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Report on the French round table

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The fourth national round table in the Ford Foundation funded project 'Voices for the *Res Publica*: The Common Good in Europe' was held in France in November 2007, under the auspices of the London-based Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR) and the Paris-based policy centre, *La République des idées*, as well as the review *Esprit*. The purpose of the round table, as defined in the Project's manifesto, was to bring together a carefully chosen group of opinion-formers and academics to foster a frank and in-depth 'off the record' exchange of views on the conflicts, underlying fears and deep defensive reflexes that exist within each minority or majority group, in other words, those factors which had led to a weakened common public space.

It is, of course, very difficult for the person who conceived the entire project, and planned the round table programme to write an 'objective' report on the round table's outcome. I trust that my non-French astigmatism will compensate for my deep involvement in the very shape of the project, and the fact that this round table took place in the country where I live, and whose political vicissitudes are most familiar to me. When reading what follows, please bear in mind this personal *caveat*.

Summarizing a two-day round table with such a diverse group of participants inevitably implies confronting several risks. The first is that of generalizing on the basis of what a given number of individuals present said, when other participants in their place might have raised different issues or addressed the same issues in a different manner. The second risk is that of 'essentializing', ie, attributing a given person's comments to his or her ethnic background, religious affiliation, age or gender. Each individual is of course a sum of different experiences and identities, which, at times, clash or reinforce each other in defining that person's outlook. Essentializing is a particularly dangerous proposition, especially for a project which seeks to build a new *res publica* on a wide set of intertwined multiple identities.

Yet, it is impossible not to generalize at some level if one is to use the round tables as a starting point for further *res publica* debates. In the pages that follow, I have referred to given group identities (such as Christian, lay, Jewish and Muslim, conservative or progressive) only when what was being said stood out for having been said by a member of a given group who clearly invoked his or her given identity while grappling with the issue at stake. Similarly, I felt it was worth reporting when only members of a given group took stands on a given issue while others who belonged to other groups did not jump into the debate.

Preliminary remarks on the round table

The French round table was highly particular on more than one count. To begin with, it took place at a highly sensitive (and of course unplanned) political moment. It was held at the very end of ten days of massive national transport strikes, perceived by all to be *the* test of the entire Sarkozy political mandate for major structural reform. The outcome of the strikes was so uncertain that the organizers had to rent a bus to ensure that the participants could attend the round table. The round table ended on an equally uncertain note, since the night before the final sessions, a *banlieue* in the Paris region experienced the return of youthful anti-police violence, fires, looting, and rioting after two youths were killed when their small motorcycle hit a police car. The group adjourned not knowing whether a new cycle of riots along the lines of those of November 2005 had just begun, or whether the violence would remain a localized incident. Given these events and the fact that the round table was held six months after the election of Sarkozy as President, it was also inevitable that immediate and highly political issues received far greater treatment than in other national round tables, particularly in a country whose national history was best defined by clashing political cultures.

The round table faithfully mirrored France's endemic contradictions, but also its strong points. During most of the two-day debates one had a sinking feeling of *déjà vu* best conveyed by the other anglicized French motto: '*plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*', particularly for any student of France who has seen the same problems

diagnosed for over forty years without any real 'cure'. France, however, is a highly complex and contradictory country. Society in all of its structures is far more positive than it is made out to appear, even as the political structures that accompany it are far more negative than meets the eye. But as is the case for elderly persons, one can wonder whether such an old country has not found some kind of inner balance linked precisely to this precarious equilibrium.

The round table stood out for a second reason: the extraordinarily high number (six) of last minute 'no shows' to be added to a more normal 'fallout' of two among the original nineteen slated participants. The previous ten days of strikes with their attendant exhausting commutes, as well as the onset of the 'flu' season, may have played a role in these unexpected absences, but their last minute nature made any replacements impossible. The fact remains that the round table lost six carefully calibrated 'voices', among which a local conservative mayor, member of the *Conseil Général* of an agricultural region; a social therapist and university professor of North African origins, with a practice in the highly sensitive *banlieues* outside Paris; a social and cultural entrepreneur from Marseilles' socially disfavoured area of La Castellane; an academic specialist of Islam; a Jewish community specialist; and a black academic specializing in France's problems of ethnic and social discrimination. Their voices would have added breadth and scope to the debates, but fortunately, there was enough diversity among those present to cover the key identity problems and classic obstacles in France's growingly complex social and political kaleidoscope.

The participants included a judge for minors from the *banlieues*, a national secretary from one of France's main trade unions, a high level adviser to the President of the French railroads from a North African background based in Marseilles, a black entrepreneur active in social issues, lay and Catholic intellectuals and editors, one with Polish and Swedish roots, as well as two historians, one Jewish now teaching in the UK, the other a deeply committed Catholic active in Church affairs, plus two people with a strong American and British experience. Despite the fact that most of them were

left of centre, and perhaps precisely because of the vast disarray of France's multiple lefts, the participants managed to raise all the pertinent issues with sufficiently contrasting opinions—some even quite conservative— to ensure that the round table addressed France's key problems through a sufficiently wide-eyed lens.

The French round table differed from all the others for one final, far more structural, reason: the risk of inherent confusion between the reference to the *res publica* and the reference to France's own specific institutional political framework, *la République*. Whereas in the UK and in the Swedish round table, and to some extent also in the Polish one, participants had to grapple with a Latin reference to the 'common good' that did not come naturally, the danger in the French round table was the opposite: that linguistic familiarity with the term would either skew the debates toward *la République*'s own everyday politics or bury them under untold layers of historical references based on a political and social tradition going back to the French Revolution.

These two dangers could not be avoided entirely. France's structural inability to carry out reasonable reforms in time, her penchant for strong solutions promulgated from 'above' with the concomitant, equally predictable revolts from 'below' do not just belong to the country's tumultuous political past. They continue to define France's deepest living cultural political identity. If the British are proud of their ability to 'muddle through' by finding *ad hoc* pragmatic solutions to most of their problems, one can say with little provocation, that the French are also proud of their ability to 'muddle through', by which they mean surviving the disturbances provoked by their repeated political and social crises. These crises—one could call this the 'other' French paradox—are so embedded in the national culture that they do not really prevent the long-term functioning of the country.

'Politics' was thus more central in the French round table than in any other, but this did not prevent the group from agreeing on several key issues. They agreed that France had become a more open and pluralist society, particularly at the local and regional levels, even though this new

openness was not necessarily reflected at the central political level still plagued by the ongoing paralysis of the political elites. They also stressed that the social welfare aspect of the *res publica* still functioned by and large satisfactorily, thus defusing some of the more violent consequences of this political paralysis. One could not really speak of entire groups of people having been 'left out' of the social contract, even though budgetary restrictions rendered all of these positive nets inherently more fragile.

If Britain had 'the Continent' as a reassuring spectre, if Sweden feared becoming Denmark, if half of Poland had the other half as its own internal enemy, France, in the eyes of most of the participants, was not only better off than the rest of Latin Europe, but it was also more 'just' and 'convivial' than either the UK or the USA, with their separate ethnic communities and weak safety nets. In other words, France, like every other country in the round table series so far, had its own reassuring 'negative' mirror.

The participants also felt (and in this they reflected a far larger French consensus) that France, unlike most of her neighbours, had no restrictive 'Frenchness' (in the sense of 'Britishness' or 'Swedishness') debate. This was due in part to the fact that national identity in France was not 'ethnic' but irremediably bound up with the Nation State and its most recent incarnation, *la République*. There was also another major reason: the country's 'others' or 'immigrants', unlike elsewhere across Europe, had come, in their vast majority, from former French colonies, and their parents had been French *indigènes* (natives), even if they themselves were not French, but most important, their children were French citizens. Most of France's immigrants already spoke French, and their children, even at the heart of the *banlieues*, were making their own contributions to French culture and counter-culture. Their integration was thus an increasingly social issue, not one based on irreconcilable identity clashes with ultimate foreigners, separated by language and culture from an older French ethnic population.

These shared readings, however, led to two very different ways of evaluating France's current

political blockages, social crises, and immigrant problems. The round table participants could be divided into two camps. There were the 'structural' pessimists, who believed that France's problems were deeply ingrained, predated current identity considerations and were unmanageable irrespective of the type of political elites in power. A second group of *ad hoc* pessimists believed instead, that things had got much worse and that a new political class was needed to confront entirely new types of social and political problems. Paradoxically, the 'structural' pessimists were also those who believed that France would continue to 'muddle through' in her very own special manner. For them what counted was to reassert the fundamental principles of '*Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*' which were the creed of *la République*. The *ad hoc* pessimists instead felt that the traditional equilibria of the past had been toppled and that *La République* could only be saved with new forms of authority and new social blueprints that would bring her closer to other national models from Europe and North America. These two camps were separated by an extremely fine line and it was not uncommon to see participants shift from one side to the other, depending on the specific topic addressed.

These latent tensions came out in the open over a highly symbolic issue which has been in the forefront of French intellectual and political debate in the last two years: the legitimacy of statistical tools that would count France's inhabitants in terms of self-proclaimed ethnic, racial and religious belonging, thus breaking with *la République's* tradition of considering its citizens as equal in an identity-blind manner. The round table was held days after France's Constitutional Court reaffirmed its opposition to any ethnic or religious statistical breakdown, but the issue of 'statistics of diversity' (their official name in the French debate), continued to hover over every session, not unlike Banquo's ghost. The 'structural' pessimists were largely opposed to such statistics, whereas the *ad hoc* pessimists argued for their vital need.

With these preliminary considerations in mind, one can now turn to the round table discussions. They all hinged around one central *leitmotif*: whether one could speak of a 'crisis' of *la République* in the following realms: 1) social cleavages; 2) the educa-

tional system; 3) secularism; 4) citizenship; 5) the law; 6) political representation.

It is worth stressing that none of these crises was directly related to the presence of 'others' inside the French context. In other words, contrary to other national experiences, and even contrary to what one saw on television, France's structural problems predated the arrival of new black or Arab immigrant populations. Depending on one's way of looking at the perennially half-full glass, this could lead participants to either relativize the weight of ethnic problems (since France's problems pre-existed this issue) or instead, to consider them as aggravating variables in an already blocked national context.

The crisis of social representation

When asked to define France's current divisions, most participants agreed that some of the old defining splits such as 'Paris versus the Provinces', a very popular reference for most of the postwar period, or generational cleavages (in the spirit of the protests of 1968) were no longer pertinent. The pursuit of individual needs versus collective institutional progress had transformed French society and deepened social fractures, without, however, creating new places of social cohesion. This was particularly true for France's 'others', of immigrant origin, who did not, unlike in the UK, aggregate in clearly defined communities—something most of the participants considered beneficial for society as a whole, in that they did not voluntarily form separate ethnic clusters. Since the French *République* only recognized religious identities (in a highly limited manner) and no ethnic ones, the French round table did not discuss the issue of 'minorities' as such, but was forced to address it in a far more indirect manner.

Many participants agreed that French society was increasingly divided between those who were 'active' and those who were not 'active' because they did not have a job or because they were retired or were on social welfare. All agreed that the current fracture between 'active' and 'non-active' persons, was leading to a badly distorted redistribution system, with the older populations both having far more money than the younger

generations, but also costing proportionately more in terms of social and economic services. These imbalances were particularly visible, according to one participant, in the smaller towns and villages of a vast country such as France.

Others stressed that France's major social divisions were, instead, territorial in nature with the rural areas and the *banlieues* being proportionally poorer and less privileged in terms of state services than the cities. To this fundamental injustice one then had to add another, namely the type of employer who gave work to the 'active' populations. Those who worked for large state companies which offered virtual life-time jobs were on the other side of the benefits divide from those who worked for small private enterprises at the mercy of market forces and with no guarantee of long term employment. The strikes that had just ended were sparked off by the government's non-negotiable declaration that henceforth workers in some protected state sectors had to pay forty years of social contributions like everybody else, thus losing 'privileges' that had been negotiated decades before in another economic setting. Some participants felt that the government was responsible for the strikes by having refused any calm negotiation. Others felt, instead, that the trade unions had to be 'curbed' in their corporatist demands. Both agreed that political ideology had won the upper hand over pragmatism.

The greatest conflict among the round table participants centred around the issue of ethnicity and race. Some believed that ethnic and racial cleavages were becoming important benchmarks of an increasingly conflictual French society. Others adamantly claimed that 'ethnic' differences were secondary, mere smoke screens, with respect to the deeper social injustices of a society where the children of the old working-class were just as discriminated against as the children of black or Arab immigrants in terms of their social mobility or the much tougher rise into France's elites. The dispute was not solved, but time and time again, different participants complained that concrete aspects of France's educational, legal and social problems could not be properly addressed simply because one did not know enough about the nature of the populations under study, nor could one count them

in terms of their identities. The conclusion was that one could not possibly fight against discrimination and injustice if one did not know 'who' was being discriminated against and in what proportion with respect to the rest of society.

Since the 'statistics of difference' had been turned by some political activists and intellectuals into an ideological symbol of a fully fledged attack against *la République*, along with the notion of 'positive discrimination', few were willing to turn such a pragmatic sociological tool into a concrete political demand. One participant, with North African Muslim origins, proclaimed his shock upon hearing that one of Sarkozy's campaign promises had been to have a 'Muslim Prefect'. The very idea that *la République* would fall into the trap of 'affirmative action' by defining ethnic typologies seemed for him to be a total denial of its quest for meritocratic excellence. Another participant from the trade union world stressed that the trade unions were a closed middle-aged 'club' with no tradition of bringing in 'new blood' and that this generational blockage also explained why there were so few black or Arab cadres within the trade union movement. Age and territorial belonging could account for this discrepancy, beyond any 'ethnic' discrimination. The round table did not pursue this discussion, as though held back by ideological 'taboos'

This debate may seem off the mark or at least exotic with respect to other European experiences, but it is important to stress that it has become a powerful dividing factor among persons who share the same political will to fight discrimination on behalf of a more open and just society, and this division traverses both France's 'right' and 'left'. Those against ethnic statistics claim that social and economic data suffice to determine social inequality, and that the state should simply fight all discriminations, all the more so that there is no such thing as 'ethnic solidarity.' Rather than speaking of targeted ethnic groups, it is best to speak of targeted 'neighbourhoods of discrimination' Those who favour ethnic statistics claim, instead, that racial discrimination further embitters social differences, and that by not counting, one continues to present a skewed picture of a racially dysfunctional French society. Blacks, in this view, suffer from

specific racial discriminations that have nothing to do with social status, since such discriminations also affect the black middle classes with higher education, who simply do not get the jobs for which they are qualified.

It is important to stress that France's blacks have taken the lead in demanding these 'statistics of difference' far more so than France's North African Muslim populations, and in the round table it was significant that the person who came out most vociferously against such statistics was of North African Muslim origin and a very committed upholder of *la République*, who had always worked in a major state company, while the person who upheld them most was a black entrepreneur. He had specifically told the round table that he had been forced to become a self-employed entrepreneur after sending out 1500 unsuccessful job applications despite his high, doctorate-level, professional qualifications.

All participants agreed that France's crisis of social representation was exacerbated by the political class' inability to take social problems into consideration. This was translated by a structural inability to promote ongoing and open social dialogue. As a result, there simply was no efficient relay between social demands and political solutions. Only the effectiveness of the social welfare net allowed society not to explode more often. Yet, for many participants, this safety net was becoming only a social palliative which could no longer hide the fact that France had a growing number of 'working poor' who simply could not make it on their salaries alone.

Disagreement arose on whether this cleavage between society and the state was 'spontaneous' or 'orchestrated' from above. The debate that followed was over hues of pessimism, which I could call 'standard', 'deep' and 'global'. 'Standard' pessimists seemed to think that there was a political 'will' to divide and conquer different groups within French society by consciously pitting them one against the other, and that Sarkozy incarnated this tactic. 'Deeper' pessimists felt that at best, Sarkozy revealed cleavages that were already there, and that it did not matter who was in power, whether from the left or the right. In both cases,

there was no real political will to make reforms, and no desire to engage in a fruitful dialogue with social actors. 'Global' pessimists felt that France's problems stemmed from deep-seated cultural trends, namely the historical tradition of hostility to the 'big ones' in power. This led to very strange unintended results, namely that those who were in the most precarious jobs often sided with and supported the demands of those who had safety cushions and corporate privileges, thus blocking society's need for reforms while misunderstanding their own self-interest. The 'global' pessimists seemed to carry the debate, arguing for the impossible goal of achieving greater social transparency. 'Standard' pessimists argued for a more cohesive political organization within the left. 'Deep' pessimists felt that France could only lurch between the Scylla of ineffective reforms and the Charybdis of Bonapartist authoritarian shaking-ups of the country to make it catch up for its non-reformist sloth. In this reading, Sarkozy merely inaugurated a new Bonapartist phase in French society....hardly the sign of a flourishing *res publica*... even though one could argue that this was the French way of 'muddling through'.

As a small counter-argument to this general pessimism, one participant stressed, that, in terms of family finances, Frenchmen were beginning to think in more 'capitalist' terms, by subscribing massively to life insurance as a form of savings- to which another replied that they did so because it was the only way of ensuring that they could leave an inheritance to their own family members rather than to the state, via its heavy inheritance taxes.

The crisis of education

France's highly centralized public educational system was historically conceived as the main pillar of *la République*, first turning peasants into Frenchmen, then integrating the working classes, and slowly taking in the new more upwardly mobile strata which were produced during the years of postwar economic growth. The participants at the round table agreed that the educational system was no longer performing its integrative role. In saying this, they were basically claiming that *la République* itself was in crisis. They disagreed however, on the

level where the system was weakest and on their assessment of some of the private educational alternatives that had risen in the last decade.

One historian stressed that France had managed to bring ever larger numbers of students into the *lycée* level of secondary education from 35 per cent immediately after the war to more than 65 per cent of the population today, a record which he deemed to be better than that of the UK.

Most participants replied that this colossal jump could not hide the fact that so many students left high school without any qualifications...many of them 'pushed on' even when they clearly had not attained the level of competence necessary to move on to the next grade. Furthermore, those who entered the universities (as opposed to the prestigious *Grandes Ecoles*), were basically entering a vast garage, if not a rubbish dump, and that even those who left with training, often did not find corresponding jobs in a static labour market, which was compared most unfavourably to the open job market of the UK. The debate about the perverse effects of France's double track system of well-financed elite *Grandes Ecoles* and financially strapped general universities, was not dwelt upon much, since it has been a topic of never-ending French discussions since at least 1968, with no seeming solutions in sight. The rate of attrition in the first two years of university studies remains appalling, in what could only be defined as a vicious cycle of indifference and bad counselling on the part of highly strapped universities that have no institutional autonomy. Sarkozy's reforms in this sector were awaited by some with great interest, but also with a hefty dose of scepticism.

Moreover, the French educational system was no longer fulfilling its function of conveyor belt and great integrator of French society. Although technically and juridically equal, French lycées and universities offered very different results in function of the territories in which they were situated and the populations who attended them, but the lack of statistics prevented any serious study of the actual social mobility of the 'visible minorities.' The question of ethnic statistics came up again in this context, with their opponents claiming that France's education system was failing because

entire 'territories' were allowed to live with poor quality schools, thus preventing their inhabitants from participating in the meritocratic educational tradition. Those advocating such statistics claimed instead that the students who were really 'left out' all happened to belong to 'visible minorities' and that French whites could still get ahead even when they came from socially underprivileged neighbourhoods.

One participant stressed that educational systems could not single-handedly give 'values', but could only serve as 'relays' for the values which the state and the elites wished to convey, but also society as a whole. This brought the debate back to the fact that entire sectors of society (mainly blacks and Arabs) were not given due consideration, were often humiliated, and treated as potential criminals or thugs, and thus marginalized with respect to the very values *la République* was supposed to incarnate. One participant stressed that the left-wing presidential candidate, Ségolène Royal, had behaved as badly as Sarkozy in her failure to address the *banlieues*. For another participant, the origins of this mistreatment were to be found deep within France's colonial past, whose perverse effects had still not been acknowledged.

What appeared to most foreigners as the highly controversial issue of the Muslim headscarf in schools was barely touched upon, because it had become a non-issue in terms of numbers. Contrary to pessimistic predictions, the number of girls who refused to take off the scarf in schools was merely anecdotal. The round table felt that the French educational system was suffering from far worse problems than this refusal to accept identity demands. And these problems were simply not being confronted at the political level.

The question of faith schools and their role in strengthening or weakening the *res publica*, offered grounds for a more fruitful debate. Religious schools in France under state contract were required to fulfil the same curriculum requirements as state schools. One participant with a Jewish background who had also taught in a private Jewish high school, felt that such faith schools were still producing 'good Frenchmen' (in his terms), if only because most graduates were so tired of Jewish

references by the end of their schooling that they had only one longing: to plunge back into the wider space. This backhanded compliment did not convince everybody. Many felt that parents sent their children to faith schools, simply because they wanted to avoid the growing violence and 'ethnification' of state schools. Some neighbourhoods might still be 'mixed', but only superficially, so at the level of shopping in open markets, but in reality, families and their children were no longer integrating via the schools of *la République*.

The participant with Muslim origins told the group that he had initially sent his children to a Catholic school, hoping it would give them a stricter moral education and above all 'values'. Upon realizing that the school did not do so, he had pulled his children out and sent them back into the state school system where they could at least encounter all types of children.

Another participant with a strong Catholic background warned that new types of faith schools were emerging that were able to forfeit state accreditation because they could finance themselves via religious orders or parental contributions. These schools came about because many Catholic parents were disillusioned with the lukewarm values taught in most Catholic schools, and by the fact that they were attended by so many non-Catholics. They wanted their children to have a strict and 'proper' theological religious education. Similar schools also existed among the Jewish ultra-orthodox, and in both cases students were not really taught to respect the *res publica*. The unspoken question on everybody's lips was what would happen one day when similar ultra-orthodox Muslim schools develop. For the time being the very first Muslim state accredited schools were just coming into being and not without controversy.

The crisis of secularism

The session was kicked off by the Catholic participant who did not mince his words in denouncing France's tradition of *laïcité*, which had been erected as one of the founding principles of *la République*. His criticisms did not stem from any wounded Catholic sensitivity but on the contrary, from a

feeling that French secularism was (in his words) 'brutal, unbalanced, and intolerant'. French *laïcité* was brutal because it was the child of the life and death struggle between the Catholic Church and *la République*, whose roots lay within the French Revolution. The state continued to mistrust any type of spontaneous religious life, preferring, instead, to rigidly codify its statutes and rights. (Indeed, religious affairs within the French state come under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of the Interior...as though religious practice could only lead to social disorder).

Laïcité was also unbalanced because it gave far more privileges to the Catholic Church than to the other two religions which fell under the 1905 separation of Church and State: the Jewish and the Protestant. These privileges were highly 'terrestrial' in terms of financial and social rights but also in terms of the Catholic Church's ability to maintain much of its internal financial 'opaqueness'. This helped explain why the Catholic Church was so committed to the accords of 1905, which gave her the lion's share of state consideration. Finally, *laïcité* was intolerant since it refused to accommodate religious newcomers, namely Islam, which was not present during the original separation of Church and state, while according virtually no statute to the new evangelical Protestant groups, and even banning Scientology as a dangerous sect. In brief, France was a country with severely amputated religious freedoms, that alone practised such secularism as a fourth religion, and therefore hardly served as an example for others to follow.

The round table's response was quite mixed. One resolutely lay participant was shocked to see that 'religion' was even on the menu for discussion in what constituted for her a breach of *laïcité*. She even felt that any reference to the 'return of religion' was irrelevant to discussions on the *res publica*. Most participants disagreed, feeling that 'religion' had become an important factor in national life, one which could no longer be avoided. In other words, the ideology of *laïcité* was outdated. They were, however, still not sure how to take this change into account, for rethinking such a delicate and outdated equilibrium could be just as disastrous as not wishing to overhaul it. Either way, one was opening a Pandora box.

Another lay voice stressed that France was not unique in this religious unfairness. Germany was just the same, particularly with respect to Islam. A lay voice with Muslim roots, stressed the degree to which Islam was discriminated against, since its faithful were forced to pray in makeshift mosques since the state could not finance them after 1905 ...the problem being that Christians and Jews already possessed their houses of worship before the separation of Church and state. To which a Jewish participant replied that synagogues in 19th and early 20th century France were still not allowed to have entrances on main roads but were built on far smaller side streets, presumably so as not to offend the sensitivity of the Christian majority. Muslims, in other words, were not the first to have been in a situation of structural inferiority.

Another participant stressed that Islam could not really be 'integrated' until it had been purged of its association with terrorism, which brought on a Muslim response that French '*laïcité*' was perceived as an excuse with which to reject Islam (and those who practised it) altogether from the French national context, in what he called the three 'V's' of anti-Muslim abuse.... with Muslim youth first being accused of being *voleurs* (thieves), then *violeurs* (rapists) and finally *voileurs* (seeking to impose the veil).

The session ended with references to how the private sector dealt with religious demands from its employees. There was a consensus that private enterprise could be more flexible than the state, which discriminated among its citizens even inside the prisons, where no provision was made for those inmates who wanted to observe Ramadan, their food being served at the usual hours...or which exaggerated on the other hand, by bringing foreign Imams into prisons, who brought with them fundamentalist ideas that were not controlled. State schools were better since they proposed eggs for Muslim children on the days when school lunches contained pork. The major industrial companies allowed for some religious practices to exist, and the law allowed three days of paid holidays for religious occasions for all workers. But the round table participants agreed that there was still much to be done with respect to Muslim workers, particularly adult women who wanted to wear the veil,

and who were looked upon with suspicion by fellow workers as potentially dangerous.

The crisis of citizenship and immigration

This particular session squarely confronted the situation of the *banlieues*, no longer as a territorial phenomenon but in terms of the specific populations who lived there. The participant who kicked off the session, the editor of the review which co-sponsored the round table, chose to stress the positive aspects of the situation, namely that in France different ethnic groups were converging with good levels of intermarriage...with older populations but also between different immigrant groups. He added that France's good fertility levels were the product of French citizens, and not recent immigrants, so that France did not have to fear a demographic explosion of non-integrated 'others'. He acknowledged that some of the older immigrants might still be living under polygamy, but asserted that their children were totally opposed to the continuation of such a practice.

There was a major discussion on whether the French *bête noire* of *communautarisme* (ie. people choosing to live within their own ethnic or religious groups with little outside contact) had any validity inside the *banlieues*, and the consensus seemed to be if that if such *communautarisme* existed it was above all the work of the French state, which had isolated recent immigrants in neighbourhoods where they were stuck together, without proper transportation into city centres, and without any 'traditional' French citizens with whom to integrate. The judge for minors confirmed that young blacks and Arabs belonged to the same gangs and that 90 per cent of the rioters of 2005 were French and perfectly socialized into French life. Clearly citizenship did not protect them from marginalization or prejudice.

The crisis of citizenship was linked to the fact that a portion of France's citizens were excluded from the national compact for social reasons, and trapped in neighbourhoods where the political elites of the country referred to them as 'enemies' in what one participant called 'war metaphors', coming from a state that invested little in public policies and did not know how to have recourse to

mediation. This reading was partially rebutted by another participant who stressed that the state had pumped millions of euros into these neighbourhoods but that nothing had come out of this intellectual and financial effort, and that there was a crucial need to have new elites tackle these issues.

The participant with North African roots from Marseilles stressed that he was not convinced the *banlieues* were inevitably explosive and that they could remain quiet for years or explode the day after (it turned out that hours after he spoke, one Parisian *banlieue* was again up in arms after two youths on a light motorcycle died when it collided with a police car). But then Marseilles had remained far calmer than any of France's other cities, for reasons linked to its geography—its *banlieues* being in the midst of the city— as well as to its numerous 'para-legal' activities, which gave the city's youths jobs in what could be euphemistically called a 'grey' economy.

The crisis of citizenship in these neighbourhoods was further compounded, according to one participant, by the fact that the youths no longer had any political demands and were totally disinterested in political life. This was due to the fact that France's political elites had never known how to open up to the best voices from these new groups, even when they had marched in the name of 'republican values' during the *Marche des Beurs* (young people of North African origins) in 1983. The state's only reaction at the time and under the left in power was to create ineffectual local associations with no links to the conveyor belts of political representation, thus parking these new voices in dead-end streets. The same was true according to the participant from Marseilles with respect to the 2005 riots, which produced no new leaders in the making and no political demands.

Other participants were less pessimistic. They stressed that many youths from the *banlieues* were making it, and that only a highly visible small number were utterly 'lost.' With a bit of effort, most could be integrated into real jobs. The adviser to the president of the French rail company explained how the SNCF had started to recruit actively in the *banlieues*, because most young adults there had not even thought of applying for a job in the rail sector,

assuming it was the given right of the children of railway workers. Breaking caste mentalities was a crucial first step in changing France's social landscape. The fact that young women were moving far more quickly towards integration was emphasized by several participants who also stressed that many French women married men from immigrant communities. The general consensus was that 'time' was on the side of integration.

There was one dissenting voice. The black participant stressed the degree to which France contained virtually all of Africa's populations, which were extremely different one from the other, and the culture gap that separated lifestyles of those who left Africa to come to France from the older French populations. The only possible way of integrating such populations was through work, which was sorely missing at this point in time. Others pointed to the fact that given globalization, France was beginning to have truly 'different' populations in its midst, ones that no longer came from its empire, such as Pakistanis, who had to be taught the very basics of French values and habits, unlike the previous generations of immigrants. So that 'time' could also be double-edged.

The historians present sought to relativize today's tensions by showing just to what extent previous immigrants were also judged to be problematic and the extent to which they retained their very separate identities for long periods of time before disappearing in the French melting pot. Taking such a long-term perspective things would work out in the end even for France's new citizens. One participant even stressed the degree to which the French state had become far 'gentler' since the police had not killed anybody during the entire three weeks of riots in 2005, whereas they had systematically shot to kill in the midst of working class crowds as late as 1947. The historian with a Jewish background compared today's situation with that of the 1930s, when other immigrants, mainly Jewish, arrived in the midst of the French economic depression, at a time when Frenchmen were de-naturalizing newly minted citizens and tightening the nationality laws....with tragic consequences for the immigrant Jews who were then deported first. Thus was the French present relativized, at least for those who stressed that France's problems were

inherent to its own structures and not brought in by immigrants.

The crisis of the law

The judge who participated in the round table set the tone for the session by stressing that France's laws were not the problem. They amply covered all of the legal needs of *la République*. The problem stemmed from the fact that governments, whether from the left or the right, were constantly promulgating new laws, many of them not even passed through parliament, as a way of showing the public that they were politically 'active'. This was one of France's major problems because laws, of course, could only create a framework for political action but did not constitute political action in and of themselves.

This particular French trait of excessive legislation led to major problems for the *res publica*. Those responsible for applying the laws could barely keep up with their new promulgations, so that the entire judicial and administrative system of *la République* suffered from these excessive innovations, which often had ideological or populist intentions. One example given was the newly acquired right of the homeless to sue the state for not giving them proper lodgings. But this implied that the homeless had the means with which to sue the state. Not only were the courts already crumbling under piles of dossiers, but such legal action would fail to produce non-existent social housing out of thin air.

As a consequence, the *res publica* was suffering from administrative practices gone awry, from a lack of transparency, and from the impossibility of measuring the social needs of all types of minorities. As a result, judges were expected to carry out the political and social tasks that politicians were not performing. For the judge, as for many other participants of the round table, the fact that there were no 'statistics of difference' meant that they could not perform their work properly, since they did not know 'who' from 'where' was doing 'what'. On this count the judge confirmed that young persons from the *banlieues* had a far higher chance of getting into trouble with the police, even at the level of first contacts, simply by their style of conversation, which policemen (who had not been

specifically trained for these neighbourhoods) often interpreted as 'offensive' and 'provocative'. The youths were then taken to the police stations with charges of 'affront to an upholder of the law' and thus began the infernal spiral of having a 'police record', for which any second offence, small as it might be, would be punished even more severely. These sociological reflections, the judge stressed, had been reached by an indirect process of trying to equate family names with a given ethnic origin.

For many of the participants who were actively involved in society, it was clear that the Sarkozy government, eager to ram through Bonapartist solutions to France's stalemated society, was not interested in leaving any discretionary powers to the judges, accused of being too 'soft' on crime. It was no longer possible to apply the law while taking particular family or individual circumstances into account. This was particularly true in the case of African immigrants with highly complex family structures, where uncles were considered as important as fathers, so that children 'belonged' to a larger 'tribe'. The Law had to be equal for all and thus blind, but many feared it was also becoming deaf to the country's social realities. France was the only country so far in the round table cycle where participants looked to European laws and their trickling into the French law as a possible source of help in breaking longstanding stalemates.

The round table then addressed the issue of minority rights within the law. These were evoked with respect to religious and sexual minorities. The debate focused on whether such specific demands (as the right to turn the Christian derived calendar into a more neutral one in terms of school holidays, or the right of homosexuals to marriage) were 'specific' rights or simply 'universal' rights applied to specific cases. A Catholic participant asked whether one should construe the Law as being the product of the 'General Will' (in which case the rights of minorities to change well established traditions would be perceived as irrelevant) or whether the Law should protect minorities as specific groups. There was not much debate on the question of gay marriage, all the more so that a civil contract existed which provided homosexual couples with the key social and legal protections. Most participants seemed to plead for a pragmatic

case by case approach on the issue of religious rights with respect to the school calendar. The Stasi commission that had recommended forbidding the scarf in schools, had also suggested that the major religious holidays be turned into 'days off' for all schoolchildren, so as to make the Republic less Christian-derived, and also as a way of teaching all children about other religious traditions and the need to respect them. This provision was never enacted into law, perhaps because it might have been strange to have all French schools have a day off for Yom Kippur even when there were no Jews in a given city or region.

The discussion then moved on to the question of whether schools should be teaching religion as a historic 'fact' in the first place. One religious participant scoffed at the idea that one could call oneself a 'Christian atheist' (the self-definition of a prominent French intellectual, Régis Debray who had proposed the teaching of the *fait religieux* in the first place, by suggesting in a typical French fashion that a law be promulgated to allow this teaching in schools). The old taboos of *laïcité* hovered over the debates, with the fear that 'religion', rather than its history, might be taught instead. Most participants seemed to agree that it was best to avoid such a slippery path into religious tensions, all the more so that one participant stressed that learning about the Koran would not help explain terrorism. Others felt that it was crucial instead to show that Islam had no built-in connections to terrorism, and that only the teaching of Islam in school could defuse such a twinning. One voice waxed pessimistic by saying that in the past, students discovered the 'other' and his or her religious background by having different classmates in school. This was increasingly less the case, since schools were *de facto* becoming segregated because of the territorial divisions.

There was a general consensus that France was crumbling under too many laws and that the national tradition of amending them often and promulgating new ones as a sign of political change was highly detrimental to the *res publica*.

The crisis of political representation

This crisis permeated all the debates. There was a widespread consensus that France's political institutions no longer represented French society and that the National Assembly was particularly deficient in this realm since it was basically a club of middle-aged white males. Such a reading did not emanate only from within the left but was shared on both sides of the old political divide. Indeed many of the participants felt that when the left was in power, it had been particularly guilty of not having sought out new political talent from within the ranks of the new popular classes, failing to bring into its ranks the stronger voices of the *banlieues*, including Arabs and blacks. The left was accused of having become a club of self-promoted 'notables', particularly among the younger politicians of the 1980s, one or two of whom had come out of the less privileged 'territories'. Paradoxically, Sarkozy was the first President to have brought 'visible minorities' into his government.

The group did acknowledge that French politics had done away with the most extreme parties, with Mitterrand having wiped out the Communists in the 1980s and Sarkozy now having wiped out the National Front. These parties, however, had listened to and given recognition (and jobs) to groups in French society that no longer felt represented, and which were still 'out there', such as the old working-class. No political party now showed any interest in or respect for the 'lower classes' be they 'old' French or from immigrant origin.

Old adherents to the ideals of *la République* stressed that France's political malaise stemmed from the loss of an ideal, that of the 'general interest', as incarnated in France's *grands corps* who ran the state. One should strive to make them more meritocratic and 'colour-blind'. *La République* would be endangered if politicians started courting or playing up to specific groups, particularly since every group contained its own highly different sub-groups, in what could become a bottomless layer cake (*mille-feuille*), losing any vision of the 'whole' in the process. The way out of the problems of the *banlieues* was simply to make sure their citizens had all types of mobility: social, professional and even transport, since they were often symbolically

locked inside housing units without access to real public transport, hence their burning of cars which symbolized mobility only for the better off.

Those who espoused a more pluralist understanding of the *res publica*, stressed, instead, that it was normal for politics to reflect group interests, and that France had made great progress on this count at the local and regional levels where group politics was acceptable. One participant gave as an example of this 'new' France a town where the mayor had appointed a deputy in charge of Armenian questions.

Decentralization was perhaps offering a new context for political reform. The problem was that these new political activists were not represented at the national level. There was a debate on whether it was simply a matter of time, or whether there were structural blockages that would persist, foremost among them the tradition of *parachutage*—having the major political parties send candidates from Paris with no local base to run in parliamentary elections, bypassing the local grassroots politician. One participant stressed that local voters often preferred the parachuted candidate to their own local hard-working politician, because they assumed the former would carry more clout in Paris.

Furthermore, given Paris' temptation to centralize all major political decisions, one encountered an added perverse effect. Local and regional actors who could reach pragmatic and useful agreements among themselves along bipartisan lines at the local level would automatically reintegrate their respective political camps and the attendant language of conflict, if the same issues were then debated at the national level....so that local progress in no way prefigured a change of French political traditions. And there could be no hope coming from Europe because politics was deeply anchored inside age-old national political traditions. France thus ran a very real danger of remaining quite frozen in political terms.

Some participants felt that Sarkozy, and his ministers, none of whom had come from France's *Grande Ecoles*, (unlike the Socialist candidate and her advisers) might finally break the French

political corset. But one could just as easily say that Sarkozy, the Bonapartist 'doer', still remained trapped in the old French political tradition. The jury was still out, and for many, the true test would be whether the *banlieues* could be 'defused', and their residents brought into national politics. A more pessimistic voice referred to the act that France's electoral map had not changed since 1986, even though the Constitutional Court had specified that it had to be revised every few years. No political party, however, had pressed for such a revision since it was not in their interest, as it would have entailed changing well-established reflexes. As a consequence, the *banlieues*, which were already discriminated against in social (and ethnic) terms, were politically underrepresented, not only in the distant National Assembly, but above all in local and regional politics as well. What was needed for French politics to become more representative was a larger dose of proportional representation....and stronger counter-powers, since the National Assembly did not have sufficient legislative clout with which to oppose the Executive.

Does *La République* still incarnate the *res publica*?

The round table debates all pointed to a loud 'no' as an answer to this question, if only because of the sheer amount of time the participants spent denouncing the dysfunctions of the French state and its political system, and above, all the divorce between French society and its institutions. (The contrast with the UK round table where 'government' was barely mentioned was particularly glaring).

Yet that would be too simple an explanation. Behind the massive political criticisms, behind the feeling that the 'common good' was short circuited by irresponsible and static political elites, loyalty to *la République* and to its longstanding principles remained strong. In the words of one participant, priority had to be given to ensuring that *la République's* values triumph over the 'incantatory' and rote reference to *la République*, used by those (on the left as well as on the right) who wanted to block all change. Only with such a gamble could 'republicans' ensure that France did not fall into the 'Anglo-Saxon' trap of identity politics....the only foreign

reference in a round table that had very little to say about 'Europe'. Yes, the criticisms were all there, but in the end one should not underestimate the power of love and even patriotic pride for France's 'difference'.

One participant's last comment in the round table was that things were really not so bad in France. The welfare state still worked, even if the left had betrayed its political responsibilities. Ultimately it did not matter that there was no effective division of powers within the French state. The 'street' would always be there to control the executive. This was not said in a rueful manner but as a philosophical piece of political analysis. The country that gave birth to the French Revolution cannot really be expected to turn itself into a modest and predictably boring political setting. The unanswered question was whether this miraculously counterbalancing 'street' would henceforth also include the *banlieues* and the local powers. To which one had to add an even more disturbing question, whether one could really introduce change in a country that, by and large, liked itself as it was.

The *res publica* in France thus faced an uphill battle to reconquer *la République*.

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http://www.jpr.org.uk/common-good-in-europe/downloads/round_table_france_programme.pdf