

**The Decolonization of Algeria:  
Defining French Identity as Difference**

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The question of identity is an important one for people in the modern era. Whether we identify with a particular nation-state, a religion, a political party, or an ancestral homeland determines the way we judge and are judged in society. The modern discourse of pluralism and multiculturalism, however, has considerably eased the pressures and implications of having one particular identity. Today, certainly in the United States, it is common to identify as a “Mexican-American,” or to be of “Irish-Catholic” origin, or in the case of our current President, to be a Euro-African-American Christian of Muslim decent. We now have the vocabulary with which to indicate, however superficially, the complexity, diversity, and plurality of the modern identity.

Yet, there remain certain identities that are not fully recognized or validated even in pluralistic Western societies. Here I am referring to the identity of a gay couple in California who wish to be married, or the Muslim schoolgirl in France who wishes to act in accord with the precepts of her religion by donning a headscarf at school. When recognition is denied, it is often done in the name of protecting another identity that would be threatened by the acceptance of this new and different identity. In the first example, gay-marriage is banned, ban proponents claim, in order to protect the sanctity of marriage and what are claimed to be American-Christian family values. In the second example, denial of recognition is justified for the protection and preservation of the French secular state and Republican identity. Focusing on the latter example—the insistence that certain ways of publicly displaying adherence to Islam are contrary to the French national identity—we liberals cannot help but question the legitimacy of claiming a unified French national identity in the first place. After all, France is home to the largest

Muslim population in Western Europe.<sup>1</sup> Yet, even if we do accept the notion of a unified French identity, the political claims that go along with this notion, including its supposed incompatibility with certain aspects of Islam, necessitate that we investigate the origin of its formation. I take this task up briefly here, but investigate the creation of a French national identity more thoroughly in section I of this paper.

The creation of the modern nation-state has traditionally been associated with Revolutionary France. In an unpublished draft paper, Professor Allan Megill points out that looking specifically at the *levée en masse* of 1793 may show us the best instance of the birth of the modern nation-state. Megill highlights three major principles that were established in this appeal to the masses:

The first principle is the unitary conception of the state that the decree invokes. There are *Frenchmen unmodified* (which here includes women and children also), rather than members of different estates or holders of particular positions within society and state. Second, there is the principle according to which all members of the state owe their highest allegiance to the state—including willingness to give up their lives. Third, there is the evocation of the “soil of the Republic,” from which the enemies of the Republic need to be expelled. This was a declaration of what Charles S. Maier has called, in his typology of frontiers, an “anti-adversarial frontier, established where organized empires or states confront each other as potentially hostile powers.”<sup>2</sup>

It is argued that this *levée en masse* marks the origin of the unitary conception of the state as made up of the French men and women who live on the “soil of the Republic.”

Furthermore, the purpose of this appeal was to protect France from the “other” nation-state enemies who threatened the new republic. Here the experience of revolution is

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<sup>1</sup> Alec G. Hargreaves, John Kelsay, and Sumner B. Twiss, *Politics and Religion in France and the United States*. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007), xv.

<sup>2</sup> Allan Megill, “The Problem of Borders in Historical Perspective,” Draft Paper for the Institute of World History of the Russian Academy of Sciences conference on “Studying World History (New Approaches): 20 Years After,” Moscow, November 10-11 2008.

assumed to have created a shared identity and will, if not in reality at least in the hearts and minds—read imaginations—of the new French citizens.

While certainly the *levée en masse* marks the birth of a unified political entity in the form of a nation-state—or at least in the form of the *idea* of such a unified political entity—it is interesting to note how this mobilization of the people did not automatically bring about the creation of an *actual* unified French identity, whether it be linguistic, cultural, or geographic. Although such a *political* identity, born of the French Revolution, proved sufficient to ensure the protection of France against foreign invasion, and subsequently underpinned pursuit of the imperial goals of a French empire, it was not synonymous with the formation of a unified and universal French identity. In the wake of 1789 and especially of 1793 France became one and indivisible politically speaking; however, it had not thereby become unitary, as Eugen Weber notes in his classic book, *Peasants into Frenchmen*.<sup>3</sup> In this book Weber outlines a process of creating or affirming a French national identity that was not as obvious or inevitable as one might assume. Rather, such a unified and homogenous identity was realized ultimately through a process that was not natural, short, nor even desired by most people who lived on French soil in the early nineteenth century. Before discussing this process further as I will in the next section, I would like to consider two other conceptions or interpretations regarding the origins of national identity in general.

The first is offered by Benedict Anderson in his book *Imagined Communities*. Here Anderson describes the nation-state as an imagined community, imagined as sovereign as well as limited. First, the nation is *imagined* insofar as its citizens will never

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<sup>3</sup> Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914*, (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1997), 97.

know their fellow nationals; it is imagined as *limited* because the nation necessarily indicates a membership that cannot be universally extended, *sovereign* insofar as it is free from any hierarchical structure (save, perhaps God), and *united* in a “deep, horizontal comradeship.”<sup>4</sup> To Anderson, the conception of the nation and the nationalism that flows from such an imagined community is closer to a kinship or religion than it is to an ideology.<sup>5</sup> The nation is something that we are born into and within which we re-imagine our allegiance and belonging. The notion of the imagined community is helpful in understanding modern willingness to die or sacrifice for a group of people to whom we are not meaningfully or substantially connected. The imagination is at work from generation to generation recreating our interconnectedness and intra-national unity “beyond which lie other nations.”<sup>6</sup>

A second perception of national identity can be teased out of the “limited” quality of Anderson’s imagined communities. Because there is no imagined national community that is coterminous with mankind, at some level nations are defined as compared to what they are not, or as distinct from an opposing nation. To Anderson, a nation does not exist without the existence of another nation. In other words, national identity is understood as, or through, difference; it is defined by what it is not. Political theorist William E. Connolly, in his book *Identity | Difference*, discusses the “diverse political tactics through which doubts about self-identity are posed and resolved by the constitution of an *other* against which the identity may define itself” (my emphasis).<sup>7</sup> Connolly recognizes that on some level difference is a prerequisite for the formation of an identity—much like

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<sup>4</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 7.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>7</sup> William E. Connolly, *Identity | Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), ix-x.

Anderson who contends that a nation does not exist without the existence of another nation. But the problem, as Connolly sees it, arises when a community transforms that which is different into that which is “other.” This transformation is done in an attempt to secure or entrench one’s own identity, especially when one’s identity is weakened or threatened by a new wholly unique identity. Although the recognition of difference is central to any understanding of identity, the transformation of this difference into an “other” is not. Furthermore, an identity that is particularly porous or evolving (as I argue was the case of French identity) may depend on or resort to distinguishing and differentiating between itself and an “other” so as to establish a more solid identity. Rather than *affirming* an identity through the imagination, here identity is made, *negatively*, through the mutual differentiation of two communities.

In this paper, I will employ Connolly’s formulation of identity as difference to better understand French national identity. Rather than focusing on the conflicts that arise today when French nationals do not assume the traditionally understood identity (secular or Christian, European, francophone), I examine a particular instance in history that allowed for the solidification of the French national identity through an appeal to difference. More specifically, I examine the process of decolonization in Algeria, pointing out ways in which this experience helped to redefine or affirm once and for all what it meant to be French. More than just defining the French identity through difference, I observe how the French cast the Algerian “Muslims” as “other” in the historical drama that was decolonization.<sup>8</sup> I rely heavily on historian Todd Shepard’s account of what he calls the “invention of decolonization;” yet my interpretation of

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<sup>8</sup> Following the example of Todd Shepard, I refer to “Muslims” in quotes because while this was a legally defined group of Algerians, the category did not refer to those who practiced Islam. For more information on this distinction see *The Invention of Decolonization* page 7.

decolonization does not run parallel to his own. Shepard contends that the amputation of Algeria from France was not adequately or legally explained, and instead justified according to the “tide of history” so as to eschew admission of defeat or error in France’s failed attempt at colonization. In this paper, I build on Shepard’s argument to explain how decolonization provided an opportunity to reassert the newly unified French identity by comparing it to what it was not: Muslim. Embedded in the discourse of identity politics, Algeria presents a relevant example of what Connolly calls the “paradox of difference.”<sup>9</sup> Connolly describes the paradox of difference:

[T]he paradoxical element in the relation of identity to difference is that we cannot dispense with personal and collective identities, but the multiple drives to stamp truth upon those identities function to convert differences into otherness and otherness into scapegoats created and maintained to secure the appearance of a true identity. To possess a true identity is to be false to difference, while to be true to difference is to sacrifice the promise of a true identity.<sup>10</sup>

According to Connolly’s description of the paradox of difference, I interpret France’s attempts at assimilation and colonization as the drive to *stamp truth* on the notion of a unified and universal French culture. By applying Connolly’s paradox of difference one-step further, Algerian “Muslims” excluded from post-Colonial France become the *scapegoats* who were transformed into the “other” so as to *secure the appearance of a true* French identity. After examining how the French community came to be imagined and unified (I), I seek to understand how the decolonization of Algeria facilitated or naturalized the unified identity at the expense of those who were different, becoming “other” (II). Lastly, I take a look at how subsequent immigration (during repatriation and post-decolonization) has confronted or challenged this identity (III).

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<sup>9</sup> William E. Connolly, *Identity | Difference*, 66.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 67.

How did the successful transformation of peasants into Frenchmen result in a concept of universal applicability, and an official policy of assimilation in the French colonies that led French officials to believe that Algerians could and should be made into Frenchmen? How did this failed project contribute to the solidification of a French identity that has rendered the French inhospitable to a diversity or plurality of identities within its borders?

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I. As I mentioned above, the French Revolution created a new conception of the French as politically united under the nation-state. There is yet another founding myth that has informed France's national identity and which dates back centuries before the Revolution. This founding reference involves the baptism of the Frankish leader Clovis in 496 AD, and is thought to mark "the unification of what was to become France with the rejection of the Aryan 'heresy' in favor of the 'Apostolic Roman Catholic' Christian faith."<sup>11</sup> While the wholly secular Revolution certainly undermined this religious creation myth, the unification of France as different from non-Catholics originally took place in 496 AD. Furthermore the French considered themselves to share not only religious roots, but a similar racial origin as well: "*nos ancêtres les Gaulois.*"<sup>12</sup> The general and popular appeal to the "Gallic topos" and an understanding of "a history of France that foregrounds the ethnic homogeneity of the nation and, as a result, establishes a radical difference between people of 'French stock' and everyone else," should inform our study

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<sup>11</sup> Jean Bauberot, "Current Issues in France." *Politics and Religion in France and the United States*. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007), 157.

<sup>12</sup> Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2006), 76.

of the French interaction with “everyone else.”<sup>13</sup> These and other myths of a near ancient unification have persisted and resurfaced as evidence of a common French history—even in popular culture, i.e., the comic book tales of the Gallic heroes *Asterix and Obelix* who resist Roman incursions. Yet, the French identity did not evolve into its present form without guidance and careful nudging by a central plan of unification and integration. This process began during the Revolution and was primarily pursued afterwards through the cadre of national education. As Weber explains, “Certainly the Revolution and revolutionary agitation carried national politics and the national language into quarters they had not touched before. Clubs, appeals, speeches, gazettes, and broadsheets, propaganda of every sort, news eagerly awaited and discussed with passion by groups once oblivious to anything but their immediate world...” all worked to engage peasants in national politics.<sup>14</sup> Despite this heightened awareness of all things national, regions in France such as Lorraine and Brittany still maintained a strong identity of their own. Some regions did not even speak a recognizable form of the French language—indeed, didn’t speak any form of French at all.

Further evidence of a non-unified French identity is demonstrated through historical references (and lack thereof) to immigrants. As Gérard Noiriel explains in his book *The French Melting Pot*, “the foreigner” had not yet emerged as a legal, statistical, or even bureaucratic concept in the nineteenth century. Perhaps this is due to or at least indicative of the fact that a central French identity had yet to form, coincidentally neither had national borders. Noiriel explains that “even in a department such as the Bouches du Rhone, under the heading of ‘foreigners’ were listed both individuals born abroad and

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<sup>13</sup> Jean-Loup Amselle, *Affirmative Exclusion: Cultural Pluralism and the Rule of Custom in France*. Translated by Jane Marie Todd, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003), 5.

<sup>14</sup> Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*, 98.

those who came from another department and carried a mandatory ‘internal passport.’”<sup>15</sup> As late as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a foreigner was anyone born outside of a given department. In Marseille, a man from Cannes was as much a foreigner as a man from Paris, or even Frankfurt. Crediting the French Revolution with the formation of a unified French identity that is anything more than political in nature is obviously problematic in light of these extremely local perceptions of identity.

By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, the political attempts at unification and centralization of French culture had worked relatively well. Weber’s comparison of the unification of France to a sort of colonization is especially helpful for my project:

The famous hexagon can itself be seen as a colonial empire shaped over the centuries: a complex of territories conquered, annexed, and integrated in a political and administrative whole, many of them with strongly developed national or regional personalities, some of them with traditions that were specifically un- or anti-French.<sup>16</sup>

Before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, French unity was more administrative than cultural. In the name of true integration, however, France systematically pursued the destruction or muting of local or regional culture.<sup>17</sup> The French assimilation process met with success in the end, “given time and skins of the same color.”<sup>18</sup> (The extent to which the survival of a certain level of linguistic diversity signifies the persistence of broader or deeper cultural divisions is debatable—I have, however, come across *Asterix and Obelix* comic books published in the Alsatian language.) Because of the success in transforming peasants into Frenchmen through the creation of roads, a national currency, schools (taught exclusively in French), and military service among other things, the French believed in the

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<sup>15</sup> Gerard Noiriel, Translated by Geoffroy de Laforcade, *The French Melting Pot: Immigration, Citizenship, and National Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 49-50.

<sup>16</sup> Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*, 485.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 491.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

universality of their culture and its applicability to all people, including the inhabitants of North Africa.

Another important component in the formation of a French national identity was the low incidence of emigration from France. As compared to England and other European countries, from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and onward, “the French state became decidedly immigrationist” as opposed to emigrationist.<sup>19</sup> Whether the French stayed in France due to a unique French love of country, an abundance of land, or a stronger tie to their homeland or village, the reality of low levels of emigration mixed with growing numbers of immigrants brought a relatively united (and arguably proud) population together with a newly immigrated population. Newly integrated French peasants were not leaving—except to go to Algeria—and instead, were joined by immigrants from other countries who were expected to assimilate.<sup>20</sup>

It is important to note that French perceptions of immigrants and foreigners were not overtly negative at the beginning of the Third Republic. From 1884 onward, in less than thirty years, forty bills related to the taxation and restriction of foreigners were presented before the French legislature. All of these propositions were defeated because they were said to contradict “the republican values of the French Revolution.”<sup>21</sup> Although immigration was not curbed or stopped, it was regulated by a strict policy of assimilation. At the end of the Second World War, practices regarding *francisation*, one component of official assimilation policy, had been specified more clearly. For foreign sounding surnames, “the measure proposed a ‘necessary modification to make them lose their

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<sup>19</sup> Nancy L. Green and François Weil, eds. *Citizenship and Those Who Leave: The Politics of Emigration and Expatriation*. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 53.

<sup>20</sup> Nancy L. Green and François Weil, eds. *Citizenship and Those Who Leave*, 52.

<sup>21</sup> Gerard Noiriel, *French Melting Pot*, 57.

foreign character,' and for given names, the objective was to replace foreign names with French ones."<sup>22</sup> Having successfully turned peasants into Frenchmen during industrialization of the French countryside, the same notion of assimilation was then applied to immigrants and colonial subjects. This was especially true for Algeria. Algeria had been incorporated into the metropole as a *département*; it was not just another colony. Rather, Algeria was considered to be an extension of France herself, and therefore the power to assimilate seemed to be all the more potent and necessary.

By examining the formation of a French national identity and its accompanying policy of assimilation—both in the metropole and the colonies—I discover a problematic conception of identity. Here one's identity is seen as something to be shed and modernized. Little or no value is granted to the local or cultural origins or sources of one's self. I argue that throughout French history, identity is seen as something constructed and learned. Possessing the traditional French, secular, and republican identity was a sign of evolution and progress—necessarily superior to an older, but perhaps more authentic identity.

In this paper, I argue that the failure to successfully transform "Muslim" Algerians into Frenchmen through assimilation created a sort of identity crisis for the French. Through decolonization and the annulment of French nationality for eight out of the nine million French nationals in Algeria, the government redefined what it meant to be French. Unlike the original imagined community of Gallic history or the education and linguistic uniformity used to assimilate the provincial French, decolonization provided an entirely negative definition of what it meant to be French. Instead of relying on legal standards and rules that had been established throughout Algeria's history, the Fifth

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 75.

Republic demarcated the French identity through appeals to difference. This has had lasting implications for the modern French state. This largely negative definition of the French identity has created instances of what political theorist Charles Taylor calls misrecognition and nonrecognition.<sup>23</sup> According to Taylor, such a denial of recognition can lead to people being treated as second-class citizens as well as a loss of self-worth as the misrecognition is internalized. What role did the decolonization of Algeria play in the calcification of the French identity and eventual exclusion of legally French nationals who also happened to be Muslims? How has this definition of French identity as difference at the time of decolonization—determined by what it was not—persisted to affect the recognition and identity of French citizens of Algerian descent and more generally the Muslim population in France today?

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**II.** I now turn to the question of how the colonization and eventual decolonization of Algeria influenced French identity. As mentioned above, during the French Revolution and throughout the colonial period, France enjoyed a relatively high level of linguistic and cultural diversity. The national education policies of the Third Republic, however, aimed to mitigate such diversity in the name of unification and assimilation. Having generally succeeded in this project, the French turned to North Africa to continue its spread of French universal republican values.

France's imperial goals and conquests have had lasting effects on what it means to be French, even today. In *Among Empires*, Charles Maier names what in his view distinguishes a nation-state from an empire. While the nation-state seeks "homogenous

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<sup>23</sup> Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 25.

territory,” the empire possesses “less administratively uniform territory.”<sup>24</sup> The nation-state has a “more militant sense of shared identity, including linguistic and sometimes religious identity,” whereas empires allow for a greater range of diversity. Put simply, “nations are better at equality, empires at tolerance.”<sup>25</sup> To be sure, elements of such a distinction hold true in France, a nation-state that *had* an empire. Immigrants to the metropole were subjected to militant measures aimed at unifying the nation through a shared language and culture; while in Algeria, nationality could be obtained and held alongside local civil status. Local civil status meant that civil affairs such as marriage or inheritance would be determined by one’s local or religious affiliation (Koranic, Mosaic, Berber, or Mozabite customary law).<sup>26</sup> Although cultural laws and traditions were recognized alongside French nationality, anyone who wanted to become a full citizen had to give up his local civil status.

While Maier’s distinction between nation-states and empires is helpful in understanding imperial diversity, tolerance, and identity in general, it is not particularly relevant to the specific case of French Algeria. Algeria, unlike the other imperial conquests of France, was administratively incorporated into the metropole. Territorially speaking, Algeria was to France what Alaska is to the United States. So, Maier’s expectations for imperial tolerance would not necessarily apply to the case of Algeria. Algerians were expected (although not technically forced) to assimilate in the same way that their fellow nationals living in the hexagon had.

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<sup>24</sup> Charles S. Maier, *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and its Predecessors* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), 102.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 29.

<sup>26</sup> Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization*, 24.

If the people living in Algeria were not full French citizens, it was not because they had been denied citizenship or withheld equality. Rather, it could be explained by their own inability or unwillingness to assimilate to French life. Shepard points out that there was no theoretical explanation on the basis of race or ethnicity to explain why Algerian “Muslims” were excluded from citizenship. There was never a widely accepted principle to justify inequality among Algerians. “Theoretical or principled explanations were far less important than the acknowledged success of resistance to the assimilation of Algeria’s ‘Muslims.’”<sup>27</sup> It was not race that set “Muslims” apart from Frenchmen, it was culture. The French believed that colonial subjects were capable of learning French culture and that “such a cultural assimilation would elevate the colonial peoples morally and intellectually.”<sup>28</sup> In sum, the Algerian “Muslims” had failed to become French because they had resisted doing so. As conqueror of Algeria and eventual Governor General Thomas-Robert Bugeaud said in a speech at the time of France’s conquering of Algeria:

[W]e promised to treat them as if they were children of France, we gave them formal assurance that we would preserve their laws, their property, their religions, their customs, etc... We may then hope, first, to see them tolerate our domination, and later, over time, we may accustom them to identify themselves with us, so as to form one and the same people under the paternal government of the king of the French people.<sup>29</sup>

Pluralism existed insofar as France recognized various cultural origins from which people began their process of assimilation. Yet, there was no generosity afforded to Algerians

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>28</sup> Paul Clay Sorum, *Intellectuals and Decolonization in France* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977). 211.

<sup>29</sup> As quoted by Jean-Loup Amselle, *Afirmative Exclusion*, 61.

who wished to maintain their original identity or create a new identity in the context of French nationality.

Since the 1870s, the official position of the French governments was that everyone in Algeria could become a French citizen—as thousands of Algerians had already done—by renouncing their Koranic civil status. Yet as Algerian independence loomed nearer and nearer, the metropole dramatically changed its position towards naturalization laws. Replacing assimilation, the official policy became one of “integration.” Assimilation in French Algeria had aimed at ignoring particularities between different groups for the sake of equality. France deserted its original position of political equality as measured by legal uniformity, after recognizing that measures to promote assimilation had created institutionalized inequality. Only as the end of *Algérie Française* drew near were different groups given the possibility of maintaining their particularities and enjoying the equal political rights that came with citizenship.<sup>30</sup> The policy of integration was adopted in an effort to stall the forces of independence. In practice, however, by recognizing irreconcilable and fundamental differences between “Muslim” Algerians and “European” Algerians, integration policies did not succeed in thwarting the independence movement, but actually marked the first step towards decolonization.

Algeria was considered to be part of France, and so the process of decolonization represented an important and drastic departure from the previous understanding of French identity. Algeria, “just across the Mediterranean, was juridically and sentimentally a part of France. The country has been built, the French believed, by the French soldiers and settlers who had come to an anarchic wasteland, and, in turn it had played an important

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<sup>30</sup> Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization*, 48.

role in the liberation of France from the Nazis.”<sup>31</sup> Now, in the face of calls for independence, France was rewriting the French Algerian history to include a discourse of colonization. What was always considered part of the metropole, was now being referred to in colonial terms.

For French intellectual Jean-Paul Sartre, Algerian independence represented the potential to ultimately liberate France from a duopolistic hegemony “in which terms such as *native*, *colonizer*, *colonized*, *white*, or *black* confined people to polarized identities.”<sup>32</sup> Intellectuals on the left considered Algerian liberation as the opportunity for a more complex and authentic understanding of the French and Algerian identity. But Sartre’s dream was not achieved. Although reactions to the Algerian revolution brought about the end of assimilation policies, independence—when ultimately achieved—provided a context in which polarized identities were recreated, perpetuated, and institutionalized.

As French control over Algeria came to a close, the opinions of French officials, no longer embedded in a discourse of assimilation, worked to redefine the French identity through contrast. These opinions were in direct opposition to the former official assimilation policy and the assumed universality of the French culture. In his memoirs, Alain Peyrefitte, de Gaulle’s Minister of Information, quotes de Gaulle as he compares the relationship between Frenchmen and Arabs to that of oil and vinegar. You can shake the bottle, mixing the two together, he says, but “after a minute, they separate again. Arabs are Arabs, French are French.”<sup>33</sup> Because this seemed so obvious to de Gaulle, he had no hope (or interest for that matter) for remaining in Algeria. They had tried to make

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<sup>31</sup> Paul Clay Sorum, *Intellectuals and Decolonization in France*, 111-112.

<sup>32</sup> Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization*, 73.

<sup>33</sup> Cited by Todd Shepard in *The Invention of Decolonization*, 75.

Algeria French and had failed; this failure came as a result of what was now considered to be the inherent and irreconcilable differences of the two peoples.

The movement of colonial liberation in general, and Algerian independence in particular, “was difficult for Frenchmen to understand. It was seen as a rejection of the gift of a superior culture.”<sup>34</sup> As independence became a reality, the French identity was brought into question. France’s position on assimilation can be compared to a religious drive towards conversion, where colonists are interpreted as cultural missionaries. To understand the motivation behind this attempt at conversion as well as its implications, I turn once again to William Connolly. Connolly criticizes aims to convert others, pointing out what he believes to be the real impetus behind such action: insecurity. Connolly explains: “[S]ince [their] truth is not provable by argument or evidence, it can be best sustained by the fervor of all who fall within earshot of it...since it cannot be known, it must be validated through general consent.”<sup>35</sup> Here Connolly is referring to any proselytizing religion that has faith in a *divine* truth that cannot be known or proven, but is validated by the conversion of others into fellow believers. This can easily be extended to apply to the French perception of their culture as superior to all others. The best way to prove or demonstrate this superiority was through conversion or assimilation of other people into this perfected way of life, language, and general culture. Algeria’s resistance to this conversion was therefore seen as a threat to the French identity.

Rather than admitting the fallibility of the universal values of the French Republic, the government pointed to the differences, if not the inferiority, of the

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<sup>34</sup> Paul Clay Sorum, *Intellectuals and Decolonization in France*, 211.

<sup>35</sup> William E. Connolly, *Identity | Difference*, 147.

“Muslims” to explain the failed project of assimilation.<sup>36</sup> Connolly explains this phenomenon theoretically explaining that the maintenance of one identity “involves the conversion of some differences into otherness, into evil, or one of its numerous surrogates.”<sup>37</sup> Historically, there had been an oversimplified conception of France and Algeria being one. This “false simplicity of one and the same” transformed into a “false simplicity of two” through the notion of decolonization. What is clear in both of these inaccurate portrayals of the relationship between France and Algeria, is a lack of generosity afforded to the potential emergence of an entirely new understanding, one that neither combined the French and Algerian identities nor labeled them as mutually exclusive.

While de Gaulle and other French officials who accepted the end of *Algérie Française* blamed the failure of assimilation on what they saw to be a unique, fully formed, and incompatible Algerian identity, at least one of de Gaulle’s contemporaries did not recognize the existence of such an identity. Beyond the more obvious distinction between “European” Algerians and “Muslim” Algerians, Algeria was divided even further among different ethnic groups and religions. According to Minister of Information Peyrefitte, there was no uniquely Algerian identity until the war for independence. Peyrefitte, in proposing to divide an independent Algeria into three states, lamented the fact that “seven years of combat ha[d] given birth to two units: the unity of the Muslim populations...[and] the unity of the non-Muslim population.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> This concept of inferiority is best exemplified in another quotation of de Gaulle who in 1959 said to General Marie-Paul Allard, “You cannot possibly consider that one day an Arab, a Muslim, could be the equal of a Frenchman?” This quotation is cited in Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization*, 75.

<sup>37</sup> William E. Connolly, *Identity | Difference*, 64.

<sup>38</sup> Todd Shepard. *The Invention of Decolonization*, 109.

Before the French conquest, Algeria had been a province of the Ottoman Empire, yet it was “a semiautonomous military and segmentary state.”<sup>39</sup> The war had transformed what had been a fluid, diverse, and mosaic identity into two irreconcilably diverse populations. Rather than allowing the evolution and formation of a uniquely Mediterranean identity, a healthy *mélange* of “Cordovan Arabs and Oriental Arabs, Kabyles and Chaouias, Mozabites and Israelites, Andalusians and Neapolitans, of Catalans and Maltese, of Alsatians and Corsicans, Greeks and Lebanese,” the war had pitted two sides against each other, solidifying them in what was anything but a necessary, natural, or nuanced distinction.<sup>40</sup> Here it is helpful to consider Connolly’s work on identity and difference to understand the implications of Peyrefitte’s contention that a unique Algerian identity had not formed until the conflict with France. The Algerian identity which had yet to take form was “at its most fragile point,” because on the one hand its resistance to assimilation threatened and disrupted “the stability of [an] established” universalistic French identity, and on the other hand it lacked “a sufficiently stable definition through which to present itself.”<sup>41</sup> According to Connolly, this fragility leaves newly formed identities, or identities not yet formed (as might have been the case with Algeria) vulnerable to being condemned as the “other.” In the case of Algeria, its differences were condemned as backward or dangerous in an effort to justify the failed project of colonization—ultimately, in an effort to moderate the threat that this failure posed to the French identity. Perceiving Algeria as the “other” facilitated decolonization

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<sup>39</sup> Jean-Loup Amselle, *Affirmative Exclusion*, 57.

<sup>40</sup> Todd Shepard. *The Invention of Decolonization*, 109.

<sup>41</sup> William E. Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), xvi.

insofar as it mitigated the impact decolonization would have on a French identity that had included the Algerian departments for over a century.

If Peyrefitte is correct in saying that a unified Algerian identity was not created until it came into conflict with France over independence, the applicability of Connolly's identity as difference argument becomes even stronger. Insofar as the Algerian War created an Algerian identity opposite a French one, decolonization allowed for a reaffirmation of the French identity as compared to the wholly incompatible Algerian "Muslim" identity. Connolly explains the consequences of articulating identity in specific historical context, such as decolonization:

For it is likely that every confident articulation of stable human interests in a specific historical context inadvertently naturalizes some contingent features of the present by treating them as if they were conformed to the universal as such. And this process of naturalization often unconsciously demonizes those very differences that would otherwise unsettle the experience of stability.<sup>42</sup>

In the context of Algeria, I interpret Connolly's theory in the following way: The demand for Algerian independence and France's eventual acceptance of the demand in the wake of a long, violent, terrifying war established the differences between the French and Algerians as natural and fundamental. Instead of recognizing the colonial and historical context of independence, the justifications and explanations were filled with references of insurmountable differences between the French and Algerian cultures. This process of naturalization resulted in—if not the *demonizing* of the "Muslim" identity—certainly the branding of Islam as problematic or incompatible with the French identity. Without the recognition and politicization of these differences, the identity of a France sans Algérie would have been greatly unsettled and destabilized. Instead, it was the identity of

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 34.

Algerians in particular, and Muslims in general, within post-colonial France that inherited this instability.

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**III.** I have shown in the preceding section how decolonization strained, questioned, and eventually reformed both the collective French and Algerian identities. Furthermore, the individual legal status of millions of Algerians was left undecided. As I have mentioned above, the march towards independence was accompanied by a broader extension of political rights to the “Muslim” population. This was done in an effort to stall independence. But now that decolonization was considered inevitable and historically preordained, there remained the question of who would keep their French nationality? After the Evian Accords declared a cease-fire and ushered in a period of cooperation between the two countries, it was clear that “France would remain French without Algeria.”<sup>43</sup> But would the Algerians remain French without France?

The negotiations that preceded and followed the Evian Accords sought to address the question of who would keep their French nationality and who would obtain Algerian citizenship. France granted repatriate status to “Europeans” and “Muslims” alike as a sort of guarantee that would work to convince Algerians of the futility of rushing back to the metropole. Negotiations to establish minority status and representation for “European” Algerians after independence were also pursued so as to prevent a mass exodus towards the metropole. Logistically, these negotiations posed serious problems for the French, who were expected to reciprocate by offering a privileged minority status to Algerians living within the borders of the hexagon. “Republican ideology, and French post-1789

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<sup>43</sup> Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization*, 107.

practice made accepting minority rights difficult.”<sup>44</sup> If France granted minority status to Algerians living in France, a status that would recognize and protect their cultural differences, would it be expected to do the same for the Alsatian community? What about the Basques? Ultimately, efforts to prevent a large-scale emigration to the metropole proved in vain, as the French government had greatly overestimated the  *pied noirs*’s attachment to Algeria. More important than staying on their land and in their homes, was the desire to remain French.<sup>45</sup> To them, this required living on French soil.

In 1962 there were one million “Europeans” in Algeria and eight million “Muslim French citizens.”<sup>46</sup> In the wake of a mass exodus, French officials left behind their consideration of citizenship status based on law and tradition in exchange for an ethnically defined definition of national origin.<sup>47</sup> When deciding repatriate status, the government replaced “existing subtle subsets of French citizens – with Koranic Status, with double nationality, protected by European minority status, etc.,” with an oversimplified “division between ‘Algerians’ and ‘French.’ The former were ‘Muslims’ ... and the latter were not.”<sup>48</sup> During this period of mass emigration from Algeria towards the newly delineated hexagon, the official and technical words used to describe those relocating to the metropole adopted a language of distinction between “us” and “them.” More specifically, “‘Repatriates’ came to refer almost exclusively to ‘Europeans,’ while ‘Muslims’ became ‘refugees.’”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 157.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 143.

<sup>46</sup> Todd Shepard, “Making French and European Coincide: Decolonization and the Politics of Comparative and Transnational Histories,” *Ab Imperio: Studies of New Imperial History and Nationalism in the Post-Soviet Space*, Feb. 2007, 3.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 4-5.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 5.

Once it was decided who would be considered Algerian and who would remain French, the next step was a campaign aimed at welcoming the *pieds-noirs*, those who qualified as repatriates, back to the metropole. Here the main priority was to distinguish the repatriated *pieds-noirs* from members of the OAS, the secret army that had dragged the war for independence out in a bloody and terrifying prolonged conflict. This was done through propaganda and a media campaign. The *pieds-noir* identity was affirmed through the demonization of an identity of difference, here the OAS. To be sure, in the case of the OAS, a terrorist organization, perhaps the demonization was not as hasty or controversial as was the distinction between “Muslims” and “Europeans;” but still, I point out how the demonization of the “other” rendered the French acceptance of *pieds-noirs* (who had nonetheless been affiliated with a long, drawn-out, violent conflict) more palatable. Furthermore, the politics of *pieds-noirs* repatriation adopted what had always been the hallmark of French immigration: forced assimilation. The French government ensured that *pieds-noirs* did not form enclaves, separate communities, or ghettos that could potentially distinguish or set them apart from the rest of the French population.

The repatriation of those “European” Algerians deemed French enough to keep their national status, along with the revocation of French nationality from those who remained in Algeria, recreated the myth of cultural unity. These repatriates were integrated into life in the metropole, while their former compatriots were systematically excluded. What resulted was a newly integrated and largely homogenous national entity that had eliminated the identities that were seen as problematic or different.

Decolonization had effectively categorized those French nationals living in Algeria who had up until then resisted assimilation as wholly incompatible with the French way of

life, and therefore incapable of assimilation and unworthy of maintaining French nationality. What did this mean for the minority of “Muslims” that *did* emigrate to the metropole after Algeria gained independence? How was the systematic exclusion of “Muslims” from post-colonial France reconciled with the fact that thousands of “Muslims,” did in fact, live in France?

Unlike other populations that had successfully assimilated given time and a national education, it appears that “post-colonial minorities are incapable of ‘melting’ anonymously into the social fabric.”<sup>50</sup> I think this is due, in part, to the effects of decolonization which worked to qualify these identities as wholly or partially incompatible with the French national identity. What can be done to engender a newfound generosity to these unique and valuable identities? A pluralization and expansion of what it means to be French seems to be in order.

It could be argued that modern attempts at pluralism in France go only as far as to offer a viable alternative to a traditional Catholic identity. This is best understood through the concept of *laïcité*, or the secular society. What this pluralism lacks, however, is an infinite amount of possibilities and alternatives: in France, you can be secular or Christian, but the alternatives remain duopolistic.<sup>51</sup> Connolly suggests a means by which the paradox of difference can be avoided or mitigated: through an ethos of critical responsiveness. While recognizing that our identity depends on differences—we are partially and necessarily defined by what we are not—we still maintain a certain level of initial generosity towards those identities that are different from our own. Rather than

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<sup>50</sup> Alec G. Hargreaves, *Multi-Ethnic France: Immigration, Politics, Culture and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 137.

confronting differences with this critical responsiveness, the French tradition has maintained a duopoly. This approach to pluralism—more antagonistic than it is agonistic—has led to the exclusion of thousands of Muslims in France—their lifestyles, religion, or identity denied recognition. Even today, efforts at affirmative action aimed at “target groups” perpetuate the exclusion of those who are considered “other.” “At the ethnic and cultural level, two major institutions are set in place, the French nation on one hand, composed of those ‘of French stock,’ which can thus be assimilated to an ethnic group or race, and on the other, the different ethnic minorities or communities, which serve as a foil to the French identity.”<sup>52</sup> I argue that this hardening of identities, in which the majority “French ethnic group” is pitted against “minority communities,” began during the process of decolonization. It has worked to create and perpetuate divisions as well as more extreme identities including religious fundamentalism. Only through a more critical response and an initial generosity afforded to diverse identities will violence and exclusion be overcome. This response would necessarily exclude attempts at differentiation, exclusion, or even assimilation.

While there still remains a lot to be investigated regarding the identity and experience of Muslims living in France today, I believe that applying Connolly’s account of identity and difference to French and Algerian history sheds much light on the subject. The next steps for further research would surely include an examination of our understanding and distinction between *allegiance* and *identity*. Does an emphasis on national allegiance rather than a unified identity help us in our understanding and acceptance of individuals who identify with a plurality and a variety of moral, social, or cultural sources as? Similarly, I would like to investigate claims regarding the

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<sup>52</sup> Jean-Loup Amselle, *Affirmative Exclusion*, xiii.

assimilation aimed at second-generation immigrants. What attempts at assimilation persist today beyond the forced secularity observed through the legal banning of headscarves in French public schools?

While not a full account of identity in France, this paper presents how the French identity was changed and stabilized through decolonization. I think it would be illuminating to expand this research to apply Connolly's conception of identity and difference to the modern French political context. Immigration and multiculturalism in France is a relevant and much discussed topic among historians and political theorists alike. I believe, however, that this problem remains insoluble without first understanding the history of decolonization in which concrete, legal decisions were made as to who would be French and who would not.

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