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THE FRENCH MODEL OF BELONGING: THE PARADOX OF ASSIMILATION AS A POLITICS OF RECOGNITION

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”La France est une République indivisible, laïque, démocratique et sociale. Elle assure l'égalité devant la loi de tous les citoyens sans distinction d'origine, de race ou de religion. Elle respecte toutes les croyances” (Article 1, Constitution of 1958)

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ABBREVIATION LIST

CC — Conseil Constitutionnel (Constitutional Council)

ECHR — European Court of Human Rights

INED — Institut National d'Études Démographiques

INSEE — Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques

OHCHR — Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

QPV — Quartier Prioritaire de la Politique de la Ville (Priority Neighbourhood of the City)

TeO — Trajectoires et Origines (survey)

WWII — World War II

ZUS — Zone Urbaine Sensible (Sensitive Urban Zone)

RESUMEN

Este trabajo examina la paradoja que se encuentra en el centro del modelo republicano francés: un sistema que proclama la igualdad universal pero que, sin embargo, en la práctica, produce una pertenencia condicional para los inmigrantes poscoloniales de origen magrebí y sus descendientes. Se demuestra como la igualdad formal no se traduce en igualdad material, lo que produce un proceso de alterización (*l'altérisation*) en el que las minorías son asimiladas culturalmente pero excluidas socialmente. Dicha pertenencia condicional no es un defecto, sino un rasgo constitutivo del sistema, que necesita la figura del "otro" para definirse. Finalmente, evaluando las corrientes filosóficas que apoyan las políticas de reconocimiento, se analiza si estas pueden reconciliarse con el universalismo republicano. Todo ello para concluir como la pertenencia podrá dejar de ser condicional si Francia abandona la idea de que la igualdad exige borrar la diferencia, sustituyendo la asimilación por el reconocimiento como condición para ser francés.

PALABRAS CLAVE: universalismo francés, pertenencia condicional, asimilación, política del reconocimiento, laïcité, alterización, inmigración magrebí

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the paradox of the French republican model: a system that proclaims universal equality yet, in practice, produces conditional belonging for postcolonial immigrants of Maghrebi origin and their descendants. It demonstrates how formal equality does not translate into material equality, generating a process of othering (*l'altérisation*), where minorities are culturally assimilated but socially excluded. This conditional belonging is not a defect but a constitutive feature of the system, which requires the figure of the "other" in order to define itself. Finally, by assessing the philosophical currents that support the politics of recognition, the thesis analyses whether these can be reconciled with republican universalism. At the end, it concludes belonging can cease to be conditional only if France abandons the idea that equality demands the erasure of difference, replacing assimilation with recognition as the condition of being French.

KEY WORDS: French universalism, conditional belonging, assimilation, politics of recognition, laïcité, othering, Maghrebi immigration

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND SUBJECT MATTER

France has long been a country of immigration. According to the 2006 French census, 25% of the population have at least one parent or grandparent who immigrated to France (Barou, 2014, p.1). Despite French refusal to define itself as multicultural, its society has been built upon a foundation of diversity. In fact, historically, during the greater part of the last two centuries France has received more immigrants than any other country in Europe (Hargreaves, 1995, p. 5). These trends have shaped the demographic and population characteristics of French society. Different cultures, ethics and values coexist with each other. In 2024, 7.7 millions immigrants were living in France, representing 11,3% of the total population (Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques [INSEE], 2026). Immigration, therefore, remains a central social, economic, and political reality in the country. For this reason, it is of essence to understand the reasons for this flow of immigration. In this regard, the percentage of immigrants coming from Europe decreased while the proportion of those coming from Asia and above all Africa grew (Barou, 2014, p. 2). In this context, it is relevant to understand French historical colonial ties, in particular in the Maghreb region. These ties continue to shape and inform the experiences of the Maghrebi population in contemporary French society, as there is a large size of Maghrebi population in France as a consequence of France's colonial history in the region and following migration (Gohar, 2025, p. 150).

Among these relationships, a special mention must be made to Algeria. France claimed the country in 1830 and it was not until 1962 when they gained independence. In the region, in 1956 Tunisia and Morocco also achieved independence from France; however, unlike Algeria, with less violence. During these years of colonial power, a new statute applied to their country in 1947 which gave them complete freedom of movement in and out of metropolitan France. From a mere 22,000 in 1946, their numbers grew to 805,000 in 1982, making Algerians the largest national group among the foreign population in France (Hargreaves, 1995, p. 17). Migration from Algeria was further reinforced during WWII, as France sent people from all over its colonies to fight in the war. And in the post-war period, France experienced what is known as Trente Glorieuse, a period marked by rapid expansion.

In need of an increase in the labor force, migration intensified from the colonies into France. If immigration were measured not by place of birth but by nationality, one of the largest immigrant populations in France comprises Europeans born in the Maghreb who relocated to France during and after decolonisation (Hargreaves, 1995, p. 26)

Figure 1: Immigrant geographic origin in 2023 and evolution between 2013-2023

Geographical origin	Headcount (in thousands)	Share of immigrants (in %)	Share of women (in %)	First quartile of age (in years)	Median age (in years)	Third quartile of age (in years)	Evolution of headcount between 2013 and 2023 (annual average in %)
Africa	**3.367**	**46,9**	**49,2**	**33**	**45**	**58**	**2,9**
Maghreb	2.091	29,2	48,8	36	48	62	1,9
Other African countries	1.275	17,8	49,7	28	40	52	4,6
Asia	**1.000**	**13,9**	**50,5**	**32**	**44**	**57**	**2,2**
Turkey, Middle East	395	5,5	46,9	34	45	57	1,7
Other Asian countries	605	8,4	52,8	31	43	57	2,6
Europe	**2.352**	**32,8**	**53,9**	**34**	**52**	**68**	**0,8**
Southern Europe	1.091	15,2	51,1	40	59	72	-0,5
Other EU countries	638	8,9	57,2	33	47	63	1,2
Other European countries	624	8,7	55,5	29	43	59	3,2
America, Oceania	**456**	**6,4**	**58,2**	**30**	**41**	**54**	**3,3**
Total	**7.174**	**100,0**	**51,5**	**33**	**46**	**61**	**2,1**

Note. Adapted from "Bilan démographique 2023 - Évolutions démographiques territoriales," by Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques, 2024 (https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/8242329?sommaire=8242421#graphique-figure1). In the public domain.

As can be examined in Figure 1, in 2023, 46,9% of immigrants living in France came from Africa, where 29,2% came from the Maghreb region.

Figure 2: Geographic origin of immigrant descendants in 2023 and evolution between 2013-2023

Geographical origin	Headcount (in thousands)	Share of descendants of immigrants (in %)	Share of descendants with only one immigrant parent (in %)	First quartile of age (in years)	Median age (in years)	Third quartile of age (in years)	Evolution of headcount between 2013 and 2023 (annual average in %)
Africa	**3.644**	**45,5**	**49**	**8**	**17**	**34**	**2,7**
Maghreb	2.597	32,4	48	9	19	38	2,3
Other African countries	1.047	13,1	53	6	15	26	3,9
Asia	**795**	**9,9**	**43**	**9**	**19**	**32**	**2,1**
Turkey, Middle East	380	4,7	38	10	18	31	0,8
Other Asian countries	414	5,2	47	9	19	32	3,3
Europe	**2.989**	**37,3**	**66**	**28**	**50**	**68**	**-0,7**
Southern Europe	1.867	23,3	60	34	50	66	-1,2
Other EU countries	797	9,9	76	22	57	72	-0,1
Other European countries	324	4,0	71	8	21	53	1,1
America, Oceania	**343**	**4,3**	**69**	**6**	**14**	**27**	**6,2**
Unknown	**245**	**3,1**	**51**	**6**	**11**	**17**	**///**
Total	**8.015**	**100,0**	**56**	**11**	**26**	**49**	**1,6**

Note. Adapted from "Bilan démographique 2023 - Évolutions démographiques territoriales," by Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques, 2024 (https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/8242329?sommaire=8242421#graphique-figure1). In the public domain.

As Figure 2 of the same study demonstrates, in 2023, 45,5% descendants from immigrants have African origins, being 32,4% from the Maghreb region.

Figure 3: Immigrant by country of origin

Country of birth	Headcount 2021	Headcount 2023 (p)
Portugal	591.975	577.000
Italy	282.937	283.100
Spain	243.448	231.200
Other European Union countries	622.135	637.600
Other European countries	500.568	623.700
Algeria	866.600	891.700
Morocco	819.025	853.300
Tunisia	314.854	346.600
Other African countries	1.148.636	1.382.000
Turkey	243.637	238.500
Other countries	1.166.258	1.217.000
Total	**6.800.072**	**7.281.700**
(p): Provisional data		
Scope: France		

Note. Adapted from "Immigrés par pays de naissance," by Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques, 2025 (https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/3633212). In the public domain.

In particular, as Figure 3 shows, the number of immigrants in 2023 coming from Algeria is 891.700, the highest number of all.

As examined through the figures, a large part of the French population is constituted by not only immigrants but also their descendants; most of them coming from Africa, specifically, the Maghreb region. The demographic reality in France has challenged the French government's terms for inclusion, integration and belonging, establishing the relationship which would be held with immigrants, not only for the first generation but also the following ones. This demographic reality directly engages with the fundamental values of the French Republic and gains particular significance in the light of the Republic's understanding of how French society should be structured and organised.

The French Republic is founded upon the following set of principles (Élysée, 2022) :

First, République indivisible: No individual and no part of the French population can assume the right to exercise sovereignty that belongs to French citizens as a whole. Unity and indivisibility guarantee a uniform application of the law throughout the entire national territory

Second, Caractère laïque: Principle based on the freedom of belief and equality of citizens before the law. It implies the separation of the Church and the State. No religion will hold a privileged status within the public sphere. Everyone is to hold their own particular beliefs, but whatever that faith may be, it should not disturb the public order. Secularism is therefore one of our most precious values, the keystone of a harmonious society and cement of a united France.

Third, Caractère démocratique: Respect of the fundamental freedoms and the designation of powers through universal suffrage.

Fourth, caractère social: Contribute to social cohesion and improve the conditions of those more vulnerable and in disadvantage. To ensure that everyone is guaranteed full and total, living and tangible equal rights, the State also works to promote equality of opportunity, by especially supporting the most disadvantaged and vulnerable.

It is through the model of *Universalisme Républicain*, where these principles come to life. Universalism refers to the idea of the existence of a unity in humankind, beyond the cultural diversity of individuals. It designated a political philosophy whose aim is to grant all citizens of the same nation the same rules, values, and common principles; without distinction of cultural, religious and philosophical differences. Its foundation is based on Article 1 of the Constitution of the French Republic (1958), which highlights the equal dignity of all persons. This principle is the source of fundamental freedoms and rights, notably human rights and freedom of conscience. However, the French universalism model has not been always acknowledged by all segments of French society (Oberti, 2007, pg 2), in particular those who who hold less economic advantages and have worse living conditions (Oberti, 2007, pg 1) have been stigmatized due to the inability of the model to recognize other identities beyond those who constitutes french values (Oberti, 2007, pg 3). The universalist model is seen as an assimilation framework, where differences are neither accepted nor celebrated but rather put aside to create a cohesive national community (Beaman & Petts, 2020, pg 4). Unequal treatment in society comes from individuals lacking certain french values or not being french enough. While the state proclaims and adherence to the universal principle of equality, this commitment is not enough to act as a safeguard against institutional discrimination and racism (Beaman & Petts, 2020, pg 6). Different social groups, as those coming from the Maghreb region, feel unrepresented , have worse educational and professional opportunities and are excluded from the French model of belonging: their identity is not fulfilled (Simon & Tiberj, 2016, para. 45)

Against a universalist and abstract model there are communitarianism and multiculturalism. Communitarianism is a political and social philosophy, which emerged in the 1980s as a critical reaction to the liberal individualism of John Rawls, A theory of Justice (1999). This philosophy is based on the idea that the individual does not exist outside of society but it is embedded within it. The value of social good is reduced to the contribution to individual well being, rather than focusing on collective good (Song, 2024). Communitarianism defends the idea that human identities are shaped by different communities and by social relations, hence this form of human nature is what should inform moral and political judgment as well as policies and institutions (Bell, 2024). Multiculturalism, is a more explicitly doctrine which upholds diversity in society. It rejects the ideal of minority groups being assimilated into the dominant culture, rather minority groups should maintain their distinctive collective identities and practices. In regards to

immigrants, multiculturalism is not opposed to their integration in society. Identity is not relegated to the private sphere, rather it plays a central role in the public and political field. Public institutions have a duty to understand the different communities and support their objectives as part of a more holistic and socially embedded approach (Song, 2024). These political theories are not identical, and therefore cannot be interchanged, as one justification for multiculturalism comes from communitarian critique of liberalism, while the other comes from a revision of liberalism. However, both concepts converge in the idea of rejection of the abstract, atomistic individuals of liberal universalism. Communitarianism is based on the level of the self while multiculturalism on the level of political recognition (Bell, 2024).

Figure 4: Multiculturalism policies for "Immigrant minorities" summary scores from 1980, 1990, 2000, 2010, 2020

	TOTAL SCORE (out of 8)				
	1980	1990	2000	2010	2020
Australia	5.5	8	8	8	8
Austria	0	0	1	1.5	1.5
Belgium	1	1.5	3.5	5.5	5.5
Canada	5	6.5	7.5	7.5	7
Denmark	0	0	0	0	1
Finland	0	0	1.5	6	7
France	1	2	2	2	1.5
Germany	0	0.5	2	2.5	3
Greece	0.5	0.5	0.5	2.5	2.5
Ireland	1	1	1.5	4	4.5
Italy	0	0	1.5	1.5	1.5
Japan	0	0	0	0	0
Netherlands	2.5	3	4	2	1
New Zealand	2.5	5	5	6.5	6.5
Norway	0	0	0	3.5	4.5
Portugal	0	1	3	3.5	3.5
Spain	0	1	1	3.5	3
Sweden	3	3.5	5	7	7
Switzerland	0	0	1	1	1
United Kingdom	2.5	5	5	5.5	6
United States	3.5	3	3	3	3.5
AVERAGE	1.3	1.9	2.7	3.6	3.8

Note. From *Immigrant minorities: Overall results*, by Queen's University, n.d. (https://www.queensu.ca/mcp/immigrant-minorities/overall-results-im). Copyright by Queen's University.

In particular, Figure 4 shows that the Anglo-Saxon democracies have adopted most multiculturalism policies, with Australia scoring the maximum 8 out of 8 in 2020, Canada 7 and the United Kingdom 6. However, France only scores 1.5 out of 8 in 2020, which places it among the least multicultural states in the entire index.

It is in this paradox that the central problem the thesis tries to tackle arises. The French model which proclaims universal equality as its highest value, in practice reproduces a hierarchy between those whose membership in the national community is presumed and those whose belonging remains permanently conditional.

2. MAIN OBJECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY

This thesis is guided by two main research questions: Why does the French republican model of integration produce conditional belonging rather than the equal membership it promises? Can that belonging cease to be conditional through a politics of recognition?

In order to answer them, the general aim of this thesis is to analyze the conceptual and institutional foundations of French universalism, and its implications for the construction of belonging within French society. This aim is pursued through three specific objectives.

1. To examine how French universalism is institutionalised through color-blindness, naturalization and laïcité; turning the ideal of integration into a demand for assimilation.
2. To analyse how this model produces conditional belonging and creates a figure of an "other," demonstrating this is a constitutive feature of the model rather than a defect.
3. To evaluate whether, and to what extent, a politics of recognition (multiculturalism) can be reconciled with French universalism so that equality ceases to be conditional.

In order to achieve these objectives, firstly, the thesis examines the theory of French universalism and its institutionalisation, focusing on how an ideal of integration translates in practice into a demand for assimilation operating through the structural invisibilisation of the individual. This is studied through three main areas, i) the color-blind approach to statistics, ii) the acquisition of nationality, iii) the principle of laicite

Secondly, the thesis studies the consequences of this universalist model, examining how its promise of formal equality produces material exclusion and a state of conditional belonging in which minorities are assimilated culturally yet never fully recognized as French.

Thirdly, this research turns to how this conditional belonging is produced, arguing that it is not a defect of the republican model but a constitutive feature of it. The model requires the figure of an "other" in order to define itself. It locates this phenomenon on two levels: first, the misrecognition of a minority identity which is in essence plural and reactive rather than withdrawn, second universalist discourse that builds itself through its own contradictions, deferring them onto France's Muslim citizens.

Fourthly, this research will analyze multiculturalism as a question of social justice within political philosophy. It will examine the idea of the abstract citizen from universalism, using Sandel's critique of the unencumbered self and Kymlicka's idea of cultural membership as a primary good. It later uses the theory of recognition through Taylor and Honneth and compares it with its republican critics, Schnapper and Laborde, in order to assess to what extent a politics of recognition can be reconciled with French universalism so that equality ceases to be conditional.

Lastly, the thesis adopts a qualitative methodology, combining legal doctrinal such as constitutional texts, statutes, and case law and laws on data, naturalization, and laïcité. It also uses secondary quantitative and sociological evidence, as well as on press used as an example of lived experiences within the French reality. It finally explains multiculturalism and communitarianism, from the perspective of social justice within political philosophy, by using a theoretical and philosophical framework made by authors such as Taylor, Honneth, Kymlicka, Sandel, Schnapper. The analysis focuses on the target population: postcolonial immigrants, from the Maghrebi region, both from the first and second generation. The first one refers to individuals being born outside of France that came later and had to go through the naturalization process, and the later refers to individuals being born in France from immigrant parents. Throughout the thesis they will be referred as “target population"

CHAPTER II
THE FRENCH MODEL: UNIVERSALISM AND BELONGING

1. THE HISTORY BEHIND UNIVERSALISME RÉPUBLICAINE: FROM INTEGRATION TO ASSIMILATION

Universalism refers to the idea of the existence of a united humankind, beyond the cultural diversity of humanity (Réseau Canopé, 2016). It all goes back to The Enlightenment, with its culmination August 4th of 1789, when the Constitution Assembly abolished privileges (SG CIPDR, 2022). One of the main motives for criticizing and dismantling the *Ancien Régime* was its organization, based on a system of privileges and inequality. The main objective of the revolution was to create *Un État de droit* (state governed by law) for all citizens (Vie publique, 2026). In fact, one of the main universal principles established in the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen de 1789*, is to establish and guarantee a one and indivisible Republic. This is directly reflected in its first article "Les hommes naissent et demeurent libres et égaux en droits. Les distinctions sociales ne peuvent être fondées que sur l'utilité commune". Men are born free and equal (Assemblée nationale constituante, 1789, art. 1). As article 6 proclaimed "The law is the expression of the general will. All citizens have the right to participate personally, or through their representatives, in its formation. It must be the same for all, whether it protects or punishes. All citizens being equal in its eyes are equally admissible to all dignities" (Assemblée nationale constituante, 1789, art. 6). In other words, the law is the expression of common will. It must be the same for everyone, whether it protects or punishes. In the end, all citizens are equal in the eyes of the law and consequently equally eligible for all dignities. This represented a profound rupture with the hierarchical social structure found in the *Ancien Régime*. In this model honor gave political status, which changes by replacing it with the concept of dignity, interpreted in the universality and egalitarian sense (Taylor, 1994, p. 5). Everyone holds and shares this dignity. In 1789 honor was abolished as a political category and noble privileges were no longer a part of what gave a person dignity and rights. The *Loi le chapelier* abolished any intermediary corporate bodies between citizens and the states, therefore the revolution created the concept of le citoyen, unified to the universal and abstract status stripped from any communal attachment (SG CIPDR, 2022). The work of the revolutionary period was continued by Napoleon I. The Civil Code was promulgated on March 21, 1804, regulating the lives of all French citizens, abolishing local laws. Its influence spread beyond France, through conquests, and it remained

unchallenged by the fall of the Empire. This principle of universalism was particularly further invoked under the Third Republic to inspire an egalitarian regime, theoretically working to integrate all citizens into a single nation, regardless of their characteristics and origins. Universalism is inseparable from the principle of neutrality, as enshrined in the 1905 law on the separation of Church and State (Réseau Canopé, 2016).

The French Republic is founded upon the following set of principles which have been mentioned before. a) "République indivisible", b) "Caractère laïque", c) "Caractère démocratique", d) "Caractère social". These principles are the foundation of the French Republic Model of Integration, a model, which does not deny or erase differences (SG CIPDR, 2022); but has never proclaimed itself to be either diverse or multicultural. In fact, the purpose of the integration model is to prevent the distinction between citizens, in order for the French state to effectively respect those differences and promote equality. The State recognizes only individual citizens, allowing communities to evolve autonomously, without institutional recognition or differentiation. This does not mean diversity is not accepted. Individuals need to be recognized before anything as citizens with the objective of letting them free to choose their personality, individual and collective identity without any predetermination. Because universalism is intrinsically linked to equality of rights, it also presupposes that all individuals, regardless of how their characteristics may differ from those of the "majority" population, must be able to effectively enjoy those rights. This is the rationale adopted to prevent discrimination (Réseau Canopé, 2016). In sum, this model is based on a national conception of citizenship that negates using certain criteria (such as ethnicity, race, or religion) to categorize individuals and to treat them as specific groups. In theory, this means the state interacts with the individual independent of these criteria, which implies equal treatment for all. This is the reason the state refuses to recognize interest groups and official public institutions that are based on these criteria (Oberti, 2007, pg 1). The State grants common rules and values without making distinctions relative to cultural, religious, or philosophical particularities. However, this does not mean there is no acknowledgment of differences; the State simply avoids making distinctions in order to better respect them. Rather than officially recognizing specific communities, the State considers only individual citizens, which allows communities to evolve autonomously. Ultimately, this model is designed as a societal project that favors both individual freedoms and national cohesion (Réseau Canopé, 2016). While this model was revolutionary and emancipatory in the eighteenth century as a way to eradicate the feudal system, its inability to recognize cultural

differences would, years later, become the principal obstacle to integrating postcolonial immigrant populations.

2. THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF FRENCH IDENTITY

This section will exemplify the way in which universalism promises of equality is enforced through three main channels: color-blindness, naturalization and laicite. All of these mechanisms claim neutrality while in reality they produce distance and hierarchy. The result is conditional citizenship, as difference is not erased but institutionalized symbolically.

2.1 The color-blindness approach

The French states aim to guarantee equality by minimizing differences between citizens and avoiding any type of phenotypical distinction. In practice, this approach makes discrimination invisible.

> The processing of personal data revealing the alleged racial origin or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, or trade union membership of a natural person, or the processing of genetic data, biometric data for the purpose of uniquely identifying a natural person, data concerning health, or data concerning the sex life or sexual orientation of a natural person, shall be prohibited (Loi Informatique et Libertés, 1978, art 6).

In this sense, it is prohibited to process personal data revealing the alleged racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs (...) of a natural person. This follows the idea of the universalist republic where racial and ethnic differences must not be recognised and should be minimised, the only distinction which can possibly be made is that between a French citizen and a foreigner (Naidoo, 2019, p. 68). This abstraction, as egalitarian as it may seem, raises important problems when trying to identify and measure discrimination. By refusing to distinguish between citizens according to racial or ethnic background, it becomes difficult to identify patterns of unequal treatment affecting French citizens of immigrant descent. Consequently, certain forms of discrimination that are systematically embedded within society may remain obscured (Simon, 2015, p. 66). While ethnic and racial studies have occupied a central place in social sciences in the United States

since the beginning of the 20th century, and subsequently in other countries such as Britain, in France this tradition has not been implemented despite holding a similar "multicultural" experience rooted in immigration (Simon, 2008, p. 153). In France the system has taken a different approach, as the census records the nationality and country of birth of individuals to distinguish French citizens and immigrants from natives. This model was designed in order to adopt within society the French Republican Model of integration and the universalist approach, a system by which immigrants would gradually lose their cultural and linguistic distinctiveness as they progressed in the path to achieve "French citizenship". However, this method reached a limit with the growing spread of racial and ethnic categories in public debates or media. Even though, racial and ethnic, are systematically excluded and are not present in French society, discrimination is widespread, as immigrants remain invisible to quantitative research (Simon, 2015, p. 66). While the race blind approach is intended to decrease racial disparities, the absence of data makes it difficult to address and identify the problems faced by immigrant communities (Gohar, 2025, p. 152). For example, in employment, studies which classify individuals according to their nationality or that of their parents, it is overlooked that some Black or North African people are French, and that once they have been living in France for more than two generations, they are no longer considered by these studies to be immigrants, and therefore no longer considered people of color (Le Monde, 2020). Consequently, this color blind approach becomes a choice of ignorance, the French state denies the social realities of many of its citizens of color. A significant dimension of French society remains hidden from official statistical observation (Naidoo, 2019, p. 68).

Because there are no official statistics on race or ethnicity, sociologists have been forced to develop alternative methods to uncover inequalities. One of these methods are "testing campaigns" in the labor market. These studies consist of recreating a situation in which discrimination can manifest itself in order to measure it. For example, two fictitious profiles can be created, of two persons holding the same level of education and who apply for the same job, but with two parameters that differ: the place of residence and the candidates' names. One is named Julien Legrand and the other Mohamed. Once these profiles have been created, the researchers sent out more than 17,000 applications or requests for information to French companies, which were not aware of the study, both in response to existing job offers and as unsolicited applications. The result: the place of residence makes no difference; the name, however, and therefore the candidate's presumed origin, has a consequence on their

chances of getting a response. Mohamed and Jamila receive about 20% fewer responses than Émilie and Julien (Le Monde, 2020). In the end, to study inequalities between groups, first it is necessary to define those groups, which means accepting certain social boundaries as meaningful. Statistics reflect the categories states find useful, but they are also essential tools for making society legible to researchers. The key is in understanding they make society visible (Simon, 2008, p. 168). This is why statistics are central to debates over integration and discrimination, they harden fluid identities into fixed groups. Statistics both shape collective identities and provide the evidence needed to fight inequality (Simon, 2008, p. 163) Consequently, the color blind approach acts as a symptom of a state of society but instead as the modus operandi of an ethnicization and a racialization that would be waiting only for it to unfold. Therefore, a way must be found beyond the desire to know without looking, to evaluate without counting, to decipher ethnic and "racial" social relations without entering into the mechanics of the stigma and of identification. Statistics are a symptom of divisions already at work in society, not the engine that produces them (Simon, 2008, p. 162). In sum, institutional blindness does not eliminate race or religion from French society, it merely prevents the state from fully acknowledging and addressing their social consequences. As a result, the descendants of postcolonial immigrants often remain invisible within official quantitative research. This invisibility is a limit for public policy and a form of symbolic violence.

2.2 How to acquire nationality

Republican universalism is also institutionalized through the process of acquiring French nationality. Although naturalization may appear to be an administrative procedure, it can also be understood as a subjective and moral *rite of institution* that ultimately results in a second-class citizenship. First, it is important to understand there are different ways to acquire French nationality. There is jus soli, where nationality can be acquired by but on French territory under specific conditions, such as the parent also being born in France. Nonetheless, for most immigrants, the principal route to citizenship is naturalization. Naturalization by decree allows a foreigner living in France to obtain French nationality through a discretionary decision made by authorities. In order to acquire it, the person must have been living in France for five years and on a lawful basis. A lawful status means holding a valid residence permit (which must be renewed every year). After five years with a valid residence permit, applicants can submit their file. They have to provide a large quantity of documents to

demonstrate where they are in their life and in French society, previous jobs, previous housing, tax statements. Sometimes it is necessary, or easier, to return to your country to retrieve certain documents, but for someone who comes from a war zone, that is impossible. After, once the administration has verified that the documents are in order, they ask the person to have an assimilation interview. Applicants must answer a series of questions to verify their assimilation into French territory and their knowledge of essential values. The interview is normally based on the "Livret du citoyen". However, certain testimonies of naturalized people show the interview differs depending on the candidate's profile (Explore Media, 2025). “No one may be naturalized unless they demonstrate their assimilation into the French community, in particular through a sufficient knowledge, according to their condition, of the French language, history, culture, and society, the level and assessment methods of which are set by decree of the Council of State, and of the rights and duties conferred by French nationality, as well as through adherence to the essential principles and values of the Republic.” ((Code civil [C. civ.], 1804, art. 21-24). By taking into account the exact wording, this article is a demonstration of how the process demands not for integration but for assimilation in French cultures and customs.

Naturalization is a reciprocal process. On one side, the foreigner expresses their desire to become French; on the other, the state exercises its discretionary power to grant or refuse that request. Therefore, naturalization becomes a "favor" the administration grants at its own discretion (Fassin & Mazouz, 2007, p. 724). It is a rite of passage, where applicants pass through a long selection process in order for the foreigner to be transformed into a national, with a formal integration ceremony. However, it is also a rite of institution, a ritual that performs a double separation. The first separation happens during the selection process: among all immigrants, the process selects those who are deemed worthy of joining the national community. The second separation happens within the nation itself: even after becoming French, naturalized citizens are marked as people who came from elsewhere (Fassin & Mazouz, 2007, p. 723). A key part of this process is the assimilation interview, conducted by the prefectural administration. This interview evaluates several things, such as how comfortably the applicant speaks French, how well they have integrated into French society, whether their way of life matches French norms, and whether they understand the rights and duties of citizenship. The integration assessment is used to filter out applicants seen as "living withdrawn into their community of origin or their family (Fassin & Mazouz, 2007, p. 735). In other words, the state is not only revising objective criteria but moral decisions on

a person's life values and life. The whole procedure reveals how naturalization is less about fulfilling objective criteria than about being recognized as culturally acceptable by the state.

There are certain real examples of this process: a veiled Pakistani applicant walks into Mme Thibaut's (agent working in french naturalization center) office, and before she has even had a chance to respond properly, the agent has already decided things will go badly. The agent stops engaging with her, turns to the researcher present, and starts commenting on her as if she weren't there, predicting that "this'll be fast.". Afterward, Mme Thibaut explains her negative decision by combining two things: the woman's weak French and the fact that "she is veiled, so there's a failure to integrate into our customs." (Mazouz, 2017, para. 47 & 48). Another veiled applicant was told she wouldn't be naturalized *because* she wore a veil. Another, who spoke French perfectly well at a follow up meeting, had her case postponed two years for "insufficient French", and the director refused to explain why (Mazouz, 2017, para. 49). The problem is, since agents can only officially justify their decisions on the basis of linguistic and French knowledge, they try to put their cultural judgments in through these official requirements. The official criterion becomes a vehicle for moral and cultural evaluation (Mazouz, 2017, para. 51).

For this reason, applicants tend to show up in their best clothes and even for Black or Maghrebi women, giving a good image can mean smoothing their features such as curly or kinky hair. (Mazouz, 2017, para. 53) M. Nyanga, a Congolese man who later became an IT professional, at first hesitated to file his application while he was unemployed. He wanted the file to be "propre" (clean, proper) by waiting until he had a job. He didn't just think unemployment was strategically disadvantageous, he felt it made him *unworthy* of applying. The procedure works not only by what agents decide, but by what applicants come to believe about themselves (Mazouz, 2017, para. 55, 56 & 57).

It is important to point out the importance of citizenship in this section. Citizenship is a fundamental element in contemporary society which establishes rights, a sense of belonging and social status. In liberal democracies, citizenship is the most basic boundary tracing a distinction between formal members and those excluded from political belonging (Caron, McAvay & Safi, 2023, p. 1066). In particular, France has been well known to promote a civic concept of citizenship, contrasting with the more closed ethnocultural regime of Germany, where citizenship has long been attached to blood descent. However, despite France's strong civic and universalist system, there is a strong ethnoracial component that underlies the

boundaries of citizenship and national belonging (Caron et al., 2023, p. 1067). Hence, even when immigrants are able to assimilate and pass the rite of institution, they continue to not belong in society. The french census includes three boxes: french by birth, became french or foreigner. These options introduce the distinction between the two types of French citizens that there can be, the native born and the naturalized. This naturalization process, as expressed above, highlights the distance between the adopted French citizens and those who were always French. Assimilation in France is conditional and incomplete; equality in law does not erase perceived difference. It is popular to use the terms "*Français de papier*" ("French on paper") or similar to make a difference between naturalized immigrants and the French- born of immigrant parents, undermining the value of their citizenship. These terms suggest "true Frenchness" relies on an inherited trait and communicates the unattainability of native Frenchness. This practice of separating different types of citizens creates a form of civic stratification in French society (Caron et al., p. 1067). Consequently, while France rejects multiculturalism as "divisive", the very existence of hierarchical citizenship categories demonstrates multicultural tension. While the Republic denies ethnic difference, it institutionalizes it symbolically.

Finally, the naturalization process perfectly illustrates that citizenship or the lack of it emerges in a dialogical context. By forcing candidates to prove their assimilation, the French state is actively constituting immigrants as 'problematized beings' who must behave in a virtuous manner according to the Republic's vision. Therefore, conditional belonging is not an accidental failure of the system, but a necessary component of how French citizenship defines itself (Isin, 2002, p. 4)

2.3 The implications of laïcité

The last mechanism through which universalism and belonging are institutionalized is laicite. This concept was born as a way to defend the Republic from the political power of the Church. Its objective was to establish a secular public sphere where the government or their political institutions make no commitment to any religious matters. Consequently, the expression of religion is completely relegated to the private sphere (Bienkowski, 2010, p. 439). However, in order to understand the treatment of religion in French society nowadays, it is essential to examine the historical past that led to it. Following the war between protestant minority and catholic majority in the 16th century, the power of the monarch in France

became absolute, and catholicism reduced itself under the power of the king. There was a belief the king derived its authority to rule directly from God. This permitted the domination of the catholic church in politics and society. In the 18th century the idea of the French catholic church as separate from the monarch arose, this was later the foundation of the current position in France, where religion in the public sphere is something states must guard against to protect people. French secularism views religion as a threat to national unity (Kent, 2023, p. 195). This stems from 1789 and the desire to avoid any type of ethnic differences in favor of an egalitarian and abstract French identity, in order to avoid the stratification that existed before the French revolution. Due to this historical background, nowadays any type of group identity based on their own characteristics is seen as destructive to the unitary idea of French citizenship (Bienkowski, 2010, p. 440). This was institutionalized by the 1905 laws, which created structures which kept faith invisible from public institutions. These rules worked tolerably well when aimed at the Catholic majority, because most French people could express faith privately without cultural loss. But the same framework, when applied to minority religions whose practices are visible (Islam, Sikhism, Judaism), now produces tension: the law still sees visibility as danger, not diversity (Kent, 2023, p. 201).

These tensions become evident in cases surrounding the use of the veil. In early 2004, France passed a law banning visibly religious clothing in public schools. The reason behind this measure was framed by the media as a necessary measure in order to prevent threats to the French idea of secularism (*laïcité*), pointing to Islamic radicalism, "communalism," and the oppression of women in poor suburbs. This generated reaction and a series of objections came from Muslims who objected that the law violated religious freedom, and doubts also rose from those who were wary this measure was going to address France's integration problems. However, the law passed by large majorities in the National Assembly and Senate and took effect in September 2004 (Bowen, 2007, p. 1). The case Dogru v. France (ECHR 2008) reflects the effects. In January 1999, Belgin Dogru, an 11 year old Muslim student at a French state secondary school, came to PE class wearing a headscarf on seven occasions and refused to remove it despite her teacher's repeated requests. The school expelled her for breaching the duty of assiduity and the school's internal rules. She took France to the European Court of Human Rights, claiming violations of her right to religious freedom (Article 9) and her right to education (Protocol 1, Article 2). On 4 December 2008, the Court unanimously ruled against her, finding that the expulsion was a justified and proportionate interference grounded in French secularism (*laïcité*) and the need to protect public order and

the rights of others. The Court noted that she had agreed to the school's rules at enrolment and was still able to continue her studies by correspondence, so the ban did not violate the Convention. The current debate over Muslim women and the veil reflects a colonial framework that used muslim women beliefs and practices as the point for measuring whether a community is seen as more traditional or modern. Therefore, the veil is treated as a test to see whether certain individuals have been liberalized and therefore westernized or rather stayed in their islamic customs. As a result, a binary choice appears, a person cannot be both but must choose to either value their traditions and respect their origins or become assimilated to modernity. This reproduces a colonial logic where immigrants must choose between joining French identity or remaining a permanent other (Bienkowski, 2010, p. 450).

Later the 2021 *Law on Respect for the Principles of the Republic* (Loi n° 2021-1109) was passed, marking a turning point in French *laïcité*. Traditionally, laïcité meant state neutrality and the institutional separation of church and state, as established by the 1905 law. The 2021, however, shifts laicite from being an organisation principles of the state to being a tool of pre-emptive suspicions towards religious minorities. These groups are now framed as potential threats to the public order and the republican principles (van der Tol, 2020, p. 68). This potentially makes religious minorities to be treated as security risks, a similar logic to that already found in the 2010 ban of the full face veil, with the superior principle of peace and living together. In this sense, the respect to the principles of the republic can function as a technique to connect religious concern to a narrative of security and patriotism. Consequently, laicite has been institutionalized in a new form: less neutral, more of a conformity test (van der Tol, 2020, p. 78). As Emmanuel Macron (2020) stated in the Speech by the President of the Republic on the theme of the fight against separatisms.

"We are not a society of individuals. We are a nation of citizens. That changes everything. One learns to be a citizen; one becomes one. These are rights and duties. But I will yield nothing to those who want to divide us in one direction or the other, because I believe that our finest treasure is this bloc that we form together. It is one and plural, let us never forget that. That is the strength of our republic. Plural does not mean that we would be an agglomeration of communities. It means that we are a national community. But this national community has 66 million stories. And something that is, each time, greater than each individual, that is what makes an individual become a citizen. Their adherence to the republican universal: that is what we must defend" [transcribed]

Ultimately, the central issue in the debate surrounding the veil, is that it is often framed not only as a religious matter but as a political one. It is not only about the culture itself but rather if those practicing it have the potential to fully integrate into public life without having to hide their origins or convictions. Religious behavior is both a demand for integration and a demand for identity recognition, a way of claiming citizenship while having their origins acknowledged (Addi, 2001, p. 97). Rather than producing cohesion, assimilation policies risk pushing Muslims further to the margins. Ignoring or misrecognizing cultural differences can be a form of oppression, as minorities are forced to accept a distorted version of themselves. Therefore, the French concept of republic could potentially adapt in order to open the public dialogue and adapt to the reality of a more plural world (Bienkowski, 2010, p. 455). At the end, the problem is that laicite is the object of a symbolic struggle where different actors seek to impose their own definition, which depends on their diagnosis of the "Muslim problem" (Hajjat & Mohammed, 2013, p. 144). Laicite has gone from being an instrument for the recognition of all religions and for the emancipation of individuals, to an identity label and a tool of exclusion (Hajjat & Mohammed, 2013, p. 262).

In conclusion, as has been explained, there are three forms in which French Republicanism is institutionalized: color blindness approach, acquisition of nationality and laicite. Each of these models aims to present itself as neutral and egalitarian, faithful to the universalist premise. However, in practice, these models face several problems. They do not erase differences, they relocate it. First, the refusal to record race or ethnicity in statistics does not abolish discrimination but rather makes it invisible, turning equality into a choice that accommodates the equality it aims to prevent. Second, naturalization is not only an administrative process, but acts as a rite of institution which filters applicants based on moral and cultural grounds. Third, laicite, far from guaranteeing state neutrality, has gradually turned into a test of conformity that treats the visible practices of minorities as threats to be contained. Henceforth, these three models show how the universalist model does not make difference disappear, rather universalism becomes the condition against which belonging is measured. A citizen is formally equal but substantively conditional. The individual is admitted to the national community but only on the condition of getting rid of the attachment that distinguishes them, and when there are those who cannot dissolve into the abstract citizen, they are marked as outsiders. Recognition is subordinated to assimilation. What now remains to be studied is what happens to those whose assimilation does not bring the equality it promises. The following chapter will analyse the effects of universalism, studying how the

guarantee of formal equality coexists with the substantive exclusion and therefore produces an “other”.

CHAPTER III

CONDITIONAL BELONGING AND THE CONSTITUTION OF THE OTHER

1. FORMAL EQUALITY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

The French Republic promises equality to all citizens, but the kind of equality guaranteed is formal, not material (French Constitution, 1958, art 1). The system is built upon an abstract universalism in which one becomes a citizen by refusing particular attachments. Therefore, this section argues how such formal equality , far from eliminating inequality, generates a structural mechanism that allows it. Assimilation is demanded in exchange for equality, but that equality is far from reality for certain sections of the nation.

First, it is of relevance to explain with some detail what is meant by formal and substantive equality. The first entails treating everyone identically before the law: the same rules apply to all, with no legal distinction drawn according to origin, race, sex, or religion (Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen, 1789, art. 6). This has already been mentioned above as one of the key pillars on which the concept of the French Republic is built. However, substantive equality looks past the legal text to actual outcomes and opportunities, on the premise that applying identical rules to people in unequal positions reproduces inequality, and therefore permits differential treatment to correct disadvantage (Fredman, 2016, p. 178). In short, formal equality addresses the normative starting point, while material equality addresses people's real standing in society. The French republican model is built on the first of these, an abstract universalism where a person becomes a citizen stripped of particular attachments. Some of the signs that France privileges formal over material equality is the refusal to measure differences. This is further represented in the Decision no. 2007-557 DC (Conseil constitutionnel, 2007) of 15 November 2007, where the Constitutional Council overturned Article 63 which would have permitted data processing revealing an individuals' racial or ethnic origins for studies on diversity, discrimination, and integration. The Conseil held that the processing may use objective data but could not ethnic origin or race, in order to prevent disregarding Article 1 of the Constitution. Taking

differences into account would represent the nation as divided but instead united and indivisible (Willmann, 2007). However, even though France has traditionally rejected preferences based on ethnic or racial criteria (Calvès, 2004, para. 29), it still pursues a certain material equality by taking into account territorial and social criteria (Calvès, 2004, para. 31). Positive discrimination legally creates inequalities in order to advance the progress of equality (Levade, 2004, para. 59). Consequently, it is not that France ignores material equality but rather does not implement it when having to recognize ethnic or religious differences, which show how formal equality is conditioned. Yet this conditioning has its consequences, even though formal equality does not identify these equalities they are still real.

Henceforth, in order to understand how France's historical trajectory and main values are translated into social and institutional practices, it is essential to first acknowledge the existence of discrimination. The main forms of expression of inequality can be found in segregation, living conditions, quality of education, level of integration... In fact, social inequalities in the form of urban segregation are the main reason for the failure of Republican integration. Even though the Republic claims neutrality and equality for all, this is far from reality, as most immigrants from non European descendants had to remain in poor neighbourhoods (Barou, 2014, p. 1). One of the main pillars of the Republic was the common duty to contribute to social cohesion and to improve the conditions of those living in worse circumstances. The objective is to guarantee equality in opportunities by supporting the most disadvantaged; however, the Republic uses a “color-blind approach", ignoring differences between citizens and treating everyone under the same abstract framework. This approach, rather than eliminating inequality, obscures the structural factors that perpetuate it. When Maghrebi immigrants came to France after WWII, most of them were housed in the suburbs, nowadays known as Banlieus, where the living conditions were significantly far worse than those living intra-muros. France has labeled the banlieues as sensitive urban zones (ZUS), later renamed the priority neighborhoods of the cities (QPVs). Their high-priority status is due to poor housing conditions and high unemployment rates (Gohar, 2025, p.158). In fact, living conditions, access to quality educational and professional opportunities are all key determinants of how individuals are perceived by others and how they come to define themselves. Maghrebians living in the Banlieus, face structural and social barriers. Education in these areas tends to be underfunded and underserved. For example, students in the Seine-Saint-Denis banlieue have experienced water leaks, mice, and insulation issues in their classes (Gohar, 2025, p.160). This is a reflection of the conditions immigrants have to

encounter on their day to day, passing on through generations, as the systemic inequality prevents them from easily moving to better living conditions. For instance, students from immigrant backgrounds are often placed into the lowest tracks meant for students who are not expected to continue with secondary education. This assumption that they are not capable or interested in further education limits their future opportunities, inhibiting upward social mobility (Gohar, 2025, p.160). Their precarious situation restricted the opportunities to improve their conditions, passing on the constraints through subsequent generations. Even among second generation individuals who are educated and obtain a diploma and hold the same educational training as a person coming from a non immigrant background, face worse opportunities. This process generates a stigma imposed on immigrants through structural inequality, shaping perception about their capacities, potential for social mobility and alleged inability to fully integrate into the French community. In fact, the unemployment rate for French Maghrebians is nearly triple the French national average and their underemployment rate is almost double the average. Even when North African applicants completed their education with French diplomas, they continued to be contacted 32% less by recruiters than those without a migrant background (Gohar, 2025, p.160). This imbalance in opportunities represents how most Maghrebian immigrants and their descendants have been forced to become culturally French but at the same time socially excluded. This social exclusion can be referred to as Othering.

As has been shown, a critical breach exists in French society. Recognition is therefore needed and loudly demanded. On the 27th of October of 2005, a group of teenagers were playing soccer. Afterwards, they went home for dinner, as usual. That night, the police officers were carrying out identity checks. These checks are usually done in suburbs, normally in areas with a high rate of immigrants. When young people see police officers they tend to run away, in order to avoid confrontation that could potentially lead to arbitrary deportation. This was the case for Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré who started running as police officers chased them. In an attempt to hide, the boys went into an electrical substation, which caused their death due to a powerful electric shock (France 24, 2015). The same day violence broke out in their suburbs of Paris, in Clichy-sous-Bois, subsequently spreading to other cities in France (BBC News, 2015). Citizens across France, particularly those with immigrant backgrounds, began to demand justice, fairness, and equal treatment. A state of emergency was declared and extended for three months. The political response to the riots was mostly repressive and penal (Oberti, 2007, p. 6). A similar event occurred the 27th of

June in 2023, where Nahel Merzouk of Algerian descent, was shot by a police officer in Nanterre, after not complying with his order. At the moment, Nahel posed no risk, was not armed and therefore not a threat to the officer. It was a disproportionate use of force. Again, violence broke out in multiple cities of France and even though a state of emergency was not declared, people with immigrant backgrounds still demanded equal treatment, recognition and respect (ABC News, 2023). In a statement released in Geneva on Friday, OHCHR Spokesperson Ravina Shamdasani expressed concern over the death of Nahel Merzork. “This is a moment for the country to seriously address the deep issues of racism and discrimination in law enforcement” (United Nations, 2023).

In conclusion, the evidence shows that equality before the law has not fully translated into equality in reality. By refusing to recognize ethnic and racial differences, the Republic makes its own discrimination invisible. The result is the target population made culturally French yet socially excluded: they are perceived as foreigners regardless of French citizenship. Material inequality produces a specific condition: Othering and its french version, L'Alterisation. The next section will examine this concept and further study how they integrated in the French Republic.

2. THE MEANING OF CONDITIONAL BELONGING (L´ALTERISATION)

Othering can be understood as the process of dehumanization that involves labeling individuals or groups as "other" in relation to dominant societal groups, which affects their social relationships and spatial interactions, often driven by anxieties related to those perceived as different (*Othering - an Overview | ScienceDirect Topics*, n.d.)

By constructing a single French identity, universalism positions those who do not conform as the Other. The process of Otherization fails to acknowledge the realities of immigrant communities and the structural inequalities. By framing certain individuals as outsiders, a narrative of danger, lack of cultural cohesion and division is imposed on them, as a result of not being fully integrated and not being part of French society. Consequently, these theoretical frameworks of equality contradict the very ideals of universalism, creating a deeply fragmented society (Gohar, 2025, p. 152).

> “You grow up in this myth, and it's an amazing myth, that everybody is equal." – Mame-Fatou Niang, “Growing up, there was one question that really haunted me: 'Where are you from?'” said Niang. “They [really] wanted to know where my color is from, because Blackness is not seen as something that is naturally French.” (Carnegie Mellon University, 2023)

In fact, a survey was made which demonstrated that most French citizens define their national identity through republican ideals such as liberty, equality, and fraternity in what it means to “be french” and the values which help unite the country. However the same survey revealed half of respondents view people of foreign origin as a threat to French identity, revealing the tension between France's universalist ideals and who is actually accepted as belonging (Vernet, 2019). French identity is constructed through a narrative imposed by the state and further molded based on political and social interests. Those who don't fit in this narrative are left behind in a parallel narrative of social exclusion. The mere creation of a parallel identity suggests the target population does not fit into what can be considered a conventional French identity. Maghrebi identity exists outside the homogenous conceptualization of the French identity, reflecting the process of Otherization (Gohar, 2025, p. 157). Therefore, even immigrants from the first generation who have later acquired their French nationality, or their descendants who have been born in France, they still don't feel part of the French community and are perceived as outsiders. A dissonance rises between the perception of oneself (I feel French) and the perception of others (I am not seen as French). This dissonance increases the sensation of rejection and prevents a sense of belonging (Simon & Tiberj, 2016, para. 38). The French republican model of integration is supposed to foster a sense of belonging but instead imposes a singular way of being French. Instead of fostering diversity and difference, the model suggests for there to be only one set of values, one culture and one way to form part of what it means to be French. For example, the French public education system tends to foster a sense of national identity by teaching French history through the lens of the ideals of the french revolution. Students with different backgrounds, such as Algerian ones, end up not feeling as if they resonate with these values, not because they reject them, but because they relate to their families experiences of colonial ruling from France (Gohar, 2025, p. 157). While adaptation is expected from someone moving to another country, this does not imply immigrants should renounce their origins, historical ties and cultural affiliations. This expectation for renouncements has always been there and goes back to the colonial period when settlers were granted the privileges of French citizenship, the

Algerians were considered French subjects and were systematically denied rights on their land. Under the departement system, Algeria had representatives in the French National Assembly, but only Algerians who had accepted French law and rejected Sharia law were allowed to vote for these representatives (Gohar, 2025, p. 153). This illustrated how access to political recognition was conditioned to the abandonment of cultural particularities. This logic still persists nowadays, and can be defined as a way for assimilation. As was stated before, to belong, means to feel accepted and approved. If instead of acceptance there is resignation, there is no sense of belonging, but rather a sense of *conditionally* belonging. The *raison d'etre* of the french republican model of integration, is preventing distinction and therefore encouraging respect. To consider everyone as citizens in order to allow them to freely express their identity. In practice, the refusal to acknowledge differences undermines the creation of a shared space of mutual respect. To conditionally belong, means to not completely belong in the French Community, leaving immigrants excluded, with a lack of recognition. This concept of Otherness informs French discriminatory practices, failing to acknowledge the realities of immigrant communities and the structural inequalities they face (Gohar, 2025, p. 152).

In France, this process is known as *l'alterisation*. It refers to the process through which individuals are perceived as foreign, even when they are French citizens or born in France, on the basis of visible characteristics such as skin color or cultural practices. Indicators of alterisation, make reference to the variables which refer to the experience of discrimination, racism, or being labeled differently from the national community (Simon & Tiberj, 2016, para. 15). In the study TeO by INED, the survey addresses this issue through questions about the frequency of respondents to mention their origins in everyday life and a related question about how others perceive their Frenchness. One of the key insights of this study demonstrates how European immigrants and their descendants were more welcome into the French community than those coming from other regions like the Maghreb, Africa, Turkey, etc.. Therefore “being French” is not only a matter of acquiring certain values, language and culture; but a matter of physically “being stereotypically French”. The term *dissonance* refers to cases in which respondents feel French but nevertheless believe they are not perceived as such. This process is particularly pronounced among second- generation immigrants, as the descendants of post-colonial migrations, who tend to be the most “visible” in French society, become the focus of the tension surrounding the definition of national

identity (Simon & Tiberj, 2016, para. 41). The present structural inequalities demonstrate how the target population are obliged to culturally assimilate, but are socially excluded.

In short, they comply with their part of the contract (assimilation), but the States refused to comply with its part (there is no material equality). This process is clearly related to what is known as "identification assimilation", where migrants feel they belong in the host society and they renounce their attachment to their country of origins, including their ethnic roots. Immigrants eventually adopt the majority's identity and leave being that which made them different. This expectation is at the heart of the French model of integration, which is why the identity of immigrants and their descendants is constantly watched, questioned, and often viewed with suspicion (Simon & Tiberj, 2016, para. 2).

In conclusion, these dynamics give rise to what is known as conditional belonging, a situation where the citizenship of people, mostly immigrants, have to be continually earned through demonstrated practices and through cultural conformity (de Waal, 2020, p. 239). Belonging is therefore not natural but rather something which needs to be constantly proved. Minority claims go unanswered as universal values are so intertwined with the national culture that immigrants have to embody the national majority culture before being perceived as citizens (de Waal, 2020, p. 240). It can be summed up to the idea, citizens with no immigrant backgrounds are guests and those with immigrant backgrounds are guests who are perpetually required to behave according to local cultural rules (de Waal, 2020, p. 243). The failure of the model to deliver belonging, can be summed up to the following question: Is it a defect of the model or rather a constitutive feature of it? The next section argues the latter, as l'alterisation is not so an accident but a structural condition of how French citizenship defines itself, a model which requires an "other" in order to take shape. And it manages to sustain this exclusion not through law but rather through discourse.

3. THE PRODUCTION OF CONDITIONAL BELONGING

3.1 Misrecognition and Reactive identity

French identity is constructed through a narrative imposed by the States, within this framework, Maghrebi identity often remains outside of the dominant national narrative, existing in the margins and reflecting the process of exclusion and otherization. It is important

to understand that to belong is to be recognized (Taylor, 1994, p. 25), therefore underlying the difficulties of the target population there is a lack of recognition which restricts them from fully belonging in society. By asking for assimilation, France denies recognition. As a consequence, a reactive identity arises where the target population holds on to their origins as a response to the stigma (Simon & Tiberj 2016, para. 5) France's approach to diversity is shaped by a paradox: while the Republic claims to recognize all citizens equally under the ideals of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* and *laïcité*, it simultaneously demands cultural assimilation as the price of belonging. At the end, the politics of belonging are based on the continuous process of deciding who is "us" and who is "them". These boundaries even though they may be physical they are mostly symbolic. The problem is that these boundaries are shaped by power struggles, while there are certain groups to try to maintain the boundaries there are others who try to withdraw them. Each party expresses their conception of belonging and therefore shapes the wanted societal outcome (Yuval-Davis, 2011, p. 3).

As mentioned, this process of exclusion and otherization is not a failure of the French system, but rather a structural and institutional characteristic of it. Citizenship and its alterity emerge in a dialogical manner and constitute mutually. The *alterisation* of the postcolonial French communities, it's constituted by the same concept of citizenship. The current model of universalism and the French republic as a space for abstract equality, needs the constitution of "others" in order to make the system possible (Isin, 2002, p. 4). Among all of the dimensions which shape personal identity, immigrants and their descendants distinguish themselves by giving special importance to origin, nationality, and skin color. While other dimensions such as gender, social class, personal interests, and family ties still matter, ethnicity tends to obscure them. This need to put a strong emphasis on origin stems from lived experiences of rejection, discrimination and being treated as "other". Identity, therefore becomes a reactive reality, making it really difficult to discern with certainty how much actually reflects a genuine attachment to someone's origin and how much is a reactive response from repeated experiences of exclusion (Simon & Tiberj, 2016, para. 42). Interestingly, origin remains important for the second generation, including for children of mixed couples, which demonstrates that adopting the majority practice such as language, culture or even social behaviour, does not automatically erase ethnic identity. Hence, behaving as the majority, meaning adopting the culture and behaviour of the host country does not exclude still being loyal to one's origin and customs (Simon & Tiberj, 2016, para. 11). It is also of great relevance to notice the importance given to origin is not strongest in the immigrants from the

first generation but rather for the descendants, revealing the importance of origin across generations and how it can strengthen over time. Origin is therefore distinct from nationality, as they don't carry the same meaning and relevance. In regards to skin color, more than a third of immigrants and descendants from sub-Saharan Africa define themselves through their skin color. This demonstrates the relevance that may be given to skin color also reported by their experiences of discrimination and racism. However, this does not mean skin color is irrelevant to their lives , as it still plays a major role in their experiences of discrimination and racism, reporting that they have been or could be victims of racism because of their skin color (Simon & Tiberj, 2016, para. 12), These results reveal the formation of a minority identity, which exists not in opposition but as a component of the French national belonging. Contrary to those opposed to the idea of communitarianism, the minority identity is not the product of resistance to incorporating elements of the majority society into one person's self, in fact 90% of those who emphasize their origins as a defining trait of their identity also consider that they "feel at home in France (Simon & Tiberj, 2016, para. 45). The formalization of a minority identity is further reinforced by the experience of stigmatization tied to one's origin, as it is strongly influenced by experiences of discrimination, racism and exclusion. On one hand, there is a strong association between one's relationship to origin and experiences of racism and discrimination, and on the other hand, between being relegated to one's origins and exclusion from Frenchness. Hence, minority identity is both shaped by personal history and by the majority society which continues to mark certain groups as outside of the national community (Simon & Tiberj, 2016, para. 18). As mentioned the sentiments for French nationality are in fact predominant among descendants of immigrants and widely shared among immigrants themselves, with 56% of foreign immigrants reporting that they feel French. Therefore one's origin can perfectly coexist with a strong sense of French belonging. This generates a plural belonging despite the recurring pressures of political discourses pushing individuals to choose (Simon & Tiberj, 2016, para. 43). This possibility for a hyphenated French is a feature of a multicultural society, yet the reduction of the identity for immigrants and their descendants by taking away the positive value of origin, erodes the process of identification. Therefore, the sense of belonging is less compromised by an inward identity withdrawal, than by a failure on the part of society to recognize belonging. At the end, even for descendants who have been born in France or who have stayed in France for a long time, the concept of visible minority found in discrimination, points to the limits of French society's openness to its own diversity (Simon & Tiberj, 2016, para. 45).

Consequently, from the study there are four main points which can be extracted. First, belonging is plural, not exclusive, origin and Frenchness coexist rather than compete. Second, minority identity is largely reactive, shaped by exclusion and not by withdrawal. Third, the real obstacle to belonging is society's failure to recognize it, not individual identity isolation. Fourth, origins remain of great importance and can be strengthened over generations, showing identity is transmitted and reinforced through time. Democratic societies which rely on abstraction and uniform principles favored by strict republican universalism, appear not sufficient and dangerous. The growing visibility of cultural difference in contemporary societies calls for more democracy, not less. A case by case examination of the demands being raised by different groups. This is essential as such demands are rarely simply cultural claims but rather hold strong social implications that require deliberation. At the end, identities are not fixed or immutable, they are what society makes of them. This allows for space to happen for reflexivity, the capacity to consider identities as a product of society work in itself rather than external threats to challenges to be managed. Instead of seeing cultural identities as problems imposed from outside, democratic societies should recognize that they are co-produced by the very institutions, discourses, and exclusions that shape them (Wieviorka, 2001, p. 247)

In conclusion, the French model appears to rely more on assimilation than integration. Although immigrants and their descendants often feel both French and connected to their origins, belonging remains conditional upon conformity to a dominant national identity. The issue is therefore not a lack of belonging, but a lack of recognition of a belonging that already exists. By demanding assimilation, France limits the recognition of minority identities, contributing to the development of reactive forms of identification shaped by experiences of exclusion and stigmatization. As mentioned, democratic society should recognize cultural identity as produced by institutions and discourses, therefore, the following section builds on this argument by examining how these feelings of conditional belonging and otherization are produced and reinforced through narratives of power.

3.2 The Necessary Gap: Universalism and Discourse

The Republican model can be understood as a performative discourse that shapes social reality according to the needs and assumptions of the state. Rather than functioning as a

mechanism for generating integration, it operates as an official narrative that defines how French society must be understood. Facing the rising demand for recognition, the State uses universalism as a rhetorical tool. Instead of recognizing the failure of the system to guarantee material equality, the state's discourse blames communities for the fragmentation. The logic of exclusion of the system constitutes these communities as “others”, in a way they are invisibilized through institutional mechanisms. In consequence, minorities are constituted as problematized beings, called upon and persuaded to conduct themselves in a more fair and repetitious manner in regards to the political and social order expected from citizens (Isin, 2002, p. 31). What matters is not the French republican model of integration but rather the discourse surrounding it. The model itself cannot be defined in an immutable manner as it is constantly being reshaped, however, what is sure is the fact the model exists and it operates with enough force in order to orient public policies, structure political debate, mobilize institutions, and define who belongs to the community of French citizens. Hence, it is the discourse about the model, not the model itself, that produces the effects usually attributed to the model (Bertossi, 2009, p. 40). This Republican discourse operates within the gap between the political and social reality on the one hand and on the other, the ideal model. Therefore, the model is not invalidated by its failure to produce a society which makes it up, but is rather sustained by that very gap between this ideological promise and the lived reality. This dynamic generates the paradoxical belief that the model's failure should reinforce the return to the model rather than abandon it. The discourse on the republican model then turns the gap into something that demands constant intervention for its closure, but at the same time its aperture is what fuels the reasons for existence of the model itself (Bertossi, 2009, p. 56). To explain this gap, the discourse contains two main competing logics. The first one blames immigration population, framing them as unwilling or unable to adapt to the rules of society. The second, blames the French society for failing to create the conditions and opportunities for integration. Therefore the system is paradoxical as it claims to not recognize differences in ethnic and cultural identities, yet identities and categorize specific groups whenever they are perceived as problems. Consequently, French republican mode is not truly abstract, it is implicitly recognized in its own dominant culture as distinct from others and works to privilege it (Bertossi, 2009, p. 57) . The model functions because identity is always defined relationally: for French culture to exist as an ideal, it requires an “other” against which to define itself. Contradiction is not a weakness but its engine (Bertossi, 2009, p. 75). Each time the gap becomes visible, the state uses it as justification to reinvent the model and pass new

laws or create new institutions. Without the gap, there would be no “integration issue” to resolve, and the discourse would lose its capacity to orient policy and mobilize institutions.

As a consequence, the tensions and contradictions internal to the model of republican citizenship, have been exposed and precipitated by the presence of the target population. These tensions are systematically deferred onto France´s Muslim who are made responsible for the republican model contradictions, and therefore delegitimize as viable citizens. The asymmetry can now be explained through the lens of French muslim experience, the republic shifts its contradiction onto Muslims and reframes them as a national problem, rather than acknowledging the problems are within the republic system itself (Fernando, 2014, p. 26). Muslim French do not argue in the fact, one can be both French and Muslim, or that practicing Islam is compatible with French citizenship. The concept of the republic sets clearly deciding lines, such as universal vs the particular, or public vs private. These lines are not a neat separation but the system in practice constantly breaks them. For example, visibly practicing Muslims who refuse to hide their faith are treated as too visible, but another background which is seen as “more fit” for the republican model is treated as conforming. Therefore the universal, neutral public sphere is full of different connotations such as white, cultural specific...., so the universal is not neutral but rather a particular identity disguised as universal (Fernando, 2014, p. 62). For example, in France, the republican idea that politics should represent everyone rather than a specific group is optimal and compromised to maintain equality, however, in practice it excludes minority candidates from politics. When there are white majority who run for office, they are assumed to represent all citizens but when Muslims candidates or those from immigrant neighbours run, they are labelled as communitarian and accused of only representing their own group. This represents how part of the society is viewed from the universalist lens, whether there is another section of society who are viewed from another perspective of not fitting enough into the republican values (Hadj Belgacem, 2023, p. 29). Even though universalism is based on equality, it works as a tool for the majority to maintain their monopoly on political power (Hadj Belgacem, 2023, p. 4).

Ultimately, there are several relevant points. First, the republican model is not a fixed image but a changing discourse, sustained by the gap between its ideal and reality. The failure to produce a society based on the ideal is what keeps the model functioning. Second, the model uses discourse not to generate real integration but to redirect structural failures onto

minorities, who are then reframed as the problem, instead of acknowledging the problem of the system itself. Third, the universal and neutral public sphere is not neutral, rather it carries particular connotations which operate in order to preserve the majority monopoly. Fourth, the system needs an “other” against which to define itself. Therefore, the monopoly of the universal is what produces conditional belonging. A belonging given only to those who surrender their origin. Yet belonging and origin attachment are not mutually exclusive and are able to coexist. The problem is not that the target population does not feel as if they belong, rather that society fails to acknowledge the belonging, which shifts the burden from the system to the individual.

In conclusion, the Republic's formal equality does not translate into material equality, and the gap between these two concepts is necessary rather than accidental. Refusing to recognize difference does not erase it, it only removes it from the official discourse while its consequences persist. The revolts of 2005 and 2023 were not a rejection of Republican values but a demand to be granted the equality those values proclaim. This exclusion produces l'alterisation, a condition for the existence of the French model. Universalism defines itself by requiring an "other" against which to measure belonging, and supports the contradiction through a discourse that reflects its own failures onto France's target population. Consequently, conditional belonging cannot be understood as a withdrawal by the target population, belonging is plural as origin and Frenchness coexist, creating a space where those who claim their origins also resonate with French values. Therefore, what is missing is not the sense of belonging but recognition. It is not the target population who fail to belong, rather the dominant narrative that refuses to recognize a belonging that already exists. This is what can be understood as conditional belonging. If the problem is then misrecognition, the question that arises is: can recognition be reconciled with the Republic model? If l'altérisation is a constitutive part of the republican mode, it is not clear whether recognition can simply be added to the system without destroying what it already is. The next chapter will tackle this objection, through an analysis of the different theories of the politics of recognition, such as those from Taylor, Honneth and Kymlicka.

CHAPTER IV

MULTICULTURALISM

This chapter goes back to the question which was presented above in order to answer it from a political philosophy perspective. In order to do so this section aims to dismantle the premise on which French universalism rests, through Sandel's critique of the unencumbered self. It then challenges the myth of state neutrality with Kymlicka, before developing the theory of recognition from Taylor and Honneth. This framework is tested against its republican critics, Schnapper and Laborde, to ask how far the multicultural framework can be integrated within French universalism so that equality ceases to be conditional.

1. THE FICTION OF THE ABSTRACT CITIZEN

John Rawls develops a theory which has been often associated with the idea of the "unencumbered self", although he did not directly use this term, as it was later attributed to his work by other authors. In his book "A theory of justice", he argues that the self is neither constituted by nor identical to any particular set of goals. The self chooses between the ends, therefore the self is prior to its ends (Rawls, 1999, p. 491). He bases his theory in the concepts of the veil of ignorance, and the original position, meaning is its the individual who chooses the principles of justice who must do so without knowledge of their personal goals, social attachment, social status or conception of the good life (Rawls, 1999, p. 118). From this perspective, Rawls, establishes the priority of the concept of rights prior to that of the good. Something is good only if it fits into a way of life consistent with the principle of right already acquired (Rawls, 1999, p. 348). Although the ideas of Rawls emerge from a different intellectual tradition, they can be related to the French Republican conception of citizenship. A detached subject, prior to its community, but institutionalized. There is a similarity in the idea of the individual, a presumption of a self separated from its constitutive commitments. Where Rawls presents the idea of the "unencumbered self", the French Republic builds it into an institution. Anglo-American proceduralism does not blend into French Republicanism, it remains their distinct political theory but shares the premise at the level of the subject, both talk about a self prior to and separable from attachments that constitute it. However, the self cannot be separated from its constitutive community. The self cannot be understood independently from its attachments, a person's moral identity is formed through living within communities and traditions and is inseparable from understanding oneself as a member of a family, community, nation, or other social group (Sandel, 1998, p. 179) With no communal attachment, the self suffers an ontological amputation. Asking a person to set aside their

identity, origins or customs does not produce neutrality, rather than create a subject deprived of depth and meaning (Sandel, 1998, p. 180). This amputation highlights the importance of belonging and the necessity of recognition.

Ultimately, cultural belonging is essential to the individual for two principal reasons. First, cultural membership can be understood as a condition of individual autonomy. Second, cultural membership plays an essential role in an individual's self identity. In regards to the first one, cultural membership is a primary good that every person must want and which is necessary for the pursuit of one's goals. Culture provides the meaningful options from which individuals can make choices. Culture serves as a context of choice, which people can later frame, revise and pursue their goals. Regarding the second point, cultural identity contributes to self-understanding by providing individuals with a stable basis for self-identification and the security of belonging. There is a strong connection between a person's self respect and the respect accorded to the cultural group of which a person is part of. It is not membership to any culture, or any general space for belonging, but rather one's own culture (Song, 2024) Recognition is the preconditions of the autonomy the French Republic proclaims. The idea of neutrality is an illusion, therefore there are certain issues where the state's actions are going to clearly have a repercussion on culture, whether that may imply favoring certain cultures over other ones when applying certain policies (Öztürk, 2025, p. 2210). In culturally diverse societies, such as France, there are patterns of state support for some cultural groups over others. While states may prohibit racial discrimination or implement certain policies in order to reduce making differences, for example the policy of the color blind approach cannot avoid favoring certain customs (Song, 2024) . There is no individual without a group or community. This community is not understood as the sum of the individuals, but also of institutions and traditional values represented and accumulated (Öztürk, 2025, p. 2201). This clearly related to the idea expressed above, universalism can function as a narrative framework through which the Republican model reproduces existing power asymmetries between cultures and between those recognized as full citizens and those perceived as “others.” The state is therefore never entirely neutral. This argument is further supported by Cécile Laborde, critical republicanism retains from liberal multiculturalism its rejection to the idea that the public sphere of a liberal democracy is culturally neutral. Minority claims should not automatically be seen as threats to this neutrality, as they rather reveal the cultural assumptions already embedded within public institutions and challenge the unequal distribution of recognition within democratic societies (Leyva, 2019, para 7).

2. CHARLES TAYLOR AND THE POLITICS OF RECOGNITION

Going further into the figure of Charles Taylor, he claims there are two main types of liberalisms. First, the Kantian one, which conceives human dignity primarily in terms of individual autonomy. Under this conception, liberal societies do not uphold any particular vision of the good life but instead seek to treat all individuals with equal respect, independently of their beliefs, values, or cultural affiliations (Taylor, 1994, p. 56). This liberalism, inhospitable to difference, insists in the universal application of norms and is therefore suspicious of collective goals. As a result, it struggles to accommodate the preservation of communities' cultural continuity and survival (Taylor, 1994, p. 60). To a certain extent, this is the model that has been institutionalized in France. The second model is grounded on judgments about what makes a good life, where the integrity of cultures holds an important place (Taylor, 1994, p. 61). Liberalism is a fighting creed, consequently it should not claim complete neutrality (Taylor, 1994, p. 80). At the end, human life is dialogical. Humans become full agents, capable of understanding themselves, and hence defining themselves, through the interchange of human language of expression. The human mind is not made through a monological process, it is not something a person accomplished on their own terms, rather than through dialogue. Identity depends on the dialogical relations with others (Taylor, 1994, p. 32).

The problem is when identity is shaped through the misrecognition of others. As a consequence a person or a group can suffer real damage, if the society a person lives in does not contemplate the pictures to portray themselves. Non-recognition is a way of inflicting harm, a form of oppression, a way of imprisoning someone in a false and distorted way of being (Taylor, 1994, p. 25). Recognition is not a courtesy, but rather a vital human need. Treating certain groups as equals requires public institutions to acknowledge and accommodate their particular cultural characteristics. This challenges the French model, as ignoring difference does not produce neutrality, it denies a fundamental human need for recognition. The form of harm described which Taylor talks about has been previously described when talking about the demands of recognition in French society. This is an example of the harm generated as a consequence for misrecongition. At the end, the demand behind the need for recognition is rooted in the idea that it helps to forge identity, as dominant

groups tend to maintain their position by projecting images of inferiority onto marginalized groups ("Othering"). Consequently, the struggle for freedom and equality must pass through a revision of this perspective (Taylor, 1994, p. 66) . However, the question that arises in this section is: Why has recognition become a political demand? Taylor traces this development to two major historical transformations that gave rise to two distinct politics of recognition. The first concerns the emergence of universal dignity, while the second concerns the growing importance attached to difference and authenticity.

As was explained in Chapter I, Change 1 refers to the collapse of the social hierarchies, which was based on the concept of honor (linked to inequalities as was understood in the Ancien Regime). Against this concept, there was the modern one of dignity, now used in a universal and egalitarian manner, as it makes reference to the inherent dignity of human beings. The latter concept is the only one which is compatible with a democratic society. Individuals are no longer defined by their place within a social hierarchy but are instead recognized as free and equal members of the political community (Taylor, 1994, p. 27). Change 2 refers to the intensification of the idea of an individual identity, one that is particular to a specific person and its the way by which someone discovers themselves. This notion relates to the idea of being true to oneself and to their particular way of being. It is authenticity, as each person has an original way of being and should be recognized (Taylor, 1994, p. 28) This is the politics of difference, which seeks recognition of the unique identity of individuals and groups. In regards to the first change, French Republicanism has fully embraced it. With the French revolution and the Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen, as its Article 1 declares, men are born and remain free and equal in rights. This implies the abolishment of hereditary honor as a political category. The *Loi Le Chapelier* (1791) abolished guilds and intermediary corporate bodies between citizens and state. The Revolution invented "le citoyen" as a universal, abstract status stripped of any particular communal attachment. Universal recognition is offered, but only to individuals as abstract citizen-dignity, never to groups as owners of distinct identities. France radicalized Change 1. However, the second shift is a political extension of the cultures the French Republicanism struggles with. As France fully embraces the first change, it has resisted to do so with the second one. The evidence has been explained along the previous chapters but it is important in this section to flag the following ones: Article 1 of the current Constitution (1958), the color blind approach, laicite legislation, all justified through the universalism approach of Change 1, while refusing to adapt Change 2 for the recognition of cultural identities.

Therefore, France has deepened and adapted Change 1 but has resisted implementing Change 2, which implies recognition of how individuals understand themselves. It is here where the possibility for misrecognition arises.

In conclusion, the two changes help to understand the French model through two different perspectives. While France carried out the first and made it the very foundation of its citizenship. It refused the second one. Hence the Republic grants its minorities an equal dignity while declining to recognise who they actually are. The paradox is that at the scale of the nation, France becomes the cultural community it forbids its citizens to form, guarding its language, its institutions and its distinctiveness. This asymmetry is not a defect of the model but its reason for being and it is what leaves the target population citizen conditional belonging.

3. CAN RECOGNITION BE RECONCILED?

As Dominique Schnapper objects, classical citizenship can be understood as the separation between the private sphere, where identities are freely expressed, and the public sphere, where there is universal citizenship. This separation does not equate to an amputation of identity, it is the condition of equal citizenship. She also argues the republican solution has often led to the marginalization of identities, confirming the argument developed throughout this thesis that the denial of recognition may constitute a form of harm (Poizat, 2012, p. 35). At the same time, she maintains that republican neutrality, while imperfect in practice, remains necessary, making references to the conditional belonging opposite to the universal equality proclaimed (Poizat, 2012, p. 36). This tension is reflected in Schnapper's argument that diversity can occur within the Republic as long as it is compatible with republican values. Historical and cultural collectivities are legitimate when they don't promote values that contradict the common principles of citizenship. The difficulty arises when particular identities appear to conflict with the equality of citizens. From this perspective, recognizing cultural or religious identities within the public sphere can risk introducing practices that may undermine the equal status guaranteed by the Republic (Libault & Damon, 2023, p. 19). Going back to Taylor's concept of the fusion of horizons, it does not entail the acceptance of all cultural practices, rather create a space where individuals can reexamine their own standards while remaining committed to them (Taylor, 1994, p. 67). Therefore, recognition of

cultural identities in the public sphere therefore does not imply leaving behind equality. Recognition is not equivalent to relativism. The boundary identified by Schnapper does not invalidate recognition but establishes the conditions under which recognition can be pursued.

Going back to Laborde, the same critical republican which rejects the neutrality of the public sphere warns that recognition may reinforce existing forms of stigmatization.
According to Laborde, the state should guarantee not the preservation of particular identities but the equal civic status of all citizens. Individuals may become trapped within stigmatized identities such as "immigrant," "Arab," or "Muslim." (Leyva, 2019, p. 10). Consequently, public recognition could, in some cases, enclose individuals within the categories that subject them to discrimination.

This objection can be further examined through the work of Axel Honneth. For this author, the purpose of recognition is not to crystallize identities, but to prevent any form of social denigration which destroys self- esteem. Honneth distinguishes between three spheres of recognition: the legal recognition and the social esteem. The first one refers to situations in which the self and another, respect each other as legal subjects for the sole purpose that they are both aware of the social norms by which they hold several duties within the community (Honneth, 1995, p. 109). Via legal recognition, individuals acquire the possibility of seeing their actions as universally respected expressions of their own autonomy (Honneth, 1995, p. 118). Furthermore, in regards of the second sphere, it refers to ability of individuals to esteem another person as a distinct individual when they both share common values and goals (this clearly relates to the shared horizon of Charles Taylor), which permit particular qualities of certain communities register as meaningful (Honneth, 1995, p. 121). In modern societies, such as France, everyone is recognized in terms of what they share universally (equal rights), however, social esteem instead needs to honor what makes people different from each other (Honneth, 1995, p. 122). As societies become diverse and no longer share a single understanding of what is valuable, esteem becomes more pluralistic and reciprocal, which means not just operating but caring about the development of the distinctive traits of every person. This concept does not imply the implementation of relativism, rather the idea that no group gets put down. Equality is about equal opportunity to be recognized, not identical amounts of recognition (Honneth, 1995, p. 130).

Furthermore, Honneth identifies three forms of disrespect which may occur in modern societies, one of them being the denigration of a way of life, which can potentially destroy self-esteem. When a society withholds esteem, by ranking as inferior or defective certain ways of life or beliefs, those who identify with these values can no longer relate to their own way of life as something positive or meaningful within their community. This degradation destroys a person's self-esteem, as they lose the ability to see themselves as someone whose traits and abilities are valued by others. What is being denied is not only approval but recognition of a form of self- realization (Honneth, 1995, p. 134). In France, even though there is formal equality, members of minority groups may still experience denigration if the dominant horizon of values portrays their way of life as problematic or gives them the status of “Others”. In such circumstances, legal recognition is granted while social esteem is withheld. Michel Wieviorka illustrates this argument through the experience of children belonging to cultural minorities. The individual who seeks self-esteem and recognition, rather than self-devaluation, faces a significant obstacle when they realize that their social environment, family background, and particular culture are perceived as inferior by the wider society. An equality which does not recognize, is an equality which excludes (Wieviorka, 2001. p. 126). As was mentioned above, the importance of esteem does not mean everyone is esteemed equally for the same things, it means no one is collectively denigrated, so each has the chance to be valued for their own difference.

Individual freedom (private autonomy) and collective self governance (public autonomy) are both essential. Neither one of them is more basic than the other (Habermas, 1994, p. 112). Because of this, a theory of rights already contains a politics of recognition that protects people within the social contexts where their identities are formed. There is no need for an alternative model to correct liberal individualism, just a protection of the individual system of rights. Equal coexistence of different ethnic groups and their cultures don't need to be protected through collective rights, as it would not make sense when there is already in place a theory of rights designed for individual persons. As individual identity is interconnected with a collective one, the individual is who remains the owner of rights to cultural membership. Individual rights can lead to real benefits for cultures. In the end, society can protect cultures because people have rights, not because we've judged their culture to be "valuable" (Habermas, 1994, p. 129).

However, as mentioned above, Habermas keeps a very individualistic idea where individuals have rights, even though there are some parts of culture which are essentially collective, such as a language which cannot be protected individually. For this reason, group level protection is needed (Song, 2024). Furthermore, the state is never really neutral, as it is built around the majority culture (Leyva, 2019). In order to solve this issue, the solution is to give everyone the same individual rights and apply them fairly . However equal rights will only apply to a certain level of fairness if everyone holds the same position in society, and minorities do not. This could potentially be correct if a country is held together through a series of political values that are separated from the majority culture such as democracy (Habermas, 1994), nevertheless, this solution does not solve the problem, as the neutral political values are shaped by the majority culture. At the end, Habermas accepts the fact, a person's identity is not self made but rather formed through their collective belonging. He accepts the central idea of the recognition theory, while rejecting Taylor's conclusion (Habermas, 1994). Recognition is not necessary, what suffices is rather a framework which grants rights to individuals. This creates a mismatch of needs, as most of the harm inflicted onto minorities is not suffered by themselves individually, rather than to their shared identity. This is related to Honneth's, third form of disrespect in regards to the denigration of life, which is by nature collective, not individual (Honneth, 1995). Consequently, individual rights cannot resolve the issue as individuals may enjoy equal legal standing, while their shared way of life remains devalued and unrecognized. This is the incoherence of Habermas theory, he admits the self is collectively constitutive but refuses that same collective any legal recognition.

In conclusion, going back to the question which was presented at the beginning, whether a politics of recognition can be reconciled with the Republic, largely depends on the lens through which the issue is approached. Article 1 of the French constitution refusal of recognizing collective rights, already suggests the limits of recognition within the existing republican framework. Therefore, if France is to implement a recognition model it should calibrate the acknowledgement and esteem of identity in the public sphere, with the already implemented core values of what the French Republic is. As this last Chapter has demonstrated, the republican model is not fixed but rather a discourse which can be revised (Bertossi, 2009). This resolves the tension from the last Chapter, where othering is a constitutive part of the model as it is currently being narrated in discourse, not as an immutable element of the Republic. Because discourse is revisable, it is the reconstruction of

it the way for belonging to stop depending on an excluded other. In fact, France already practices the logic of reconciliation at the scale of the nation through the affirmation of republican and national values that constitute a shared cultural identity. The Republic does not reject recognition as such; rather, it rejects forms of recognition that challenge its normative foundation. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge, recognition does not necessarily imply relativism. The fusion of horizons reshapes self-understanding and allows us to appreciate the validity of another perspective (Taylor, 1994). Taking all of this into account, universalism and recognition can be articulated together by fixing the limits which allows for mutual coexistence. The Republic shall not abandon its universalism, instead, it must move beyond an understanding of equality as blindness to develop a form of recognition which allows minority groups to feel that their sense of belonging is acknowledged within the national community.

CONCLUSIONS

This thesis had the objective of analyzing the conceptual and institutional foundations of French universalism, and its implications for the construction of belonging within French society. In order to do so, it first aimed to examine how the French Republican model contributes to enforcing conditional forms of belonging, through institutional structures that fail to accommodate demands for recognition. In this regard, the following conclusions can be drawn:

First, the foundation of the French Republican model is the abstract citizen. Born in the Enlightenment and in the French Revolution of 1789, Universalisme Républicaine abolished the hierarchy of honor of the *Ancien Régime* and invented le citoyen as a universal and abstract concept stripped from communal attachment. This later became the principal obstacle to integrating the target population, as it structurally was unable to recognize cultural differences.

Second, this abstraction is institutionalized through three mechanisms: the color-blind approach, the acquisition of nationality and laicite. Each of these mechanisms opt for neutrality while in practice they generate a hierarchy. Color blindness makes discrimination invisible rather than abolishing it, naturalization works as a rite of institution which marks those who become naturalized as citizens "from outside", and laicite turns into a test of conformity. At the end, universalism is the conditions by which belonging is measured.

Third, formal equality does not necessarily equate to material equality, creating a gap which consequently gives rise to "Othering". The target population assimilate culturally while still remaining socially excluded; through urban segregation, underfunded education, and labor market discrimination. The result is dissonance "I feel French, but I am not seen as French"

Fourth, this dissonance leads to conditional belonging, which is a constitutive feature of the model. Belonging is plural, as origin and Frenchness coexist rather than compete. This shapes the target population identity as reactive, as it is shaped by exclusion rather

than by withdrawal from the community. Consequently, conditional belonging can be understood not as a lack of the target population's sense of belonging but as the society's refusal to recognize a belonging which already exists.

Fifth, this lack of recognition is sustained through discourse. The French model thrives on the gap between its ideal and its lived reality, using it as a way to justify the model while deferring its contradictions onto the target population. Because identity is relational, it requires an "other" against which to define itself.

In the end, and answering to the first research question: *Why does the French republican model of integration produce conditional belonging rather than the equal membership it promises?* The French model produces conditional belonging because it promises equality but demands the surrender of difference. However, the difference is not erased but relocated as the target population keeps living on it. They must assimilate culturally while remaining socially excluded. This is not a failure of the model but a constitutive feature, which led the thesis to further explore this tension. It did so by analysing the tension between the principles of Universalisme Républicaine and the theories of multiculturalism to finally evaluate the extent to which the elements of the multicultural framework could be integrated within French universalism to address the phenomenon of conditional belonging. In this regard, the following conclusions can be drawn. The abstract citizen is a fiction and the neutrality of the state does not exist. The self cannot be separated from its constitutive community without an ontological amputation (Sandel). At the end, cultural membership is a primary good and a context of choice, which makes the ideal of a culturally neutral state an illusion (Kymlicka). In addition, recognition is not a courtesy but a vital human need. Identity is dialogical (Taylor), therefore misrecognition is a form of harm. France embraced the shift from honor to universal dignity but refused the recognition of difference, behaving at a national scale as a cultural community itself. Lastly, France grants every citizen full juridical recognition (equal rights), but its dominant horizon of values casts the target population as problematic. This withholding of esteem inflicts disrespect, destroying self-esteem independently of legal equality. For this reason formal equal rights in France cannot, on their own, repair the harm done to a denigrated community. The aim of recognition is not to crystallize identities, but to prevent the social denigration that destroys self-esteem. In the end, and answering to the second research question: *Can that belonging*

cease to be conditional through a politics of recognition? Recognition and universalism are not opposed but can be articulated together. Recognizing differences in the public sphere is legitimate, as long as the recognition does not erode civic equality. Ultimately, universalism sets the limits within which recognition becomes sustainable. This is possible as the constitutive character of othering is part of the model as it is currently constructed, not as an immutable part of it. In sum, belonging can cease to be conditional, but only if France abandons the fiction that equality requires erasure. It will do so the moment recognition replaces assimilation as the condition of being French.

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