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Mayanthi L. Fernando, *The Republic Unsettled: Muslim French and the Contradictions of Secularism*, Duke University Press, 2014, 328 pp., \$25.95 US (pbk), ISBN 978-0822357483.

French *laïcité* and its impact on the institutional and discursive treatment of Muslims in this country has intrigued North American academia at least since the infamous law banning “conspicuous” religious symbols in public schools—as the rapidly growing body of literature in that area testifies. While one might have feared that the topic is by now largely exhausted, Fernando’s anthropological study is original and does offer something novel: more than any other book, it meticulously unravels on a theoretical and empirical level the fundamental paradoxes engrained within French republican secularism (and the secular project more broadly). Thereby, the book also exposes the particular kind of discursive straitjacket secular republicanism constructs around religious Muslim French, rendering it extremely difficult for them to articulate and represent themselves, thus consigning them to a perpetual space of unintelligibility. Muslim French, who are considered troubling “disruptions” (5) to the secular order, are equally disrupted by “the institutions, political and legal practices, and dominant discourses that comprise French secularity” and that seek to “regulate and govern [...] Muslim life” (6). But they also disrupt by exposing, at least for the reader, if not for the defenders of French secularism, “the instability and disunity, the contradictions and confusions [...] of the secular republic” (5).

In line with recent critical scholarship on secularity, Fernando does not analyze the contradictions inherent within French *laïcité* as signs of a not yet completely achieved secularity, but as indicative of secularity’s immanent condition. In this understanding, secularism is a “normative project of government” (20) that, in order to regulate religion, constantly needs to define and redefine its boundaries, and thereby reshapes not only institutional but also social and cultural life. By taking a cue from Talal Asad’s insight to study secularity through its shadows, Fernando furthermore sets out to examine the more concealed and insinuating practices and effects of French secularism as they unfold “in the shadows of the secular republic” (5), in this case, within the less mediatized realms of French Muslim religious and civic life. It is here that the inherent contradictions of French secular rule become most forcefully visible. Yet, they can be happily ignored or anxiously disavowed by the defenders of republican secularism because, as Fernando argues, the resulting tensions “are asymmetrically distributed in a constant recalibration that sustains secular rule. Muslims, seen as incapable of separating religion from politics, become the sources of contradiction, rather than secular rule itself” (21).

But Fernando also moves beyond most recent critical studies on secularity by investigating the important nexus between race and religion (something that has been initiated by Tomoko Masuzawa but not really taken up productively so far). By “tracing the continuities and discontinuities between colonial and postcolonial constructions of race and religion,” Fernando wants to show “how racialization and secularization intersect to produce contemporary forms of Muslim alterity” (18). Not taking the establishment of religion and race as distinct categories at face value, she examines the processes that have produced them as different in the first place, and she examines how difference constituted through racial and religious categories “operates across a sexual matrix” (19). With such a complex theoretical and methodological toolbox, Fernando painstakingly and relentlessly lays bare the exclusionary and regulatory workings of an inconsistent secular republican power.

The book opens with an investigation of French Muslims’ difficulties to have their own understandings of citizenship and belonging to the French nation accommodated within dominant definitions of secular republican citizenship. The restrictions within republican secularism to acknowledge various and diverse definitions of attachment to the nation provide Fernando the occasion to scrutinize the paradigmatic tension underlying the republican understanding of citizenship, and by extension, French republicanism, and to which she will come back repeatedly in this book—that is, the tension between universalism and particularism. While French republicanism (as a particular modality of secular liberalism) ideally builds on a distinction between the universal and the particular, *de facto* it has always been defined by “its imperatives to both universalize and particularize,” which explains the dual nature of republican citizenship with its “contractual” *and* “cultural” bases (36). The notion of a universal contract between individual citizens abstracted from any particular ethnic or cultural background collides with the particular ethnic, racial, and religious identity of the republic. It is this tension, Fernando argues, that demands from “Muslims to abstract their Muslimness in the public sphere” but that at the same time, “makes impossible any such abstraction” (37). This, one can easily imagine, constructs a highly ambivalent discursive terrain that Muslim French, who self-consciously lay claim to both parts of their identity, have to navigate. Fernando reads French Muslims’ claims to citizenship and belonging to the French nation *as* (visible) Muslims as an aspiration to push the universalist dimension within republicanism in order to fully realize its inclusive and embracing promise. They envisage France as a pluralist nation, where Muslims as Muslims can be French as well, thereby liberating French republicanism from the implicit ethno-cultural baggage it contains. Yet, Fernando contends, French Muslims’ cosmopolitan visions remain largely a wishful thinking, because Muslimness and Frenchness are conceptualized as incommensurable in the republican imaginary.

If, for religious French Muslims, Fernando continues in Chapter 2, inhabiting publicly their non-normative identities ideally should simply be “a right to *be*” (79), they are obliged to bring “their specifically Muslim interests to the attention of the polity [...] seeking political, economic, and symbolic redress,” because they face numerous exclusions *as* Muslims. In so doing, “their demands are subsequently read as purely Muslim demands for cultural rights, and as a sign of unacceptable communalism” (87), something which breaches with the French principle of universalism. Fernando shows here the discursive trap in which French Muslims find themselves, incapable of denouncing their own exclusions. Secular republicanism couches the deliberate exclusions that target Muslims in the neutral language of universalism, thereby hiding from view, reminds Fernando, that “[b]ecause the universal is always already the site of a privileged particular, subjects existing outside the particular-as-

universal [...] will always speak from a subordinate position marked as irredeemably particular, from a position of difference” (89).

Chapter 3 examines two state-sponsored initiatives that aim at creating Muslim institutions in order to tackle another of the fundamental contradictions Fernando traces in this book: the “paradox of French laïcité,” which “for all its commitment to the separation of church and state and its ‘privatized’ and ‘individualized’ construal of religion [...] has always, of necessity, relied on state recognition of centralized religious authorities” (117).<sup>1</sup> I particularly enjoyed Fernando’s discussion of the efforts to establish the ICI, the *Institut des Cultures d’Islam*, a highly ambitious and ambiguous Muslim institution intended to serve multiple purposes: on the one hand, it is designed to serve as a house of worship in an area that lacks mosques. Thereby, it should also get praying believers on Fridays (who could not make it into the overcrowded mosques) off the streets of their gentrifying neighborhood. On the other hand, the ICI is intended to become a cultural center that creates an environment for diversity politics *à la française*, defined as *vivre ensemble* (living together) via digestible multiculturalism. Thus, it is organized to attract the new cosmopolitan bohemia moving into the neighborhood, but it should at the same time educate (the mostly working class) Muslim inhabitants through the exposure to culture and thereby habituate them to a secularized version of Islam. And all of these various objectives of the ICI, initiated by the municipality, have to be achieved while simultaneously respecting the secular injunction to separate religion from the state as well as from culture—the reader gets it, it is an impossible mission. The discussion of this multilayered, multifunctional, and ambivalent project brought to my mind the case of the *Mosquée de Paris*, built during the heydays of French colonial rule over Muslim North and West Africa, which itself was the outcome of objectives of control and cooptation, materializing in a magnificent if strange mosque–restaurant–tea salon–*hammam* complex.<sup>2</sup>

Establishing this multi-task locality that also aspires to maintain a clear separation of spheres (religion, politics, culture) assumed to be naturally and self-evidently distinct is not an easy task. Here Fernando offers the reader some insider glances into the almost comic battles of Parisian civil officers involved in that project. We listen, on the one hand, to the quandaries city officials have with the recalcitrant, non-collaborating Imams of the neighborhood (denounced, not unrelated to their ethnicity, either as ignorant peasants or as cunning Islamists) who are not enthusiastic about the new ICI-mosque. On the other hand, we learn of the at times clumsy but always well-intentioned efforts of employees of the ICI-cultural center. Having some very basic notions of the concept of Orientalism, they carefully try to avoid falling in that trap even if the very idea of the ICI as a space of *vivre ensemble*, where Muslim “difference” can be shared, still ends up fixing the Muslim as Other—though a somehow sympathetic Other, at times cultural, at times ethnic, but never too religious: “respecting and sharing with and in the Other requires that Muslims remain Other, but comfortably so” (131). So while one might imagine “sharing with each other” as a neutral, balanced exchange between two sides, Fernando aptly discloses that in this case, “[t]he position of exigency, of making demands, is clearly reserved for the non-Muslim partner” (130). She concludes: “Thus a sharable Islam must be imagined very differently, first by confining unsharable ethical practices like praying to the mosque, and then by locating

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted from Cécile Laborde, *Critical Republicanism: The Hijab Controversy and Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 47.

<sup>2</sup> Mustafa Bayoumi, “Shadows and Light: Colonial Modernity and the Grande Mosquée de Paris,” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 13 (2) [2000]: 267-292.

everything else under the sign of culture” (132). But if the cultural center avoids defining Islam qua religion, then, how does it specifically define it? And what precisely brings the different performances, exhibitions, and artworks exposed there by artists from the Middle East, North and West Africa together? It is, Fernando argues, by recoding the signifier “Muslim” as “cultural and racial” (139). She situates this slippage she identifies here within a longer historical configuration connected notably to colonialism where France’s colonial subjects had already been defined by a concatenation of race, religion, and culture. So, whereas French republicans often accuse Islam of being incapable of properly distinguishing religion from politics and culture, Fernando provocatively replies that it is not Islam that “cannot separate religion, race, culture, and politics” but it is “Christianity, secularity, and Europe [that] cannot” (141).

The question as to why the Islamic headscarf generates such a profound malaise within the French public sphere, rendering it incapable to recognize this garment as a personal ethical commitment for certain French Muslim women is dissected in Chapter 4. Fernando explains this malaise through the secular-republican imaginary that defines its central commitment to self-realization and individual freedom as being in opposition to any normative authority or constraints; thus, it relegates pious Muslim French women who do recognize religious authorities and norms into a “a no-man’s land of discursive and legal unintelligibility” (173). What I find intriguing in this chapter is that Fernando does not stop at merely opposing the different understandings of and relations to authority and freedom within liberal approaches and Islamic traditions, as is often done, but she goes further to uncover a much more nuanced and complex relation between freedom and norms within French republicanism, and more broadly within liberalism, than is commonly acknowledged. Discussing the work of John Locke and Émile Durkheim, two eminent political thinkers of these two traditions of thought, she shows to what extent they both emphasized the importance of “education, a disciplinary process they both believed necessary for the cultivation of freedom” (176). Consequently, she pinpoints the vital tension that exists within these traditions between authority and freedom because claiming that education and discipline are necessary for the cultivation of freedom, also means that: “authority is actually essential to cultivating proper freedom [...] to producing freedom” (176).

This insight is of course not completely lost to the defenders of secular republicanism, given that the passionate critiques of the Islamic headscarf in France usually alternate between an insistence on personal autonomy and freedom on the one hand and the necessity to reinstitute the authority of the Republic, on the other. In front of this apparent inconsistency, Fernando advances an astute and pertinent suggestion: “I wonder if criticism of the religious authority and normativity of Islam defers a set of tensions inherent to a secular-republican project that emancipates individuals from various forms of authority (the Catholic Church, custom, and so on) by bringing the normative disciplinary authority of the school to bear on its subjects. The headscarf indexes the relationship between authority and freedom that is central not only to the Islamic tradition but to republicanism as well. At the same time, it signals the waning of that authority and the school’s inefficacy in disciplining citizen subjects” (179). In such a context where secular republicans bemoan the general loss of authority of the republican school and the republic at large, Fernando delights the reader with another of her provocative conclusions (that, again, must come as a terrible vexation to every staunch defender of secular republicanism); namely, because French Muslims actively acknowledge the link between authority and freedom, they appear to be “the true heirs to the Third Republic,” or perhaps even are “the only real republicans left in France” (180).

The last two chapters focus on the question of sexual politics, as they are engrained within contemporary secularism in general and French secular republicanism in particular—an intertwining that Joan Scott has so aptly captured in her term “sexularism.”<sup>3</sup> Fernando, in Chapter 5, looks at the celebration of some public figures embodying the secular and liberated Muslim woman who take up the function of mediatizing these politics. In Chapter 6, she investigates public debates around LGBT rights and marriage equality in France and the particular ways politically active Muslims are explicitly interpellated to prove themselves to be tolerant toward non-heteronormative sexualities. Both chapters show how French sexual politics culturalize and racialize gender inequality and homophobia, positing them as a Muslim problem that France has largely resolved. The group of celebrated secular and “liberated” Muslim women discussed in Chapter 5, who are taken to represent Muslim women while contradictorily also being applauded for their “exemplarity” or “exceptionality,” confirm this culturalizing and racializing logic when they publicly narrate their personal ‘emancipation’ story from repressive Islamic traditions toward their embracement of secular-republican values. Their narratives, in which we find long-established Orientalist portrayals of the violent misogynist Muslim man, analyze domestic and sexual violence occurring in the *banlieues* as a “collective cultural pathology” (197), whereas similar forms of violence being perpetrated by white French men always remain unmarked by the fact of being subsumed under the cover of individual and even momentary psychosis. Chapter 6, similarly, exposes how during the passionate debates around marriage equality, Catholic homophobes were generally considered as individuals who indicate a political problem that will eventually be solved, whereas homophobia among Muslims was always collectivized and considered to be a civilizational problem, demonstrating the incapacity of Muslims to become fully European.

*The Republic Unsettled* is a dense, but extremely well written book that exposes and “unsettles,” as the title indicates, secular republicanism by laying bare its numerous inconsistencies and paradoxes. Thereby it also discloses the many remaining blind spots within secular liberalism more broadly. And for anyone (like myself) who has experienced the frustration during fruitless discussions with French peers, incapable to destabilize even if only slightly their certitudes of secular republicanism’s truth claims, Fernando’s book provides a deeply satisfying read. One can only hope that it will be translated into French in the near future in order to contribute, beyond the Anglophone academic world, to a more local French debate. In the aftermath of the *Charlie Hebdo* shootings, which has issued in an uncritically and self-gratulatory reinvigoration of secular republicanism in France, accompanied by a dramatic increase in anti-Muslim violence, Mayanthi Fernando’s book is more timely and urgent than ever.

Jeanette S. Jouili  
University of Pittsburgh  
Assistant Professor of Religious Studies

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<sup>3</sup> Joan Scott, *The Fantasy of Feminist History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

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