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Policing and Repression Education

France: Emmanuel Macron's Government Is Mounting a Witch Hunt Against "Islamism" in Universities

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Emmanuel Macron's Government Is Mounting a Witch Hunt Against "Islamism" in France's Universities.

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In recent years, charges of "Islamism" have become a common attack line against the Left and anti-racist groups in France, claiming that those who fight racism are themselves sowing racial animus. In the mouths of Marine Le Pen or hard-right pundits like [Éric Zemmour](#), this amalgam paints the Left and minorities as a united front of "separatist" and terrorist-adjacent forces that threaten the Republic and its values.

But such talking points are becoming ever more mainstream. In [this article for Mediapart](#), here presented in abridged English translation, Lucie Delaporte explains how Emmanuel Macron's higher education minister, Frédérique Vidal, has taken up the crusade against "Islamism." In an interview this weekend, Vidal endorsed lurid claims that social science departments are under its spell — and called for a witch hunt in response.

France's academic community is in uproar after higher education minister Frédérique Vidal declared her intention to order the National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) to mount an "investigation into Islamism" in the country's universities.

The controversy began on Sunday, when the minister gave a remarkable interview to CNews — the news station beloved of the far right. Questioned on a recent front-page article in conservative daily *Le Figaro*, headlined "How Islamism Corrupted the Universities," Vidal began her comments by agreeing with its "assessment":

What we're seeing in the universities is that people can take advantage of their titles and the aura surrounding them . . . they are minoritarian and they do this, certainly, to promote radical or militant Islamism ideas, always seeing things through the prism of their determination to divide, to cause tension, to identify enemies.

CNews presenter Jean-Pierre Elkabbach fished for more: “You’d add to that the [indigénistes](#) who say race, gender, and social class . . . all make up a single whole?” Unbothered by this incredibly confused question, the minister again agreed. “Absolutely. Besides, biologists have long known that there is but one human species and no races — so you see how I am not worried on that subject,” she replied, showing that recent social science debates on the category of “race” had completely passed her by.

“Yes, you’re not worried about it, but there are minorities, working away . . .” the host continued, jerking his fingers in a gesture apparently representing the infiltration of the university by these “minorities.” “Is there some sort of alliance between Mao Zedong and Ayatollah Khomeini?” he further suggested, clearly having taken the problem to heart.

“You’re right,” replied the higher education minister. “But that’s why whenever an incident takes place, that is reprimanded, each time something is blocked, that gets rescheduled — but I think that the vast majority of academics are conscious of it and fighting against it.” By this point, viewers were left with little idea of what “it” was — its meaning now lost among the chimeras of “Islamism” and “race-obsessed feminism.” But, the minister continued:

That is why I am going to call on the CNRS to mount an investigation into all the currents of research on these subjects in the universities, so we can distinguish proper academic research from activism and opinion.

The minister’s announcement clearly caught the academic community by surprise. Questioned on Tuesday as to what shape this investigation would take, the CNRS seemed hard-pressed to provide any kind of response: “At this stage, we’re in discussions with Frédérique Vidal’s office to clarify what the minister’s expectations are,” was its first, obviously embarrassed, response to our questions.

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Vidal’s office seemed equally in the dark as to “what the minister’s expectations are.” Finally, the response came: “The objectives of this study will be set over coming days. It will seek to define what currents of research are going on in France, on various themes.” This reply could hardly have been vaguer. So, is the plan to produce a classification of more or less suspect “currents” of thought? Or — why not — also lists of the teaching staff who are part of them, like in the good old days of McCarthyism?

Thought Police

France’s universities are today going through an especially tough period because of the pandemic. Students are in [despair](#), and research fellows are exhausted. Following Vidal’s claims, the academic community was in uproar.

Late on Wednesday, the CNRS finally published a [scathing press release](#), explaining that “Islamism” is a “political slogan” that does “not correspond to any scientific reality.” Indeed, it continued, “the political exploitation” of this term “is emblematic of a regrettable instrumentalization of scholarship.” The research council, which specifies that it will conduct an investigation “to shed a scientific light on the fields of research concerned,” was forthright in

insisting that it “particularly condemns the attempts to delegitimize various fields of research, like postcolonial studies, intersectional studies, or work on the term ‘race’ or any other field of understanding.”

Late on Tuesday, the usually reserved Conference of University Presidents (CPU) issued a killer [press release](#) expressing its “astonishment” and demanding “urgent clarification” from the minister overseeing the sector. “Islamism is not a proper concept but a pseudo-notion of which we would try in vain to provide even a hint of a scientific definition. It ought to be left, if not just to CNews presenters, then more broadly to the far right that popularized it,” writes the organization representing university presidents.

‘Since they won’t find any Islamists in the universities, they have to rely on a concept like “Islamism” — which means nothing but makes it possible to lump all critical thinking together with terrorism,’ commented researcher Samuel Hayat.

But is the goal of the “investigation” now entrusted to the CNRS to identify potentially ideologically dangerous elements within the academic community? On this point, too, the CPU made its stance clear.

The CPU regrets the confusion between issues of academic freedom — free inquiry, underpinned by peer review — and those concerning possible misdemeanors and infractions, which will be the object of administrative inquiries if necessary.

The CPU is also alarmed by the instrumentalization of the CNRS, whose mission has nothing to do with evaluating research fellows’ work, or indeed clarifying what belongs to the realm of “activism or opinion” . . . If the government needs well-documented scholarly arguments and analyses to help it to go beyond caricatural representations and bar-room squabbling, then the universities are at its disposal. Political debate is not, as a matter of principle, a scholarly debate; but that doesn’t mean one can say any old thing.

But the university presidents — and the world of research more broadly — hadn’t heard the last of the “any old thing” the higher education minister had to tell. On Tuesday, the France Insoumise MP Bénédicte Taurine questioned Vidal on whether she intended to create a “thought police” and received this incredible response:

Well, yes, in sociology it’s called conducting an investigation. Yes, I am going to ask for an assessment of the array of research currently going on in our country . . . On postcolonialism . . . But I, you should know, was extremely shocked to see a Confederate flag appear in the Capitol, and I think that it’s essential that the social sciences delve into these questions, which are still relevant today.

Few understood the comparison between postcolonial studies and the Confederate flag, emblem of white supremacy. And why cite the particular case of postcolonial studies — a field of research present in universities across the world?

Numerous academics and researchers expressed their indignation. The economist Thomas Piketty and the philosopher Camille Froidevaux-Metterie each called for the departure of a minister now disavowed by a large part of the scholarly community. [On Twitter, Piketty](#) wrote that “With Frédérique Vidal, the Macron/Castex government is realizing [interior minister] [Darmanin’s dream](#)

[of outflanking Le Pen to her Right](#) . . . this disgraceful minister must go.” The hashtag #VidalDemission (VidalResign) spread far and wide.

A Witch Hunt

Historian and CNRS research fellow Séverine Awenengo Dalberto, a member of the Institut des mondes africains, joined calls for Vidal’s resignation:

It’s scandalous, shameful to see academic freedom being restricted, the instrumentalization of historical and social-science research for narrowly political ends, and especially, in the current pandemic context, having this level of disdain for students, distracting media and parliamentary attention with this fake problem of Islamo-leftism rather than the anxiety and precarity young people are facing.

A specialist on colonial questions, this historian damned an approach which she sees as aimed at “banalizing a far-right discourse and fueling the very tensions [Vidal] claims to be denouncing. How can she seriously think that working on racial discrimination — on the mechanisms, the effects of assigning identities based on skin color — means recognizing the existence of biological races?”

Another CNRS research fellow, Samuel Hayat, a specialist on worker mobilizations, described his colleagues as “somewhere between bewilderment and despondency”:

This follows in logical continuity with Frédérique Vidal’s authoritarian management of higher education teaching and research . . . This is, in short, a generalized offensive against critical discourse and critical thinking. . . . For Frédérique Vidal, the university has to be a matter of “excellence” and profitability, but the idea that there are hubs of critical resistance to policy is intolerable.

The political scientist emphasizes how this “witch hunt” compares to policies clamping down on academic freedoms in Brazil, Hungary, the United States, Turkey, and Japan. While in those countries the battle is mainly concentrated on the terrain of gender studies — accused of destroying the foundations of society itself — in France, the struggle against Islamism offers a ready-made excuse to hunt out “deviant” researchers. For Hayat,

Since they won’t find any Islamists in the universities, they have to rely on a concept like “Islamism” — which means nothing but makes it possible to lump all critical thinking together with terrorism . . . The icing on the cake is the instrumentalization of the CNRS, a public research body . . . To be treated like a back room working on identifying an object that doesn’t exist is particularly insulting. The CNRS should insist that it isn’t on a leash to serve the government’s political objectives.

For the historian Camille Lefebvre, a CNRS research director and specialist on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Africa, Vidal’s announcement is part of a “purely electoral move that consists of putting the question of Islam at the heart of the coming [2022] presidential campaign. The problem is that this is a performative discourse and they don’t have any grasp on what the consequences will be.” She describes a vilifying discourse that “wounds part of French society by telling them that they

need to stay in their lane.”

The sociologist Abdellali Hajjat is, together with Marwan Mohammed, a pioneer of the study of Islamophobia as a new form of racism. Faced with the rising climate of hostility to such research in France, Hajjat [recently left the country](#) to teach in Belgium. For him, Vidal’s claims are:

the latest step in a moral panic among French elites, which began in at least 2015–16. It highlights the success of an intense lobbying by chauvinist “universalists” who set up a false opposition between “universal values” and “decolonialism.” The minister says we need to separate research from activism . . . It seems that this is mainly a matter of targeting academics considered “deviants” from the political and scholarly norm.

For the sociologist, despite the sheer ineptitude of a minister who seems largely overwhelmed by this situation — making comments that could even be cause for ridicule — the situation is truly alarming. “This will to hegemony, to total control over research, is reminiscent of the practices of the most authoritarian political regimes today.”

“I’m angry — what’s happening is both shameful and really troubling,” comments Audrey Célistine, a lecturer in political sociology and American studies at Lille University and a member of the Foundation for the Memory of Slavery’s scholarly board. “We’re dealing with a form of McCarthyism,” she insists, deeming the level of public debate “simply appalling.” “When we see someone like Raphaël Enthoven [a pop philosopher on French radio] referring to the ‘plague of intersectionality,’ we see that in these debates, people are proud to show off their crass ignorance. I’m all for debate, but with people who read the books they’re talking about.” Like all the other researchers we spoke to, she felt that Vidal has lost all credibility and is not fit to remain minister overseeing the sector.

Following previous statements by education minister Jean-Michel Blanquer on the “Islamism” in the universities, it had seemed that higher education minister Vidal wanted to defend academic freedoms. “The university is not the hearth of extremism or a place where anyone should confuse emancipation with indoctrination,” she reminded her cabinet colleague.

‘How can the universities minister seriously think that working on racial discrimination — on the mechanisms, the effects of assigning identities based on skin color — means recognizing the existence of biological races?’ asked historian Séverine Awanengo Dalberto.

Today, Vidal instead seems to be zealously following a map drawn by the executive itself. Interviewed by France Inter on February 1, interior minister Gérald Darmanin was asked about the place “*indigénistes*” and “race obsessives” have in the universities — a line of questioning telling of the level of discussion on this subject. Darmanin replied that while these ideologies are perhaps “in the majority” in the universities, “this is a tragedy for France and we have to debate that toe to toe, idea by idea.” For France’s self-described “top cop,” “this, indeed, is what the president of the Republic called for in his Mureaux speech,” referring to Macron’s intervention targeting “[Islamic separatism](#).”

Already last October, a government-backed amendment that was slipped into the Senate bill on the research agenda had tried to make academic freedoms subject to “the framework of the Republic’s values.” Ultimately rejected on account of its vague formulation, this amendment itself highlighted the government’s suspicions with regard to the world of academia.

Later that month, a [hundred academics](#) put their names to a column in *Le Monde*, including Marcel Gauchet, Gilles Kepel, Pierre-André Taguieff, and Pierre Nora. They denounced the “denial” over the problem of Islamism and lamented that “*Indigéniste*, race-obsessed and ‘decolonial’ ideologies (imported from US campuses” had infiltrated French universities, “feeding hatred against ‘Whites’ and France.” This doubtless had its effect on the executive — though it lent no similar credit to the many counter-articles on this same subject, including [another *Le Monde* column](#) signed by two thousand researchers — in this case, ones actually in touch with recent social sciences output.

President Macron, [who has shifted from his studies of philosopher Paul Ricœur to reading Taguieff](#) and his denunciation of “postcolonialism hucksters,” told journalists last June that “the academic world has its share of blame. It has encouraged the ethnicization of the social question, thinking this was a good line of research. But the result can only be secessionism. This means splitting the Republic in two.”

Today — faced with the assault coming from a government obsessed by the idea of bringing the academic community to heel — it is teaching staff, researchers, and academic freedoms in general that are truly under threat.

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P.S.

- Jacoin. 02.20.2021:
<https://jacobinmag.com/2021/02/france-macron-vidal-islamo-leftism-universities>
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