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IS AMERICA BECOMING POST-RACIAL WHILE FRANCE IS BECOMING POST-SOCIAL?

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1 INTRODUCTION

As Barack Obama's election asks the question of a "post-racial" America, France wonders about putting more race in their class-based policies.

Before getting to something like “concepts” or “ideas,” let me tell you about Joseph. He is one of the first people I interviewed, nearly a month ago, when I arrived in Washington, DC, to begin my fellowship at the Transatlantic Academy. Joseph is neither a political analyst, nor a sociologist. Born in Washington, DC, he is now in his early 40s and manages a barber shop on U Street. The walls of his salon are covered with posters celebrating Obama. I met him without any appointment. I didn’t need a haircut, just an introduction to my presentation. On my colleague Rahsaan Maxwell’s advice, I simply opened his door.

At first, I asked Joseph what has changed for him since the elections. His immediate answer to this basic question struck me. “Before Obama’s election, I was nothing more than a Black man in America,” he said. “Now I feel myself like a citizen of this country.”

I wanted to know if the issue about the so called “post-racial” America went deeper than the media and academic controversy that I had read about. I really would have thought that Joseph the barber, would have looked at me with a disapproving frown and said something like: “What do you mean by post-racial?” Instead, he replied: “The shift to post-racial America is a fact. We proved we can pass racial lines. I have been educated with the idea that White people were devils. I didn’t wait until Obama’s election to change my mind about that. But since I know White people have voted for him, I look at them in a different way.” As I realized further into our conversation, Joseph is not a dreamer. He is far from thinking that the segregation problems are over, or that the race line has been erased in this country. But with his answer, I felt encouraged to work on the issue I was interested in.

Does Barack Obama’s election mean that the United States now lives in a “post-racial” era, that Americans are not as polarized by race as before?

I assume it is not a yes or no question. But the way you answer this question will determine the kind of social policies that can be implemented and the evolution of the American model of social integration. Could it be less based on race and more on class factors such as income? Could other consequences be observed in terms of minorities’ leadership? One apparent meaning of Obama’s election—a victory for Black people—could also be questioned as African-Americans could lose in terms of public subsidies or affirmative action policies.

Of course here are questions that I would have asked if I was American. But, nobody’s perfect, I’m French. So I’m also interested in this because we’re currently discussing the same issues in France, but in exactly the reverse direction. Roughly said, the French so-called “Republican system,” supposedly colorblind, is inefficient in order to fight race discriminations. Currently, one of the main public debates in France is on the introduction of race-based statistics and race-based policies. In other words, my hypothesis is that while Americans question the issue of a shift from race to class, the French wonder about putting more race in their mainly class-based policies.

The United States as a “post-racial” country? France as a “pre-racial” country?

It seems to me a perfect “transatlantic” issue, as the two situations, even not exactly symmetric, can nurture each other.

2 IS AMERICA SHIFTING TO THE POINT OF BECOMING A “POST-RACIAL” COUNTRY?

On this topic, Joseph is far from representing the dominant way of thinking, especially among African-American people. Many objections confront the “post-racial” hypothesis.

Race as a key element

The main objection is that race remains a key element to analyzing American society. The election of the first African-American president has not changed the huge racial gap between communities. According to *The State of Black America*, a report published some weeks ago by the National Urban League, African-Americans remain twice as likely as Whites to be unemployed, three times more likely to live in poverty, and more than six times as likely to be incarcerated.

Fifty-five years after the historic Supreme Court case of Brown vs. The Board of Education, the racial disparity of resource distribution is reflected as in inequality in scholastic achievement and dropout rates in high schools. “There are still two stories to tell about Black America,” says Marc Morial, president of the National Urban League. There is one of accomplishment, prosperity, and increased political power that fill us with pride and hope. However, the other story is different: “Fewer than 50 percent of African-Americans graduate from high school in many major cities.” The same disparities exist in the quality of health care in relation with insurance coverage and income. The average life expectancy is 78 years for White people in comparison with less than 73 for Blacks.¹

In his office on Capitol Hill, U.S. House Representative Alcee Hastings of Florida warmly insisted: “Nine blocks from here, in Anacostia, you have a highly segregated community where the poorest children are the most likely to be educated by the least

experienced teachers.” He added: “We’re very satisfied to have elected Obama but things will get worse if we consider we’ve nothing else to do than relax! In four years, the question will be: ‘Did we do it?’”

Actually, the race barrier as a systemic phenomenon and not as an individual problem is not only reflected by statistics. The racial gap remains in everyday life, as suggested by the controversial speech by Attorney General Eric Holder last February. In depicting the country as “a nation of cowards” divided by racial matters, Holder focused on the fact that many aspects of American life remain separated.

Krissah Thompson, reporter at *The Washington Post*, published “I’m not post-racial,” an article² that confirms the gap between the multiracial crowd gathered for Obama rallies and everyday life “in beauty salons, parks, or churches and small town squares” where people are, in what she referred to as “racial isolation.” Thompson told me with humor that “Black people have voted during decades for White candidates and nobody at this time argued that it was a ‘post-racial’ vote!” Thompson added an autobiographical part to her article. She writes, “Post-racialism means the loss of so much that I cherish about who I am and where I came from.” She confesses for herself a rarely integrated social life and the hope that race and ethnicity will remain valued aspects of her identity. As I argued that she was working in a quite integrated company, she replied to me that the weight of race was hard to detect because people today were more friendly and because the image of the Black people in the media has changed. Other arguments tend to acknowledge the remaining weight of the race factor. Analyzing the presidential vote itself shows that the new president gained 95 percent of Black voters,

The main objection to the “post-racial” hypothesis is that race remains a key element to analyze the American society.

¹ *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, “Trends in the Black-White life expectancy gap in the U.S.,” March 21, 2007.

² *The Washington Post*, “I’m not Post-Racial” November 30, 2008.

A lot of people don't consider a post-racial society as a realistic goal or as a goal at all.

two-thirds of the Hispanic vote, but “only” 45 percent of the White vote.

Of course, remaining facts of pure racism are the clearest sign that America has not passed the racial barrier. It can be the soft racism of radio host Rush Limbaugh when he mentioned Obama as the “magic negro.”³ It can also be the real violent threat of extremist groups. According to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, these extremists “have capitalized on the election of the first African-American president,” where Obama has received more threats than any previous president.

“Barack Obama’s election has inflamed racist extremists who see it as another sign that their country is under siege by non-whites,” adds Mark Potok, responsible for the Southern Poverty Law Center, a group that monitors the radical right.

Is “Post-racial” America just a campaign slogan or a real goal?

The most specifically American sign of non-achievement of a “post-racial” society is simply that **a lot of people don’t consider it as a realistic goal or as a goal at all.** According to a *Washington Post* poll,⁴ 41 percent of Black people compared to 22 percent of White people think racial equality will not be achieved in their lifetime or even ever. Leonard Pitts, columnist for *The Miami Herald*, explains very clearly that Blacks and Whites use different ways to judge racial progress:⁵ “Whites use the yardstick of how far we have come from a nation we used to be. Blacks use the yardstick of how far we have yet to go to be the nation we ought to be.”

So, is “post-racial” a fallacious concept? Shamira Muhammad, political science student at Howard

University, thinks it is. She explained to me that the “post-racial” buzz had only been created during the campaign by the media in order to make Obama more appealing and friendly to the Whites; to make them less guilty for voting for him.” In her mind, the race issue remains so prevalent that Obama couldn’t really address it without being barred from the election. She is not far from thinking that Obama’s election will be a bad thing for Blacks because, as she puts it, “you can’t improve the situation of Black people if you don’t confront the race issue.” But actually, Obama himself rejected the term “*post-racial*” because, as quoted from an interview with *Newsweek*, “it implies (...) an easy short cut for racial reconciliation.”⁶

Daryl Scott, history department chair at Howard University, argues that he knows “very few people who take ‘post-racialism’ seriously.” According to him, it is nothing more than a new word for assimilation and the conservative denial of any racial and/or social policy. He further added that it is probably a way for White people who now feel comfortable with a multiracial society, to keep their leadership within it.

The new president has “to defend himself to be pro-Black,” Scott added. “He won’t do anything for Black people as Black people. But he will show he can make a pro-Black policy without any reference to the color.” Universal health insurance will be the main test on that ability.

Last but not least element showing the still racial vision in American society is the public perception of Obama himself. As he can seriously be considered through his biography as a “post-racial” candidate, most African-Americans consider him, since he won, just as a member of their community. The current pressure on the president regarding the choice of a church—Black or integrated—seems

³ *The Los Angeles Times*, March 19, 2007.

⁴ Pew, November 13, 2008.

⁵ CNN Politics.com, March 28, 2009.

⁶ *Newsweek*, July 8, 2007.

significant of the fears or the doubts remaining on this topic. An African-American student told me that she considered the straight hair of Michelle Obama as a concession to the Whites and even a sign of a remaining inferiority complex. “Look at the way he swaggers in certain circumstances,” said one student. “He is not ethnically African-American by birth but he is assimilated because he attended Black churches, worked in Black neighborhoods, married an African-American woman,” commented Scott. “Just the opposite of a ‘post-racial’ man.” And as Scott denies any “post racialism” in the new president’s attitude, he concludes with a sentence that sounded to me as the exact opposite: “Obama has studied us as a political anthropologist. He has insights on all of us and understands us better than we understand ourselves.”

A changing society challenging the race-based system

On the other hand, several elements tend to reflect the weakening of the race factor and an ongoing shift to the acceptance of a multiracial society. In a way, the last presidential election itself can be celebrated as “post-racial” because, obviously, it has not been racially but politically polarized. For example, 80 percent of White voters think that Obama will not favor the interest of Black people. For many Blacks, the massive choice of White voters in favor of Obama has been something like a revelation. The multiracial crowds during his rallies showed the race barrier could be overcome. “There is an eager and growing audience among citizens of every race, to embrace the notion, that the end of race-based politics is near,” wrote PBS journalist Gwen Ifill.⁷

⁷ “The Breakthrough,” Politics and race in the age of Obama 2009.

The dramatic improvement of race relations shown by recent polls seems to reflect a turning point. According to a poll,⁸ 59 percent of African-Americans characterize as “good” the relationship between Whites and Blacks, that is twice as much as nine months ago! “If you are interested in showing that America is just an unfair country, it is hard to make it since the election,” argued Spencer Boyer, Center for American Progress. “We’ve passed beyond blaming White Americans for everything.”

In this apparently new context, some Black academics question the relevance of the repeated complaint on discrimination by organizations such as the NAACP or the National Urban League. “If the NAACP as it currently operates ceased to exist tomorrow, what significant effect would it have on black America?” asked John MacWhorter, *The New Republic*.⁹ Instead of being interested in schooling, employment, fighting AIDS, he argues, “the NAACP is all about the colorful, the dramatic, the recapitulation of the spirit of the sixties,” what he calls “tribalist incantation.” The centenary of NAACP is not the only pretext for this anger. Obama’s election has boosted this kind of judgment. “I’m sick of the same old forecast for blackness,” adds novelist Victor LaVallee.¹⁰ “If a disempowered Black person opposes an empowered Black person, which one is the Black nationalist?” La Vallee heavily questions the political use of racism in writing: “What will become black identity without a common enemy?” The question is not just a provocation as the classical racial divisions are challenged by a serial of data.

From a **demographic** point of view: The U.S. approaches a tipping point as the groups currently characterized as racial minorities will account

⁸ *The New York Times*, April 29, 2009.

⁹ *The New Republic*, February 12, 2009.

¹⁰ Bookforum.com, Apr/May 2009.

Several elements tend to reflect the weakening of the race factor and a shift to the acceptance of a multiracial society.

for a majority of the U.S. population by the year 2042 and as soon as 2023 for the people under the age of 18. “That means that every child born in the USA from here on out, will belong to the first post-White generation,” wrote columnist Hua Hsu in a recent contribution entitled “The end of White America?”¹¹

This perspective, combined with the consequences of a globalized world on race relations will have direct consequences for the perceptions of our identities. The NYU sociologist Dalton Conley already describes a “network nation,”¹² where applications like “facebook create flexible identities that only overlap with racial identities.” That means an infinite number of possible self definitions, far away from the limited categories of the current American census. Some stars like Tiger Woods who identified himself as a “Cablinasian” (Caucasian, Black, (American) Indian, and Asian), seems to personify this kind of self make-up. As the result of the growth of a multiracial population, traditional color lines have blurred. The old Black-White divide has become murkier as America has diversified and Americans have started viewing themselves in more complex ways.

From a **sociological** point of view, change is also in progress. Today, 79 percent of the American public know an interracial couple, a 21 percentage point gain from 1995. Polls suggest that the number of Americans who count at least one Black friend has jumped 25 percent since 1973. “But what about TWO friends?,” asked Dayo Olopade from the *The Root*, insisting that... “Obama doesn’t count!”

Even from the **economical** point of view, the race barrier has moved back. Diversity has improved inside the Black community as race equity did (70% of African-American households lived in poverty

in the 60s versus 46% today). But class disparities between rich and poor have widened and this gap transcends race.

A possible shift from race-based to class-based policies?

All these ongoing radical evolutions make possible, if not necessary, a progressive shift from a management of social issues based on race to a vision based on social status and income. Ironically, Barack Obama seems to have the best profile to act in this direction. Because he has succeeded in convincing his White voters that he is the president of the whole country and he has to maintain this conviction. This possible shift from race to class is not just a guess. During his campaign, Obama made several such statements. The most well known is the one about his daughters who “should probably be treated by any admissions officer (to college) as folks who are pretty advantaged.” Besides this quite personal issue, he made very precise declarations considering affirmative action under the criterion of class and not only race. We need to craft it “so some of our children aren’t getting more favored treatment than a poor White who has struggled more.”¹³ Then he clarified more: “I think a university or college should take in account race but also class.” After all, it is not revolutionary as the Supreme Court rulings have been rendered in this direction in recent years.

Moreover, it is in the logic both of politics and economy. As Ifill argues in her book, “Black politicians elected to represent a more diverse electorate, balance conservative solutions such as school vouchers and tougher sentencing, against more liberal priorities, including affirmative action and reducing recidivism. They are more likely to cater to white voters, and assume that black supporters will understand.” The worsening of

¹¹ *The Atlantic*, January/February 2009.

¹² *The New York Times*, June 22, 2008.

¹³ Journalists of Color Convention, July 2008.

economic inequalities and the crisis weigh in the same direction. As racial equality has improved, class disparities between rich and poor have widened. And this gap between very poor and very rich transcends race. Stagnant or even diminishing incomes affect all ethnic groups. Of course, on an ethnic basis, it seems frightening that more than 24 percent of the Blacks are poor and “only” 8 percent among Whites. But on the social basis, 43 percent of the poor are White, which means 16 million people. In his essay entitled “The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality,”¹⁴ Walter Benn Michaels points to the failure of race-based policy against inequalities. According to Michaels, the race and diversity debate hides the real problem (harder to fight) that is social inequality.

Dalton Conley shows that the wealth accumulated by the families is the real basis of inequalities in education. By taking this criterion into account, the gap between Blacks and Whites disappears. The consequence of the American confusion between race and class is that a shift from race to class is perceived (and perhaps often conceived) as a way to forget the needs of Black people and to refuse all social policies. That seems obvious in the two cases on affirmative action that are being examined by the U.S. Supreme Court. Basically, the cases concern a controversial affirmative action program for the fire fighters in New Haven (Connecticut) and the right for a southern state to change the location of a polling station. The questions at stake are, in the first case, to know if a promotion test where no Black scored high enough to be eligible can be considered as fair. In the second case, the question is the current validity of the law authorizing the federal administration to “pre-clear” any change in the voting arrangements that can discriminate against minorities in 9 southern states. The Court will decide nothing less than

whether the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act are outdated or not. If the decisions open for debate on these two pillars, they would oblige Obama to take a position.

As John Payton, president of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, calls for “race conscious vigilance,” the other side denounces the “sordid business” of dividing individuals by race. The question of racial distinctions is not only defended by African-Americans as the consequence of their tragic history, but they are also the legal way for the administration to classify U.S. citizens as well as for gerrymandering. The 2010 census should be a very challenging matter for these reasons. In 2000, only 4 percent of African-Americans claimed a multiracial identity, yet at least three-quarters of them are ancestrally multiracial (Spencer Boyer).

It is very understandable but difficult to admit for a French person that Black people in America are the toughest opponents to colorblindness policy that is the French ideal. The aim of every politician should be that one day, race wouldn’t be an issue,” says Brittany Buttlar, sociology student at Howard University. But she is one of the rare people I’ve met to express spontaneously this hope. Thus, colorblindness that has been the ideal of prominent Black activists and progressive voters during the 1960s, became in the 1980s a synonym of conservatism and anti-Black policies. The way these ideas can be used is interesting as the opposite phenomenon happened in France. In the 1980s and 1990s, the leftist parties and organizations such as SOS racism fought for the “right to be different,” which is something like “the rights of minorities” but made a U turn since 2000 and most of them defend, today, “the right to indifference,” which is close to colorblindness.

Several factors including Obama's statements make possible a shift to a more class-based policy.

¹⁴ Metropolitan Books, 2006.

3 IS FRANCE A “PRE-RACIAL” COUNTRY?

The basis of the French “Republican model” is the idea that the nation is not socially based but results from a will of living together.

So, let’s move to France. Why is colorblindness so deeply rooted in this country? Does that mean that France is a “pre-racial” country? Does that mean that French President Nicolas Sarkozy will help the French people accept their new multiracial make-up? Can the so-called “Republican model” be adapted to the diversity of the population?

A non-racial “Republican model” shaped by history

The basis of the French model of managing the diversity of the population is the idea that the French nation is not an ethnic but a political notion. The nation is not racially based but results from a will of living together symbolized by citizenship. It is the idea of a “social contract” that was developed during the 18th century by philosophers like Jacques Rousseau. The model moves toward assimilation, based on individual adherence to the French nation. Everybody has his or her own worth, independently from the community he or she belongs to. That is why the French way pretends to be “universalist.” The individual way of considering equality is summarized in a sentence of Stanislas de Clermont Tonnerre, a deputy during the French Revolution who struggled for the emancipation of the Jews. “Everything has to be refused to the Jews as a nation and everything has to be given to the Jews as individuals,” said Tonnerre. On this basis, Jews were given full citizenship, which had been earlier refused to them. This conception of equality is not just theoretical but the consequence of a specific History. To simplify matters, I will refer to four very different periods.

1. During the **French Revolution**, the first Article of the 1789 declaration of human rights states that “men are born and remain free and equal in rights.” The idea comes again from Rousseau: “Liberty expresses itself by the common will of the people.” The condition of this liberty is that

nobody can have more rights than anyone else. This also means that the law is the only source of power and has to be the same for everybody.

This concept can be opposed to the Anglo Saxon one, which is based on the acknowledgment of a natural right for everybody to defend himself against the power of the state. In this conception, the idea of a common will, expressed socially by the nation and politically by the state doesn’t exist, and the idea of diversity is more easily manageable.

2. The second period is the one of the **strengthening of the République system**, at the end of the 19th century. At this time, the ancient struggle between the Catholic Church and the Republic ended with new rules of managing diversity in the field of religions. As Catholicism was not supposed to dominate any more, every religion was considered at the same level. That meant the absolute neutrality of the state leading to the separation of church and state.
3. **Vichy and the Nazi occupation** period is another crucial element. The trauma of the segregation laws against Jews strongly impregnates our current controversy about race-based statistics. Because of what happened at this time, the categorization of people is not at all associated with fighting against discrimination, but with the exact opposite, which is systematic persecution.
4. The fourth point is that France is **an old country of immigration**. This is a prominent point because it shows that, unlike Italy, Spain, or Germany, the diversity question is an ancient one in France, where mass immigration began during the second part of the 19th century. In the 1920s and 1930s, the rate of immigration into France compared to the population was equivalent to America. There had been

xenophobic anti-Italian riots in southern France in the 1890s, mass deportation of Polish miners after the 1929 crisis, and racist murders in the 1960s and 1970s. Today, the population of France is one of the most mixed populations in Europe. One person out of five born in France has an immigrant as a parent or grandparent.

A relatively flexible model challenged by discrimination

Race is not a French legal category and is not used in the public debate. As the Anglo Saxon conception tends to consider different categories of people and to give them rights in order to bring an end to discrimination, we are inclined to think that to create new categories and new rights for each one could create discrimination, conflict, and endanger the principle of equality. The exceptions to uniformity and blindness have to be formally permitted by the law or a court. That doesn't mean that policies can't adapt the law in order to reduce inequalities. But only if the situation of the people concerned is objectively different, which excludes the use of race or religion. Yet, other criteria such as sex, disability, poor neighborhoods, or a concentration of foreign pupils can be the basis of a legal kind of affirmative action. For instance, the law establishes a 6% quota of handicapped persons in every company hiring more than 20 persons. Another law makes provisions for a certain quota of women in elected functions. In the field of education, priority zones called ZEP are based on social and economical criteria including the number of foreign pupils. In the field of urbanization, there are special subsidies for social services, renovation and transportation in "sensitive zones." In some of these communities, free zones benefits a zero tax rule and and job priority for the local young people.

Actually, the question of criteria has been questioned for a long time in the field of statistics. Until the 1990s, only one criterion was considered, that of nationality, which is insufficient to describe and even more to fight against acts of discrimination whose victims belong to the second generation of migrants of French nationality. For a long time, the reality of discrimination has been masked by the proclamation of equality. The problem was only seen in terms of individual racist abuse or libel. Laws have punished these offenses since 1972, but could seldom be enforced because of the difficulty to prove it in court.

The urban riots that began in the early 1980s and the National March of the second generation of Algerians for "equal rights" in 1983, helped people to realize the importance of discrimination, decades after this occurred in the United States. Today, the reality of racial discrimination is widely acknowledged. People from North Africa or Muslims are perceived as the major victims of discrimination (41 percent), far more than Africans or Blacks (26 percent). All things being equal, someone of Mahgrebian descent is 2.5 times more likely to be unemployed than the child of a French person. And there is only one non-White member of the French Parliament (with the exception of Deputies from the French Indies). Pressures from groups of second generation people analyzing discrimination as the perpetuation of colonialist attitudes, and also pressures from the European Union led to the establishment in 2005 of the High Authority against Discrimination and for Equality (Halde). This public organization is able to deal with individual claims. The huge gap between beautiful principle and reality is a major political challenge. "Equality" belongs to the triptych of the French official motto—liberty, equality, and fraternity—the country's highest values. So it appears that the most proclaimed promise of the system is not kept, which represents a threat to discredit and destabilize the whole country.

Discriminations whose victims are people of foreign origin, show the insufficiency of the "Republican model."

Nicolas Sarkozy's insistence to establish American-style "affirmative action" faces opposition from Constitution specialists.

The "impossible" reform?

Sarkozy, who loves fighting taboo subjects, had already taken sides on the issue when he was Minister of the Interior. He relied on the U.S. example and said he was in favor of "affirmative action." As soon as he was elected president in June 2007, he gave contradictory signs. Sarkozy created the very controversial Ministry of Immigration and National Identity as a thank you to the ex-Le Pen voters. At the same time, however, he also nominated Rachida Dati, a woman of Algerian and Moroccan origins, as Minister of Justice. Dati is the first person of her background to be appointed to a high-level position in the French government. Sarkozy has repeatedly said that he intends to change the Constitution in order to make race-based surveys and improve anti-discrimination policies. But the board he appointed to prepare the constitutional revision concluded last January that ethnic differences couldn't be recognized in the public sphere. Its report argued that affirmative action has been practiced by the law to respond to a system of "legal segregation," in countries such as the United States, where racial criteria have been used for a long time, which has never been the case in France.

Another motivation was that it would be a paradox for France to begin such a policy just at the time when affirmative action based on ethnic criteria is decreasing. The board expressly refers to Obama's Philadelphia speech about resentment linked to affirmative action.

The possibility of any American-style "affirmative action" seems definitively closed. The president, however, did not consider this answer as a defeat. On the very same day these negative conclusions were released, Sarkozy nominated Yazid Sabeg, a businessman of Berber origin, commissioner for diversity and equal opportunities. Since then, Sabeg has advocated "true equality" and ethnicity-

based statistics, asserting that France is on the way to "apartheid."

The quest for the French Obama

One of the reasons why Sarkozy kept to his idea was Obama's triumph. Indeed, in July 2008, when he met the future American president in Paris, he declared: "What the United States has done with Barack Obama now, that's what we want to do here." The hijacking of Obama's popularity led to a misinterpretation and confusion between meritocracy and affirmative action. Sarkozy used Obama's example as if the American president was only the result of affirmative action.

While the political career of the new American president symbolizes talent, selection by knowledge and competence, it appears that the French ministers chose to show the priority given to the "diversity" had been chosen less for their political ability or talent and more because they were politically close to the president, and last but not least, because they're beautiful. This ambiguity appeared when Rama Yade, a secretary of state of Senegalese origin, refused to leave the government to drive the Sarkozy's party for the European elections, as the president had asked her to do. Some of her colleagues made public statements that they should never have made concerning a White person. "We're not protected just because we are of Maghrebi or African origin, we have to do what others do, in fact more than they do, being given an opportunity," remarked Nadine Morano about Yade's case.

The confusion between racial and social discriminations led to a ridiculous statement by French Finance Minister Christine Lagarde who said that "something similar to Obama's election has already happened in France with Sarkozy being elected as the representative of a minority." Sarkozy's wife, Carla, added that "the French voted for the

son of a Hungarian immigrant, whose father had an accent and whose mother had Jewish origins.” In reality, Sarkozy was born in a very rich family and his biography is unrelated to that of Obama’s.

The French president probably uses the racial factor as a way to hide rising social inequalities and to show his self-determination, but also for tactical political reasons. The controversy about race-based statistics seems to be a good way to divide his leftist opposition. The problem is that the issue also divides his Gaullist friends.

“France has to challenge the mixtures of cultures” and has to create statistical tools in order to measure “diversity,” said Sarkozy. Recently, a new commission chaired by Commissioner Sabeg has been charged with this task. The current controversy opposes people like Sabeg, who think France has to change its way of managing diversity and must work on race-based surveys in order to rehabilitate “visible minorities,” opposed by people thinking that it would be dangerous and that we’ve only to reform the current procedures.

Sabeg wants to promote the collection of data on what he called the people’s “feeling of belonging” to a minority or self-identification to a race that

seems to be constitutional. On the other side, people refusing to admit ethnic statistics say that it should force people to wonder which community they belong to, a question that most people don’t currently ask themselves in France. According to the public, the danger is to stimulate community spirit at a time when national cohesion is a priority and to lock people into closed categories at a time of globalization and when mixed marriages are increasingly common. Another argument is that nobody can oblige a person of mixed race to define himself for instance as Black. Precisely, in France, a man like Barack Obama wouldn’t be perceived as Black but probably as “of mixed race.”

The first consequence of this endless debate is to paralyze a great deal of surveys and measures that could be done within Constitutional limits. It seems to me a good example of French failing, consisting of debating about principles instead of acting. It makes me think of some opera scenes where actors, on a moving walkway, sing “let’s walk” while they don’t move forward at all.

The confusion between racial and social discriminations, and the political instrumentalization of the debate on “ethnic statistics” lead to paralyze any improvement of the system.

4 A COMMON IDEAL

The question is the same in the two countries: how to fight against discrimination without challenging cultural cohesion? The answer has to be looked for, in the respect of any identity, in the conviction that people are free to choose and change their identification.

Does all this make the United States a “post-racial” country or France a pre-racial country? In the literal meanings of these words, I don’t think so. The United States remains structured by race as France remains built on the belief in equality. For parallel historical reasons: slavery and the struggle for civil rights in the United States and the Revolution and the building of a Republican state in France. The two countries are not about to suddenly change their paradigm. Actually, they face opposite stakes. America has to unify a country historically made from different states and diverse populations, as France has to create the conditions for a new type of diversity in a unified and centralized country.

The two countries seem to have two symmetric taboos: race for France and... colorblindness for the United States. They suffer from symmetric rigidities: rigidity of theoretical equality for France, rigidity of racial identities for the United States. But they experience the same need of challenging new types of diversity in a context of globalization of identities that make both current situations unsustainable.

Of course it would be stupid to imagine that the United States could delete the identities that comprise its extraordinary strength. But it would also be a mistake for France to artificially create racial categories and barriers at the precise moment when the rigidity of these categories is questioned. Politically, and paradoxically, the two presidents could have been the good persons to negotiate this sensitive evolution. Obama, is of course the most powerful American politician in order to help the country go beyond the race borders, because he is in the same time president and... Black. At his level, Sarkozy could have imagined he would import American-style statistics and affirmative action in France because he is supposed to be in the same time Gaullist and pro-American.

But it will be difficult for any of them to move very far away on this issue for several reasons. Some are different: a tremendous agenda for Obama and some confusion for Sarkozy. Others are common: the economic crisis is the predominant one. Any political sign given about changing rules of access to jobs or subsidies could be very unpopular in a period of exploding growth in unemployment. Yet, the status quo is not tenable. The United States pretends going beyond race is a part of their dream, but they act in the opposite direction. France writes the word “equality” on every public building but admits discrimination.

In the two countries, the question is the same: How to fight against discrimination without challenging cultural cohesion, without deepening racial divisions, and locking people in closed groups against their will? The answer has to be looked for, in the respect of any identity, in the conviction that identities can be mixed, and that people are free to choose and also to change their identification.

In a sense, the two countries share a common ideal that: Anyone can be a real American or French regardless of how he or she looks, and regardless of whom his or her ancestors were. The election of Barack Obama provided evidence of this in the United States. Everyone begins today to observe how this achievement can boost the evolution of American society. How it can be considered as an example all around the world—I think especially to the African continent—and thus transform the image of this country abroad. But the challenge of social equality remains.

France, who likes to consider itself as an example, has much to learn about the tremendous consequences of real racial equality. The country has yet to find its own way to which it can’t be imported. But the current demographic and social transformations in the two countries could shape convergent ways

to equality. That is why the two countries will have more and more to understand from each other in the future on this issue. In a sense, they have a common bath problem: the United States has not to throw the baby of identity out with the water of race, and France has not to throw the baby of equality out with the water of discrimination.

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