/.

This undergraduate thesis, by Fordham student Madalyn Von Hassel, examines a case study of racialized state violence: the murder of Adama Traoré by police in 2016. She documents the grassroot response and institutional brutality, with its echoes in colonialism. While not peer-reviewed, this thesis offers a thorough legal documentation in the Traoré case proceedings.