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BY PHILIPPE MARLIÈRE

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“Islamism-Leftism”: Macron’s Witch Hunt Against Critical Academics



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Speaking recently on CNews, France’s [equivalent of Fox News](#), the higher education minister launched an unprecedented attack on the whole French academic community. Frédérique Vidal argued that French academia is “[gangrened by Islamism-gauchisme](#)” or “Islamism-leftism”. The “Islamism-leftism” tag is today used uncritically by members of the government, large sections of the media and conservative academics.

It is reminiscent of the anti-semitic “Judeo-Bolshevism” slur of the 1930s which blamed [the spread of communism on Jews](#). In reality, “Islamism-leftism” is an elusive pseudo-concept which voluntarily confuses Islam – and Muslims – with Islamic extremism and points the finger at “left-wing academics” who allegedly collude with these nebulous Islamic entities.

The notion, which is dismissed by [the scientific community](#) as unsound, was coined by the academic [Pierre-André Taguieff in the early 2000s](#). The neologism was originally forged to point to the alleged political convergence between leftist “alter-globalists” and Muslim extremists fighting the “Americano-Zionist” partners. Taguieff argued that an unlikely

alliance which expressed a “[New Judeophobia](#)” was formed between the two camps in the name of the struggle against imperialism and neoliberal globalisation.

Taguieff today readily goes along the new usage of his own word. He is a co-founder of an academic network called “Vigilance Universités”, which monitors the alleged “racialist drift” in French academia. The network’s actions comprise flagging up to the government some of the academic research carried out by alleged “Islam-leftists” on race, intersectionality or decolonial/[post-colonial studies](#).

On the same day of the CNews interview, the higher education minister declared that she would ask the state-funded national research centre, CNRS, to investigate academic research in French universities. She pledged to identify “[militant and ideologically driven work](#)” in academia.

The minister cited post-colonial studies as an example of “un-scientific” research. Still referring to post-colonial studies, she confessed being “extremely shocked when spotting [Confederate flags in the Capitol](#)” during the attack by Donald Trump’s supporters. This comparison bordered on the absurd and left commentators speechless.

French academics at large perceive her intervention as an attack on academic freedom and the sign that the “[thought police](#)” have been sent to closely monitor what they are allowed to research.

Vidal’s statements drew unusually robust rebuttals from two of the most influential academic institutions in France. First, the traditionally low-key Conference of University Presidents (CPU) dismissed “Islam-leftism” as a pseudo-concept which belongs to the [gutter press and far-right rhetoric](#). It further argued that university was not a “place of indoctrination which fosters fanaticism”. In short, the CPU said that the minister was talking nonsense.

Shortly after came an equally strongly worded rebuttal from CNRS itself. Despite complying with the ministerial order to review research in academia, the national research centre reiterated that the word “Islam-leftism” has no scientific grounds. It stated that it “firmly condemned” attacks on academic freedom and “attempts to delegitimise different fields of research, such as postcolonial studies, intersectional studies and [research on race](#).”

Vidal’s injurious statements did not appear out of thin air. In June 2020, President Macron himself declared that “the academic world, looking for a niche, is guilty of having encouraged the racialisation of socio-economic issues. The outcome of this can only be a secessionist one. It boils down to breaking down the Republic.”

Macron made these disparaging comments following George Floyd’s assassination in the United States and in the wake of the most important antiracist protests that France had [experienced since the 1980s](#). It is no coincidence that those words started a new wave of [anti-American rhetoric](#) against so-called “un-French” concepts such as “white privilege”, “racialised people”, “state racism” or “decolonial thought”.

France is familiar with systemic police brutality against people of colour from poorer backgrounds. However, when it comes to race, the French establishment is in complete denial. Most politicians and journalists revert to the tired argument that to talk about “race” is “racism”. They argue that France, a “colour-blind Republic”, has to uphold its “universal” values, the best defence against racism and division.

In a televised address to the nation the day after a historic anti-racist march in Paris, President Macron labelled the anti-racist demonstrators “separatist” and “communautaristes” – a very pejorative term implying they reject the laws and traditions of the Republic, and cultivate instead their own “community-driven” values and lifestyles. Macron celebrated instead “republican patriotism” and “republican order”, expressions which traditionally pander to the French right and far-right.

Eminent members of the government followed suit: Jean-Michel Blanquer, the education minister, was the first to cross the line and use the “Islamist-leftist” tag traditionally associated with conservative or far right media. On a major French radio channel, he declared that “Islamist-leftism is creating havoc in academia.” As ever, those claims were unsubstantiated.

More recently, Gérald Darmanin, the interior minister, tried to outbid Marine Le Pen by being even more right-wing than the far-right leader herself on immigration. He accused her of being “too soft on Islam.” Those public statements culminated in February 2021 with the passing of a controversial bill aimed at tackling so-called Islamic “separatism”. Many in France see the bill as an infringement on religious freedom, enshrining Islamophobia as state doctrine.

Yet the accusation of “Islamist-leftism” is dismissed out of hand by the main academic institutions and no one has ever been able to define exactly what an “Islamist-leftist” is. Post-colonial and de-colonial studies, race studies and intersectionality studies remain extremely marginal and under-rated in French academia: only two percent of publications in French sociological journals have been devoted to those studies since the 1960s.

So why such a fuss about “Islamist-leftism”? Academics who work on intersectionality, race or decolonial issues take gender-related and race-related discriminations and inequalities seriously. Their research findings are therefore unpalatable to the government which upholds the view that there is no structural sexism and racism in France, or nothing to discuss about France’s colonial past. Hence the concerted attacks on “critical academics” to discredit their work and silence them.

What is more, Macron knows that he is now perceived as a man from the right by a majority of voters. His electorate has also dramatically shifted to the right since 2017. He is betting on facing Le Pen again in the second round of next year’s presidential election by presenting himself as the respectable face of conservatism. To achieve that, he believes that “being tough on patriotic values and Islam” will win over conservative voters.

Macron regards Le Pen as a weaker opponent because the assumption is that moderate voters from the left will rally around him to stop the far-right from winning the decisive second round. This strategy worked in 2017, but it might not work again next time round.

Following combative social movements opposed to his economic reforms such as [the Yellow Vests](#), an inadequate handling of the [Covid-19 pandemic](#) and major concessions to the far-right on law and order issues, Macron is no longer seen as a credible bulwark against the rising tide of the far-right.

By aping and outbidding the far-right on its traditional themes of immigration and Islam, Macron has been playing with fire. His economic failures, his unpopularity and the lack of popular candidates from the centre left and centre right could see France [sleepwalking into voting for a far-right president](#), almost by default.

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***Philippe Marlière** is a Professor of French and European Politics at University College London (UK). Twitter: @PhMarliere*