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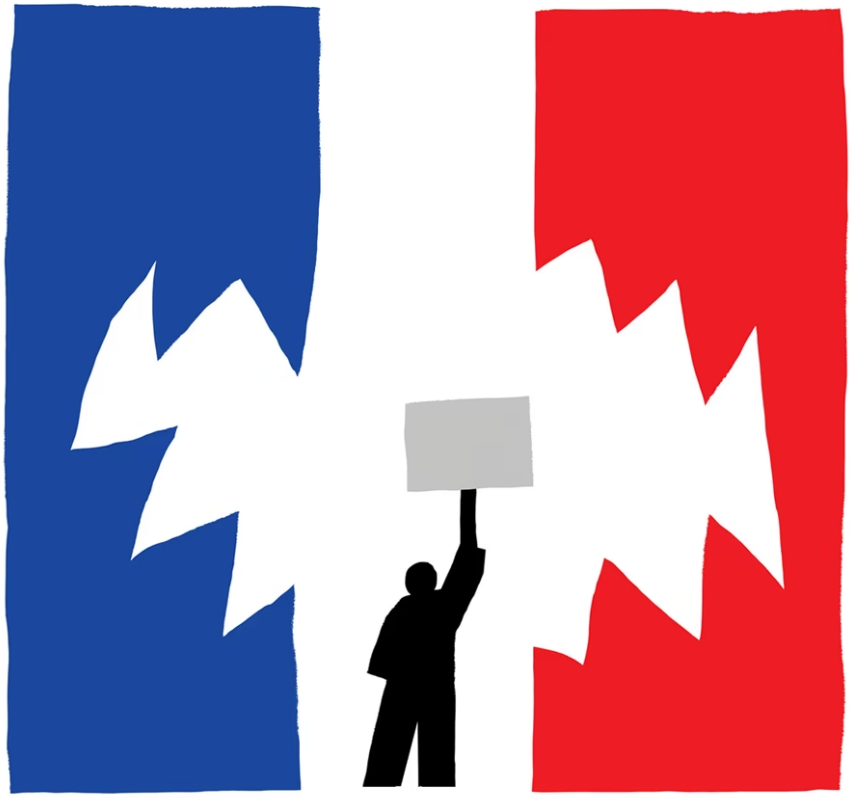

Ben Hickey

GLOBAL

THE FRENCH ARE IN A PANIC OVER *LE WOKISME*

The nation's vehement rejection of identity politics made me recalibrate my own views about woke ideology.

By Thomas Chatterton Williams

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IT TOOK ME a moment to register the sound of scattered hissing at the Tocqueville Conversations—a two-day "taboo-free discussion" among public intellectuals about the crisis of Western democracies. More than 100 of us had gathered in a large tent set up beneath the window of Alexis de Tocqueville's study, on the grounds of the 16th-century Château de Tocqueville, in coastal Normandy. I couldn't remember hearing an audience react like this in such a forum.

The democratic crisis that the conference sought to address has many facets: the rise of the authoritarian right, metastasizing economic inequality, the pressures of climate change, and more. But the conference, held in September 2021, had mostly narrowed its focus to the American social-justice ideology that's commonly referred to as "wokeness." The person being hissed at that afternoon was Rokhaya Diallo, a French West African journalist, social-justice activist, and media personality in her mid-40s. (In America, she writes for *The Washington Post*.) Besides me, she was one of just a handful of nonwhite speakers and, to my knowledge, the sole practicing Muslim.

For many of us who had come to exchange ideas, the venue felt significant. The château, with its ivy-covered walls and swan-filled pond, lies far away from the intricacies of multicultural life in modern democracies. But Tocqueville was, of course, one of the world's keenest interpreters of the American experiment. His classic two-volume text, *Democracy in America*, published in 1835 and 1840, explored the paradoxical nature of a vibrant new multiethnic society, founded on the principles of liberty and equality but compromised from the start by African slave labor and the theft of Indigenous land. Its author, while finding much to admire, remained skeptical that such powerful divisions could ever be transcended, because unlike in Europe, social rank was written into the physical features of the nation's inhabitants.

Many who claim social justice as their ultimate goal insist that America has done little to challenge Tocqueville's grim appraisal. In their view, some of the country's cherished ideals—individualism, freedom of speech, even the Protestant work ethic—are in fact obstacles to equity, illusions spun by those who have power in order to keep it and hold the marginalized in their place. The woke left's approach to addressing historical oppression—namely, prioritizing race and other categories of identity in a wide variety of political and institutional decisions—has stirred anxieties in the United States. But the concerns expressed at the Tocqueville estate were less about what this phenomenon means for America than what it might mean for France. As the saying goes, when America sneezes, Europe catches a cold.

The French have long prided themselves on having a system of government that doesn't recognize racial or ethnic designations. The idea is to uphold a universal vision of what it means to be French, independent of race, ethnicity, and religion. Even keeping official statistics on race has, since the Holocaust, been impermissible. Recently, however, and to the alarm of many in the traditional French commentariat, American-style identity politics has piqued the interest of a new and more diverse generation.

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And so I'd come to witness an extraordinary exchange—one that would not happen in the U.S. mainstream. Over the course of the conference, speakers had repeatedly debated whether what the French have termed *le wokisme* is a serious concern. A majority of the panelists and audience members, myself included, had answered more or less in the affirmative. Political organization around identity rather than ideology is one of the best predictors of civil strife and even civil war, according to an analysis of

violent conflicts by the political scientist Barbara F. Walter. By pitting groups against one another in a zero-sum power struggle—and sorting them on a scale of virtue based on privilege and oppression—wokeness can't help but elevate race and ethnicity to an extent that expands prejudice rather than reducing it, in the process fueling or, at minimum, providing cover for a violent and dangerous majoritarian reaction. That, at least, was the prevailing sense of the group.

As the last panel, "Media and Universities: In Need of Reform and Reassessment?," got under way, Diallo took the opportunity to argue the opposite position. Onstage with her were a political scientist and two philosophy professors, one of whom was the moderator, Perrine Simon-Nahum. Diallo is a well-known and polarizing figure in France, a telegenic proponent of identity politics with a large social-media following. She draws parallels between the French and American criminal-justice systems (one of her documentaries is called *From Paris to Ferguson*), making the case that institutional racism afflicts her nation just as it does the U.S., most notably in discriminatory stop-and-frisk policing. Her views would hardly be considered extreme in America, but here she is seen in some quarters as a genuinely subversive agent.

Simon-Nahum opened the conversation with the question "How can we shape citizens in a democracy?" And what role should educational institutions and the media play? Were woke forces in universities and media striving to delegitimize elites, she continued, and to undermine the institutions of knowledge production? Were they "building a new totalitarianism of thought?" The woke ideal of disseminating knowledge "on an egalitarian platform," she suggested, was neither possible nor even desirable.

"The circulation of knowledge is also the circulation of experiences," Diallo responded. "Some minority experiences may be more visible" now thanks to social

media. That poses a much-needed challenge to traditional "elite" knowledge production, which, she said, had "filtered out" certain perspectives in the past. This claim was indisputable. A few weeks after this conference, Emmanuel Macron would become the first French president to participate in commemorations of the 1961 massacre of Algerian protesters by police in Paris. Most French people I know had never encountered this event either in school or in traditional media.

Read: A Macron victory isn't enough

The woke "have discovered new epistemologies," Jean-François Braunstein, a philosophy professor at Panthéon-Sorbonne University, nonetheless retorted—theories of knowledge that validate feelings over facts. He called Diallo's position "a staunch attack against science and against truth." He appeared to want to expand the conversation's scope beyond racial identity to encompass the dissolution of the gender binary, which was not a subject Diallo had been addressing. Simon-Nahum demurred but suggested that the larger disagreement about "the conception of knowledge" was still worrying; it justified fears that the French discourse was becoming Americanized.

Diallo replied that most people in attendance were likely "privileged," and as such, disproportionately fearful of the "emergence of minority speech [from] people who indeed didn't have access to certain clubs … and are questioning things that were considered" unquestionable.

"Of course we cannot experience what others experience," Simon-Nahum responded, with seeming irritation—no longer moderating but fully entering the debate. And yet,

we can understand it: “It’s called empathy,” she said, before sharply taking issue with Diallo’s point about privilege.

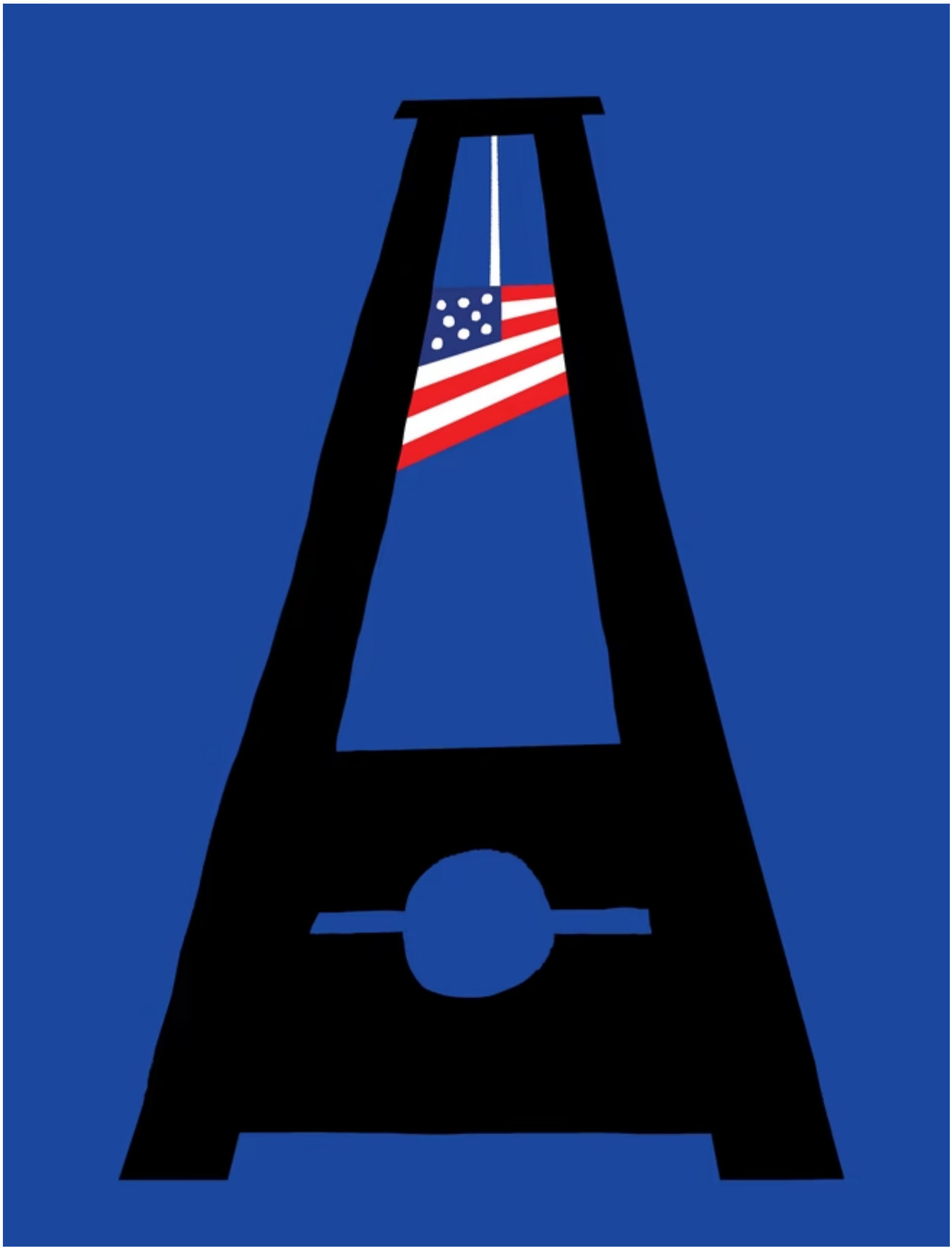
It was around that time, with Diallo isolated from the rest of the panel, that I started to notice the hissing, coming from the audience when she spoke. As the moderator refused to concede even the theoretical possibility that any knowledge can be derived from identity, I noticed Diallo’s expression growing distant. Simon-Nahum pressed on, referring to Diallo’s appeal to lived experience as not only misguided but a kind of “domination.” “This intellectual war that’s being waged is a threat to democracy,” she said. “I feel threatened … first and foremost [as] a citizen.”

Braunstein chimed in to say that Diallo’s argument reminded him of a quote by the extravagantly racist writer and Nazi collaborator Charles Maurras: “A Jew can never understand [Jean] Racine, because he’s not French!” (When Diallo objected, Braunstein said that he was not comparing her to Maurras.)

It went on like that. By the end of the discussion, I was somewhat shaken. On many discrete points, I tended to agree with the philosophers on the panel. I have made Paris my home for the past 11 years and have been raising French children there for nine of them, which is to say I feel a genuine stake in the culture. I am convinced that it would be a terrible, perhaps even insurmountable, loss to abandon the universalist, color-blind French ideal to the fractured landscape of American tribal identity.

And yet I also felt that something fundamentally unfair had just transpired. France, like America, is constantly evolving. Any attempt to make sense of it will have to take Diallo’s arguments seriously. She had tried to share an understanding of French life—one in which growing segments of the French population feel excluded and censured

—that her interlocutors could not or would not accept, but that their behavior seemed to confirm.



I had until that point considered Diallo an ideological opponent. She had likewise regarded me warily—as a privileged, nonwhite, non-French spokesperson for a universalism that masks white prerogatives. Her personal credo of sorts, "*Kiffe ta race*" ("Love your race"), which is the title of her podcast and her most recent book, directly contradicts my own writing against the reinforcement of racial identity. And yet, when she walked offstage alone, I found myself rushing to catch up with her. As we spoke, to my surprise, my eyes became teary. I wanted her to know that I had seen what she'd experienced, even if no one else had. "That happens all the time here," she told me. "It happens all the time."

THE FRENCH REACTION to *le wokisme* has been revelatory for me. I am working on a book about the ways American culture and institutions changed after the summer of 2020, and how that transformation has, to an unusual degree, reverberated internationally, and particularly in France. The incident at the Tocqueville conference caused me to recalibrate some of my assumptions—and to appreciate more keenly just how easily anti-wokeness can succumb to a dogmatism as rigid as the one it seeks to oppose. Many of the debates here take place as if in a parallel universe, eerily familiar but with several illuminating differences. They are a useful prism for contemplating the excesses and limitations, as well as the merits, of the social-justice fervor that has gripped the United States.

France's vehement reaction to wokeism has to do with the country's complex relationship with America itself.

The French left exerts far less power than American progressives do over the media, academia, culture, and elite corporations. Diversity as an end in itself, and minority representation in particular, is still far from a mainstream preoccupation here. Outside one prestigious school—Sciences Po, in Paris—affirmative action scarcely exists. Perhaps because of comparatively muscular labor laws (which Macron has sought to weaken), people do not fear being canceled for controversial speech, either in universities or in the workplace. The #MeToo movement could not gain much traction in a country whose major left-leaning intellectuals and at least one newspaper published unequivocal defenses of pedophilia as recently as the 1970s. France has little patience for American culture-war staples such as genderless pronouns and bathrooms. Even the relatively modest, gender-neutral *iel* was forcefully dismissed by the first lady, Brigitte Macron: "Our language is beautiful. And two pronouns is enough," she has said, to practically no pushback at all.

So why has the reaction to American-style identity politics become so heated within the French intellectual sphere?

One reason lies in a crucial distinction between the political realities of France and the United States. In France, the controversy over *le wokisme* is almost always a proxy for a deeper concern about Islam and terror on the European continent. Those seen as permissive of wokeness are presumed to be indulging not merely a victim complex, but something far more sinister: *islamo-gauchisme*, what the far-right former

presidential candidate Marine Le Pen has described as the alliance between Islamist fanatics and the French left. My friend Pascal Bruckner, a traditionally liberal philosopher, describes it in his book *The Tyranny of Guilt* as "the fusion between the atheist far Left and religious radicalism." This is understood as a marriage of convenience: The anti-capitalist left sees Islam's potential for fomenting unrest as a tool to discredit the center and radically remake bourgeois society; reactionary Muslim parties, in turn, pretend to join the left in opposing racism and globalization as a means of amassing power.

Thus, in the French racial imagination, it is the potentially violent Muslim—not simply the man with dark skin—who represents the ultimate "other." But even if France didn't experience violence, an identity politics that would give cover to separatism is seen as unacceptable. This is what Simon-Nahum seems to have meant when she said she felt "threatened" as a citizen. And it's why, for some, matters as trivial as halal-food aisles in the supermarket take on an existential quality that has no real equivalent in 21st-century America.

But France's vehement reaction to wokeism has another cause, which is barely discernible in the U.S. It has to do with France's complex relationship with America itself.

On September 13, 2001, beside an image of the Statue of Liberty shrouded in blooming clouds of smoke, the front page of *Le Monde* proudly declared, "*Nous sommes tous Américains*." It was a grand and heartfelt gesture of solidarity in the face of incomprehensible hatred and barbarity, one that was returned in 2015 when a spasm of terror swept over France. That extraordinary year began with the massacre by al-Qaeda-affiliated militants of 12 people in the Paris offices of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, which had republished caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad. It

concluded with a citywide rampage in November, in which 130 were slain and hundreds more were injured in cafés, restaurants, and the Bataclan concert hall—most of them by homegrown radicals declaring allegiance to the Islamic State. The immediate outpouring of grief in the American press, and the millions of Facebook profile pictures filtered with the tricolor, was as moving as it was justified.

Over the next five years, the U.S. could no longer muster such empathy. By the fall of 2020, America had fully turned its gaze inward. The police killings of George Floyd and others directed America's attention to its own legacy of slavery and racism. These were the conditions in which a new and at times totalizing ideology, organized around a racial binary, gained traction. And practically overnight, the mainstream American press became reluctant to view what had been happening in France (namely, a spree of machete attacks, decapitations, and stabbings, from Paris down to the Riviera) through the lens of individual agency, ideology, religious radicalism, terrorism, or even plain old good and evil. Suddenly, it was all about identity and systems of oppression. Through the lens of racial reckoning, fanatically secular and color-blind France had, in a sense, brought this grief upon itself.

For many in France, a headline in *The New York Times* crystallized this new attitude of reproach. Following the beheading of a middle-school teacher named Samuel Paty in October 2020—for the transgression of showing those *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons in the classroom—the American newspaper of record's first encapsulation of the attack focused not on Paty but on his assailant: "French Police Shoot and Kill Man After a Fatal Knife Attack on the Street." The headline was subsequently changed, and the article itself was relatively balanced. But when it described Paty as having "incited anger among some Muslim families," the implication to many French readers was unambiguous: Teaching the universal value of free speech to all students, regardless of

ethnic affiliation, was what had really led to Paty's murder. French audiences took this idea—which was echoed throughout much of the American media—as an exoneration of Paty's assassin, an 18-year-old Chechen asylum recipient with extremist beliefs who had hunted down his victim only after learning of his existence from a social-media mob.

Reading such coverage in the American press was painful for many French people of all ethnicities and religious affiliations. For months, the perceived abandonment by an admired and influential ally was the subject of constant conversation. Why were American commentators using Paty's killing to score points on Twitter by condemning a society they did not know? Why had the *Times* framed this act of savagery as a simple—and, one might infer, possibly excessive—police shooting? Why were journalists at other outlets, including *The Washington Post*, reinforcing a narrative that reduced complex issues of secularism, republicanism, and immigration to broad allegations of Islamophobia? Why were critics on social media resorting to the blunt racial catchall of whiteness? Did they not understand that French citizens of African or Arab descent were also appalled by such violence?

Many French people began to see their nation as a pivotal theater of resistance to woke orthodoxy. Macron himself became a determined critic, insisting that his country follow its own path to achieve a multiethnic democracy, without mimicking the identity-obsessed American model. "We have left the intellectual debate to … Anglo-Saxon traditions based on a different history, which is not ours," he argued just before Paty's killing, in his October 2020 speech against "Islamist separatism." Macron's minister of national education at the time, Jean-Michel Blanquer, spoke of the need to wage "a battle" against the woke ideas being promulgated by American universities.

Pamela Druckerman: Why the French want to stop working

The unease with *le wokisme* in France, then, is shaped and heightened by the country's distinctive history and self-perception—its legitimate fears of homegrown jihad and its concerns about domineering Yankee influence. You can't understand the French reaction to wokeness without understanding these domestic preoccupations. But at the same time, you can't dismiss France's more philosophical—and universalist—critiques of wokeism simply because of them. The battle against wokeness that Blanquer described has been joined on both sides of the Atlantic. Last spring, I visited him at his offices to get his perspective on it.

Blanquer, the minister of national education from 2017 until May 2022, has been one of France's most consistent, controversial, and powerful opponents of woke ideology. (He once filed a suit—later dismissed—against a French teachers' union for using the term *institutional racism* in a description of its workshops.) In January 2022, he spoke at—and, by his presence, lent the state's imprimatur to—a colloquium at the Sorbonne titled "After Deconstruction," which brought together an array of critics of the new social-justice orthodoxy.

Blanquer is matter-of-fact and unsparing. While studying at Harvard in the '90s, he told me, he first became aware of PC culture, the precursor to what he sees as today's crisis. He sympathized with many of the aims of political correctness but grew wary of its application: Treating women and minority groups as different and special, he began to think, was ultimately antithetical to equality. "In the history of ideas, it's not the first time that, when you push an idea to the extreme, it becomes the contrary," he said.

He has a point. Especially when turbocharged by social media, wokeness tends to fetishize identity and bestow moral authority on whole groups by dint of historical oppression. Of the many reasonable concerns one might have with this approach, most are dismissed by its proponents as brute racism, undeserving of serious engagement. But in the Ministry of National Education's lobby sat a large school portrait of the late Samuel Paty—a literal martyr to the consequences of zealous group identification.

The key to healthy and sustainable social progress is understanding to what extent a potentially useful idea can be pursued before tipping over into self-defeating extremism. A constant trap for would-be guardians of the liberal order is a reaction that itself becomes extreme. As Mathieu Lefevre of More in Common, a nonprofit working in France and elsewhere to reunite divided societies, explained to me, wokeness "rearranges [all] the chairs at the ideological dinner party." On the one side, it fosters a kind of leftist illiberalism that is almost religious in nature, in that it brooks no dissent—the sort of ideology that center-left liberals have historically opposed. And on the other side, "being anti-woke allows a proximity between the center and the far right. You start with a [colloquium] about *le wokisme*, and you end up questioning foundational liberal principles like freedom of expression." You end up banning terms such as *institutional racism*.

This isn't merely a theoretical pitfall for the French center-left and center-right. In 2021, then–Minister of Higher Education Frédérique Vidal ordered a government investigation into public-university research that sought "to divide and fracture"—in other words, research focusing on colonialism and racial difference. The institution tasked with carrying out the investigation ultimately refused to do so, but as the

sociologist François Dubet wrote in *Le Monde*, "How can we think that it is up to the State to say which currents of thought are acceptable and which are not?"

What's more, a critic might note, Blanquer's rigid devotion to the principle of universalism entails a certain blindness to often valid minority concerns—about a lack of recognition, inclusion, and dignity. Though there are no official statistics on the matter, according to a 2016 French study, young people who are perceived as Black and Arab are 20 times more likely than everyone else to be stopped by the cops. In November 2020, a video went viral showing the unprovoked pummeling of a Black music producer by armed police in Paris. I, too, ultimately believe in universalism, and I worry that obsessively tracking demographic differences can lead us to ascribe nearly anything to racism. But events like this have lent credence to the identitarian left's argument that addressing unequal treatment is nearly impossible when you can't measure it.

And so the activists and those listening to them have looked to America for a vocabulary to express what is happening in their own country, whether or not that vocabulary fully makes sense here. Wokeism's perpetual, often performative outrage; its lack of nuance; its reflexive inclination to silence dissent—these are serious flaws for those who care about liberal democracy. And yet these same qualities have attracted good-faith attention to issues too long neglected in America, and often still unmentionable in Europe.

When I asked Blanquer why he had suggested in the past that the battle against wokeness was already lost, he admitted that it was only "a provocation—I never think we'll lose." And when I asked him whether there are specific cases of cancel culture in France that compare to the most egregious cases in the U.S., he paused. Eventually, he mentioned a production of *The Suppliants*, by Aeschylus. In 2019, there were protests

over the cast's use of dark makeup. But these protests were relatively small and ultimately unsuccessful. When I attended the opening-night performance, the minister of culture was there to show solidarity against the attempted censorship. In a typical debate in America, this would be the moment when the claim is made—falsely—that cancel culture doesn't exist.

In 2010, the U.S. State Department invited French politicians and activists to a leadership program to help them strengthen the voice and representation of ethnic groups that have been excluded from government. Rokhaya Diallo attended, which many of her critics still use as evidence that she is a trained proselytizer of American social-justice propaganda. (In 2017, under pressure from both the left and the right, Macron's government asked for her removal—as Diallo put it to me, it "canceled" her—from a government advisory council, seemingly on the grounds that race- and religious-based political organizing contradicts key principles of French republicanism and secularism, or *laïcité*.)

> America and France are each being undermined by internal divisions—one by overemphasizing them, the other by denying them.

But in a classified memo published on WikiLeaks, former U.S. Ambassador Charles H. Rivkin laid out the pragmatic, self-interested rationale for the program, part of what was called a "Minority Engagement Strategy":

> French institutions have not proven themselves flexible enough to adjust to an increasingly heterodox demography. We believe that if France, over the long run, does not successfully increase opportunity and provide genuine political representation for its minority populations, France could become a weaker, more divided country, perhaps more crisis-prone and inward-looking, and consequently a less capable ally.

Today, in a post-Trump America, it's impossible to read such an assessment without a sense of deep embarrassment. Still, I was haunted by these words as I watched the French elections last spring. Macron was reelected, but the results clearly showed that an identity-driven illiberalism long active on the right is gaining force on the left: Both the far left and far right gained seats in Parliament. Significant numbers of minority voters—feeling ignored and misunderstood—have grown sufficiently demoralized to give up on the center. After being replaced in May as minister of national education, Blanquer ran for Parliament and did not even survive the first round of elections last June—coming in third behind candidates at each extreme.

Many in the French mainstream are correct to note that wokeness is philosophically incoherent—trying to end racism by elevating race—and, if taken far enough, dangerous. The politics of identity that undergirds the obsession with social justice obliterates individuality. It subordinates human psychology—always an ambiguous terrain—to sweeping platitudes and self-certain dictates; it boxes all of us in. Worst of all, it smacks of determinism, trapping the present in a never-ending past that steals the innocence from any collective future.

Le wokisme has not gone well in America. Cancel culture is quite real in the U.S., and its effects have been toxic to debate and, in many cases, to institutional decision

making. Resistance to wokeism's more ambitious designs—the elimination of merit-based screening at elite public high schools; the "defunding" or even abolition of the police—has been widespread and, to many progressives' surprise, ethnically diverse. Yet its outright suppression in France has not gone well either. Ambassador Rivkin's assessment is applicable to both societies: America and France are simultaneously becoming weaker, less capable, each undermined by growing internal divisions—the one by overemphasizing them, the other by denying them altogether.

I remain convinced that an authentically color-blind society—one that recognizes histories of difference but refuses to fetishize or reproduce them—is the destination we must aim for. Either we achieve genuine universalism or we destroy ourselves as a consequence of our mutual resentment and suspicion.

Attempting this will be painful and, at times, feel counterintuitive. Woke impulses are irrepressible today, and they will likely remain so as the grand global project of building multicultural democracies continues. The question, then, is not how to stamp out these impulses, but how to channel them responsibly, while refusing to succumb to the myopia of group identity. A riff on the apocryphal Winston Churchill quip about liberal ideology describes the challenge aptly: You have no head if you wholly embrace it, but if you categorically reject it, you have no heart.

In principle, it is hard to deny the superiority of the French model of universal citizenship—*liberté*, *égalité*, *fraternité*. Yet in practice, the exhausting and sometimes disingenuous American reflex to interpret social life through imperfect notions of identity nonetheless manages to perceive real experiences that otherwise get dismissed and, when suppressed long enough, put us all in peril. It would be a mistake for either culture to remake itself entirely in the image of the other. The future belongs to the multiethnic society that finds a way to synthesize them.

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