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Rethinking laïcité as a geopolitical concept

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ABSTRACT

Laïcité, France's idiosyncratic religious neutrality, is a concept that governs significant aspects of daily life while being notoriously variable in its application. Alongside sociological, legal and historical understandings of laïcité, I propose an additional way to view laïcité: through a critical geopolitical perspective. I argue that laïcité has been made and unmade through geographic imaginaries and practices through which idealised modes of universal citizenship confront and negotiate with affiliations to faith and culture to produce hegemonic ideas about the place of religious identity in French society. In particular, this confrontation has occurred within the French public school system, the *école républicaine*. I argue that laïcité, as it is manifested through educational policies as well as geographic imaginaries, reflects a will to forge a nationally unified citizenry as well as ambivalence about the need to negotiate with locally rooted cultural identities. I illustrate this through the phenomenon of student infringements, or *atteintes*, against laïcité: while these are framed as a grave threat to republican unity requiring national interventions, there has nevertheless been a consistent lack of spatially specific official knowledge of where *atteintes* take place.

RÉSUMÉ

La laïcité, ou neutralité par rapport à la religion particulière de la France, est un concept qui influence de nombreux aspects de la vie quotidienne alors qu'il incline à une fameuse variabilité dans son application. Je propose d'avancer une perspective de la géopolitique critique pour l'analyse de la laïcité à côté des perspectives sociologiques, légales et historiques. Dans cette perspective, la laïcité se fait et se défait à travers des imaginaires géographiques ainsi que des pratiques spatiales dans lesquelles des modalités de la citoyenneté universelle idéalisée se confrontent à et se négocient avec des convictions et affiliations culturelles pour produire des idées hégémoniques sur la place de l'identité religieuse dans la société française., cette confrontation se réalise en particulier dans l'école républicaine française. Selon moi, la laïcité, telle qu'elle se manifeste dans les politiques éducatives aussi bien que les imaginaires géographiques, contient à la fois une volonté de former une nation de citoyens dans l'égalité et une ambivalence par rapport aux éventuels besoins d'accommoder la différence locale. J'illustre

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mon argument en traitant le phénomène des incidents dits « atteintes » à la laïcité commises par des élèves. En même temps que les atteintes sont traitées comme des menaces graves contre l'unité républicaine exigeant une forte réponse nationale, il existe un manque constant de connaissances officielles spatiales sur ces incidents, c'est-à-dire là où elles ont lieu.

Introduction

Laïcité (which will remain untranslated and unitalicised for the remainder of this article) is a concept that is both fundamental to French political culture and bitterly contested. At its most basic, it is a term that describes the state's 'neutrality' towards any particular religion. However, even that minimalist definition masks a complex debate over the consequentialist, normative and contextual terms of 'neutrality', to say nothing of the historic variability of these terms over time. Baubérot, for instance, (2015) identifies no fewer than seven discrete historical and contemporary 'laïcités'. This indeterminacy has been borne out in work investigating the application of laïcité in specific institutional contexts, which confirms that rather than representing an agreed-upon set of principles, laïcité is often manifested in practice as a particular constellation of relevant actors' prejudices (e.g. Orange 2016; Bozec 2015, 2020), compromises (e.g. Bowen 2007; Lizotte 2020) and misapprehensions (e.g. Lorcerie 2010; Farhat 2020). Or, as Altglas (2010) puts it, 'laïcité is what laïcité does'.

The purpose of this article is to propose an approach to laïcité that casts it as not only historically and institutionally contingent but also *geopolitical*. Here, rather than 'geopolitics' in its usual meaning of international relations and great power conflict, I employ a meaning of geopolitics as it is known critically: that is, as conflicts over, as Ó Tuathail (1996) puts it, the spatially referenced taken-for-granted assumptions known as 'geographic imaginaries' (Gregory 2009) and the practices that produce 'the ownership, administration, and mastery of space' (3). In the case of laïcité, the general trend of practices through which laïcité is applied as public policy has been towards a spatial ordering of identities and the rights and privileges associated with those identities, with the parochial and communitarian relegated to the private and local scales and the universal to the national and global scales. These practices, in turn, have been facilitated by a set of geographic imaginaries that have generally promoted a vision in which territory administered by the French state appears as political and social spaces of openness and unity as opposed to those governed by ostensible theocratic tyranny. To be sure, this distinction has never been absolute, nor universally shared, and the strength of these geographic imaginaries has waxed and waned over time. However, the long tradition of 'Gallician' state control over religious organisations inaugurated by Philippe le Bel in the early fourteenth century (see Bowen 2012) has generally fostered a sense of French exceptionalism with regard to the relationship between church and state, even if this exceptionalism has not always been warranted.

Because laïcité in the contemporary era is closely identified with the complex nexus of notions of nation, state and citizenship rooted in the ever-shifting intellectual construction of French republicanism (Laborde 2008; Bertossi 2012; Chabal 2015), it is often

thought as constitutive of a fundamental or typical French ‘identity’. In particular, *laïcité*, as it is often interpreted and applied today, casts visible expressions of Islam as irreconcilable with republican religious neutrality (see Tiberj 2014), even as the Catholic cultural biases—so-called ‘catho-*laïcité*’—of that neutrality often go unacknowledged (e.g. Balibar 2004; Laborde 2008). What the critical geopolitical perspective shows, however, is that the geographic imaginaries and practices that have made up *laïcité* over time have produced ‘identities’ in the sense described by Avanza and Laferté (2005): complex interplays between social categories imposed from the top down and affiliations negotiated from the bottom up and produced through not only discourse but also material practices. In this sense, an activist state posture towards religious identities has, including before it was given the label ‘*laïcité*’, long involved geographic imaginaries and practices aimed at managing social difference (see Baubérot 2002; Bowen 2009).

Laïcité’s fundamentally spatial nature can be apprehended in a variety of ways, but for the purposes of demonstrating it here, I investigate its manifestation within the French public school system. The *école républicaine* as it is known today is an institution whose initial conception and realisation in the late nineteenth century were driven by the metropolitan centre’s ambition to integrate culturally the peripheries of the still-consolidating French nation (see Durpaire 2016). Today, this ambition has been redirected towards another set of ‘peripheries’: namely, the deprived urban fringes of major French cities, the *banlieues*, which have been increasingly imagined as the repositories of Muslim intransigence to republican integration. What unites both underlying geographic imaginaries, though, is a basic belief in the ability of state education to liberate children from potentially illiberal community or family influences. Despite acknowledgement of its many flaws, a postulated liberationist potential of common education remains influential in contemporary debates about how *laïcité* is to be practised pedagogically (see Laborde 2008; Orobon 2020).

The manifestation of *laïcité* within the *école républicaine* in turn rests upon two differently scaled geographic imaginaries through which *laïcité* is commonly understood: on the one hand, the geopolitics of *laïcité* are global. Rooted in France’s colonialist past (Bowen 2009) and accelerated by the post-11 September 2001 securitisation of Muslim identity (Croft 2012), *laïcité* has increasingly become a standard against which non-compliers are seen as not only incompatible with ‘Western’ civilisation (Tiberj 2014), but also as potential security threats (Hajjat and Mohammed 2013). At the same time, a critical mass of these non-compliers is identified as residing in the *banlieues* (e.g. Dikeç 2007; Douzet and Robine 2015). These geographic imaginaries have the effect of applying existing prejudices and fears about a collective Muslim embrace of illiberal, anti-republican values—*communautarisme* (Dhume-Sonzogni 2016)—to entire neighbourhoods and even municipalities, driving a narrative of spaces ‘subtracted from the Republic’ (Baubérot 2012) that must be urgently reintegrated into the republican order. Taken together, these geographic imaginaries—the school as the outpost of republican order, the threat of global Islamist terrorism and the mass disaffection of postcolonial urban populations—have been collapsed into education, both as an institution and in the form of individual school buildings, as a site of intense struggle over the meaning and function of *laïcité*. However, as I argue, even within the highly scrutinised *école républicaine*, the geographic imaginaries and practices making and unmaking *laïcité* continue to act as a negotiating force between national unity and local diversity.

The rest of this article proceeds in four steps. First, I briefly outline some basic tenets of the critical geopolitical approach I use to understand *laïcité* as a geopolitical concept. Next, I introduce the *école républicaine* as a ‘geopolitical site’ (Lizotte and Nguyen 2020) that consolidates and mediates between geographic imaginaries and administrative regimes at several different scales to produce an institution through which *laïcité* is intensely scrutinised as a security as well as cultural matter. Following that, I examine a narrative that I argue illustrates one of *laïcité*’s core geopolitical tensions through the issue of student infringements against *laïcité* policies, which I will hereafter refer to by the French term *atteintes*. Since a seminal incident in 1989 now dubbed the ‘first headscarf affair’ in which three girls in a school in Creil refused to remove their *hijabs*, *atteintes* have been taken as evidence of imminent social breakdown on the supposition that youth are succumbing to family and community pressures to reject the French republican social pact built on loyalty to the ‘universal’ republic over personal cultural ties. This framing has been often criticised—correctly—for its use of increasingly racialised discourse in which *laïcité* appears more and more as a stigmatising standard against which Muslim religiosity is cast as backwards and dangerous (e.g. Alouane 2020). However, I argue that even if state discourse has at times slipped into a culturally stigmatising script, it has in the main attempted to maintain the delicate balance between national unity and local diversity that has characterised *laïcité*’s core geopolitical function. This is demonstrated, I argue, by what has been a consistent reluctance to indicate where *atteintes* take place, instead framing them as a nationally scaled problem. This has remained the case even in the face of a powerful popular geographic imagination that ‘knows’ exactly where *atteintes* tend to occur: that is, in the Muslim-coded *banlieues* and priority education zones.

A critical geopolitical approach to *laïcité*

A primary contribution of the critical geopolitics literature has been to place a heavy emphasis on the role of discursively generated geographic imaginaries not only in *describing* spaces of belonging to the national community, but also in *constructing* these spaces themselves (e.g. O’Tuathail and Agnew 1992; Kuus 2010). Geographic imaginaries, in Gregory’s (2009) formulation, are ‘taken-for-granted spatial orderings for the world’ that impose borders, scalar hierarchies and spatial categories (e.g. urban/rural; inside/outside) on the world. On this basis, O’Tuathail (1996) sums up critical geopolitics as the recognition that what is often taken for granted in discussions of the borders and divisions making up the world is in fact the result of ‘“geo-politics”, the politics of writing a global space’ (18). Such a recognition reveals that at the heart of both official state representations of *laïcité* as well as contestations of *laïcité* is a wealth of geographic imaginaries that places these values—and those who are thought to embody them—as being either inside or outside the space of the nation. As such, *laïcité* as a set of (contested) principles marks out the literal borders of the French nation and the state that administers it.

A further key development of the Anglo-American¹ critical geopolitics literature has been to recognise how the discursive and the practical production of political space mutually inform each other (Kuus and Agnew 2008; Müller 2008; Kuus 2010). The broadening of the remit of critical geopolitics has also involved moving away from the traditional arenas of war, conflict and border control to understand how the production of

political space is not only based on the discourse of governments and practitioners of statecraft but also through more everyday, unofficial and mundane practices. For example, feminist geopolitics has offered incisive insight into microgeographies of intimate relationship, fear and risk, and emotion (Hyndman 2004; Williams and Boyce 2013). Crucially for the contemporary governance of *laïcité* in school settings, which focuses heavily on bodily presentations thought to have religious significance, the attribution of fear and anxiety to particular bodies that disrupt accepted sociospatial arrangements is both highly territorial and generated not just from the state, but at a variety of scales by actors in everyday encounters. Smith (2012) sums this up by stating, ‘bodies not only *are* territory but also *make* territory’ (1511, emphasis in the original). Such a formulation connects understandings of risk visible on the individual to larger-scale constructions of danger; risky bodies are not only surveilled for their own sake, but also, through their (perceived) visibility and presence, produce territorial categories through which risk is conceptualised and governed.

A critical geopolitical framework in which territorial categories are understood as being both the object of state intervention and productive subjects of new or spatial knowledge is useful in several ways for understanding the current state of *laïcité* as a key aspect of French political culture. First, it shows how *laïcité* is a principle that produces the nation as an idealised space of belonging, while tacitly setting conditions on that belonging. Laborde’s (2008) comprehensive overview of contemporary arguments for and critiques of different understandings of how *laïcité* should be conceived and realised demonstrates that most, if not all, of these positions draw on an idealised or critical understanding of the imagined community of the French nation. Just as ‘official’ republicans posit the borders of France as the container of *laïcité* and its promise of a common political bond transcending ethnic and class divisions, critics point out how the *laïcité*-based path to integration was constructed even as France’s colonised populations were offered impossible-to-meet terms of integration, permanently locating them outside the boundaries traced by *laïque* norms. As such, their ethno-religious identities (‘musulman.e’) and places of origin (‘maghrebain.e’, ‘algérien.ne’, etc.; see also Davidson 2012) were marked as irreparably pre-modern and ‘backwards’.

The second component of a critical geopolitical approach to *laïcité* is its ability to show how these larger-scale territorialising discourses simultaneously produce territory subject to state control at smaller and more intimate scales of life. One of these key intimate sites, of course, is the body of the (un)veiled girl or woman. Since at least the 1989 ‘headscarf affairs’ in Creil, the decision to veil has become increasingly understood not as an individual one, but one embedded in social and economic change at global, national and local scales. Submission to sexist patriarchy, an embrace of stable identity amid post-modern disconnectedness, the reclaiming of an identity neglected in official republican discourse, or agential negotiation of the competing obligations and constraints inherent to the multiple micro-capillaries of everyday power are not exhaustive of the possible interpretations attached to the decision to veil or not veil (Laborde 2008; Hancock 2015).

Finally, the critical geopolitical framework allows us to see the French public school, both as an institution and a collection of individual sites, as a set of spaces where *laïcité*’s multiply-scaled spatialities mingle and circulate. Crucially, it allows us to recognise that while these different spatialities can be discretely analysed, in practice they are not so easily separated. With the school as a focusing device, *laïcité* casts, for example, the body

of the veiled girl not just an individual infraction of a particular rule against religious symbols, but a synecdoche for the loss of French sovereignty over entire communities (see Bowen 2007), masculinised Muslim violence (Delphy 2006), assaults on 'Western' progressive understandings of gender and sexuality, and globally organised terrorist violence. As I will discuss in the following section, the *école républicaine* itself contains and produces several geographic imaginaries and spatial practices that make it an especially potent site through which laïcité is made and unmade.

The *école républicaine* as a geopolitical site

Modern state-sponsored schooling tends to aim at shaping governable subjects according to a hegemonic conception of citizenship at any given moment (Mitchell 2006; Staeheli and Hammett 2010). At the same time, schooling is an institution that retains a certain autonomy through the intricacies of its day-to-day functioning accumulated over decades and centuries of development in particular national contexts.² While overarching considerations of the national interest and national competitiveness may play a key role in shaping the ideal citizen to be educated (Mitchell 2003), the structure, personnel and practices of the institution lend schooling qualities that are not overdetermined by particular state discourses. Indeed, as an institution that contains elements of both centralised bureaucracy and dispersed practice, schooling exercises its own ability to contest, complicate and rework the geographic imaginaries and practices that make up the dominant narratives attached to citizenship and national geopolitical priorities (Lizotte and Nguyen 2020; Lizotte, 2023).

This partial detachment from overarching discourses is especially important in the context of schooling in societies with relatively recent increases in the population of Muslim citizens, where debates regarding citizenship, assimilation and integration have tended to be especially contentious over the past several decades. As Bertossi and Bowen (2014) point out, it is useful to think of the functioning of these institutions in terms of 'relative autonomy'—influenced, but not directed, by these debates. In the specific context of the *école républicaine*, while educators' perceptions are powerfully influenced by geographic imaginaries inherent to the dominant ideal of French citizenship and the ostensible threats posed by Islam to that ideal, their behaviours and practices are not dictated by these imaginaries. In the following section, I outline three basic spatialities that inhabit the *école républicaine* as a collective set of institutional traditions, individual sites and educators and that allow it to rework the prevailing narratives about citizenship and integration, local environments and risky bodies that characterise the contemporary discursive climate.

Making and integrating the national citizen

The ideological origins of the modern French ideal citizen are, of course, complex, but Laborde (2008) offers a useful distillation of some of their key moments and influences. Events such as the French Revolution, which saw periodic regional revolts against the succession of revolutionary central governments, the Dreyfus Affair, which cemented the republican association of sectarian agitation with anti-Semitism and mob rule, and the collaborationist Vichy regime in southern France during the Second World War have led

to the gradual accumulation of a deep sense of suspicion with any kind of regional, cultural or political allegiance to an entity other than the Republic. This suspicion has been paralleled by the accumulation of a dense network of state institutions meant to directly connect the citizen to their government without the intermediary of competing loyalties (Dikeç 2007).

The origins of the *école républicaine* in the late nineteenth century and its mission of knitting together rough *paysans* with their local and parochial loyalties to the indivisible Republic are well-known (Weber 1976). In the contemporary context, continuities can be found between the ambitions to integrate ethnic and regional minorities that characterised the ‘free, compulsory and laïque’ system established by the 1881–1882 *lois Ferry*, and current attempts to facilitate integration and provide a common basis for belonging to the French national community (Durpaire 2016). Nevertheless, understandings of the nature of the difference to be integrated and the norms against which integration should take place have shifted significantly. These shifts have themselves taken place in part against the backdrop of, among other things, changes in the global political economy, changing regimes of immigrant integration across Europe (Joppke 2007; Bertossi 2012), the collapse of the traditional French left (Chabal 2015) and debates over multiculturalist and assimilationist ideology (Favell 1998) to produce a hegemonic—though not uncontested—regime of republicanism re-emphasising social integration to an ostensibly neutral French political and social culture.

Further shaping the forms that laïcité has tended to take within this broad understanding of republican citizenship have been anxieties about the place and status of Islam within France. The gradual development of a post-colonial French Muslim political consciousness (Shields 2007) and French anxieties about this consciousness (Bowen 2012), the post-‘9/11’ securitisation of Islam (Croft 2012; see also Peker 2021) and the racialisation of Muslims in Europe and France in particular (Davidson 2012) have all combined to construct Islam as a potential barrier to integration in the twenty-first century. In this context, schools become especially scrutinised as sites especially crucial to successful integration, and laïcité becomes the benchmark for determining whether integration efforts have been successful. However, this benchmarking is not monolithic or absolute: even within the ecosystem of government and quasi-government organs that play key roles in circulating official guidance on laïcité and its application, some institutions, such as the now-defunct Observatoire de la laïcité, offer more conciliatory visions of laïcité than others.

Outposts of republican virtue

Even as schooling receives overarching understandings of ideal citizenship that circulate nationally, it is also embedded within local communities. These communities are themselves subject to scrutiny for their adherence to norms of republican citizenship, a scrutiny that in the contemporary context is often expressed through *communautarisme*. *Communautarisme*, which Dhume-Sonzogni calls in the subtitle of a 2016 book a ‘chimera of French nationalism’, is a cobbling-together of various philosophical and ideological tenets to form a particularly stigmatising concept that aggregates individuals into homogeneous groups pathologised for having ostensibly made the conscious choice of cultural isolation over republican unity. Indeed, *communautarisme* powerfully

depoliticises the causes of Muslim and immigrant anger while simultaneously accusing such communities of reverting to pre-modern cultural practices (Taguieff 2005; Seniguer 2017). What *communautarisme* also suggests is a particularly *spatially* circumscribed imagining of the deliberate choice to retreat from the republican commons, expressed in the concept of the *repli*—‘folding in’—*communautaire*. This gives *communautarisme* an adaptable geometry that can handily designate neighbourhoods and even entire towns as problematic. Crucially, though, this adaptable geometry is overwhelmingly applied to urban spaces rather than rural ones, due to the demographic and political economic changes that have led to real and imagined concentrations of Muslim populations in the *banlieues* since the 1950s (Kepel 1991; Dikeç 2007, 2012; Piettre 2013). This phenomenon primes the collective French geographic imaginary to understand these places as especially susceptible to *communautariste* influence by Islamist extremists. Visible signs of religious affiliation, whether mundane, such as veiling, or spectacular, such as the thousands-strong Friday street prayers depicted in documentaries such as *Trappes at Prayer Time* (Bowen 2007), therefore become markers of alienation from the rational, universal space of the Republic.

Being embedded within these larger imaginaries of urban Muslim restiveness, schools are also caught up in *communautarisme*'s scrutinising lens through which anxieties about the possibility of forging a unified French citizenry out of ethno-religious difference are directed. One of the first examples of these intertwining discourses appeared in historian Georges Bensoussan's (publishing under the pseudonym 'Emmanuel Brenner') 2002 tell-all anthology of accounts from teachers working in *banlieue* schools titled *The Republic's Lost Territories (Les territoires perdus de la République)*. The teachers he interviewed provided explosive testimony indicating an alarming alleged 'Islamicisation' of youth descended from majority-Muslim immigrant cultures as manifested through anti-Semitic, sexist and homophobic behaviour. Although initially relatively unnoticed, the book was eventually instrumental in convincing then-president Jacques Chirac to set up the Stasi Commission in 2003, charged with investigating the state of the application of *laïcité* (Bacqué 2017). In the midst of the committee's work and its intensely mediated hearings, prominent feminist Michèle Vianès tellingly referred to the public school as

a sanctuary, that is to say, a space protected from strife. Society's conflicts cannot penetrate it. It is unacceptable that the public, *laïque* and obligatory school should be polluted by the demands of 'communities' that would try to impose their beliefs, their habits, their customs upon it. (2004, 266)

In Vianès's telling, each school is theoretically indistinguishable from the next as an outpost of republican universal values that encapsulates the promises and the vulnerabilities of the larger system. At the same time, they are also imagined as being particularly demonstrative of the characteristics of the local community, so that challenges to *laïcité* are taken not just as attacks on the national education system in the abstract but also in the sense of the proverbial canary in the coal mine, as indicators of local 'communities' threatening to 'pollute' their neighbourhood schools (for examples of this discourse as expressed by educators, see Bozec 2015). Within the piercing gaze directed at schools, it is individual student bodies—especially, though not limited to girls—that become evidence of such pollution.

Risky bodies

Although the 1989 Creil ‘headscarf affair’ is an important watershed moment in the development of the *foulard*, the Muslim veil, into a synecdoche for risk at local, national and global scales, it is not the only one. The third of Bowen’s (2009) ‘three temporalities’ shaping policies and politics towards Islam in France emphasises that the Creil incidents were only able to achieve their salience against the background of France’s decolonisation of Algeria, the growth in Muslim populations in France since the 1960s, and the rise of global Islamism. Collectively, this has led to perceptions of French Muslims’ disengagement, if not disloyalty. Such anxieties are heightened following Islamist-inspired acts of extreme violence and lead to calls for greater surveillance and stronger measures to enhance adherence to the French republic.

Within the general citizen-making mandates assigned to the *école républicaine*, as well as the scrutiny applied to individual schools as representative of their local communities, educators from primary through secondary schools have been handed the responsibility of monitoring students for signs of risk of radicalisation through a succession of schemes. Inevitably, such monitoring involves a measure of reconciling state-defined categories of risk with individual perceptions; as Donnet (2020) documents, in addition to the categories themselves being vaguely defined, teachers often err on the side of ‘weak signals’ in which information is incomplete, partial or fragmented, to refer students to state and community anti-radicalisation mechanisms. Crucially, this incomplete information involves a monitoring of students on the basis of ethnicised (see also Ribert 2006; Lorcerie 2009) and gendered understandings of what constitutes potential radicalisation: girls suddenly wearing the veil, for instance, but also students’ articulation of conservative gender norms coded by teachers as ‘fundamentalist’.

Taken together, these spatialities of the *école républicaine*—overarching norms of republican citizenship, anxieties about the ostensible *communautariste* tendency towards ‘secession’, and the presence of racialised and gendered risky bodies—lead to a focus on infringements of *laïcité* policies within schools as a primary concern of monitoring and action. The school, as an institution and in the form of individual buildings, contains not only the aspirations of the ideal national citizen but also fears of global terror, national dissolution and local restiveness. Thus, when incidents of ‘infringements’—*atteintes*—against *laïcité* policies arise, fears at all of these geographic scales are activated and correctional measures are implemented in an attempt to shore up the basic elements of the French republican pact (Ribert 2006; Jarraud 2016). Such interventions reflect the general tendency of national school systems to pursue the inculcation of citizens holding values and principles considered desirable (Mitchell 2003; Popkewitz 2008) and leverage the school system in order to manage threats at several geographic scales, from the local to the global (see Nguyen 2016; Lizotte and Nguyen 2020). In the following section, I describe some of the contours of these interventions, highlighting a contradiction at their core: despite the widespread engrained popular geographic imaginary of particular *banlieues* and even individual schools as the primary source of *atteintes*, official efforts to contain them have remained national in their scope. This reluctance to take a spatially specific approach, I argue, offers an opening for the further investigation of *laïcité* from a geopolitical perspective.

The geographic unknowns of laïcité in the *école républicaine*

I have argued that laïcité, particularly as it is manifested through the French public school, has developed historically as a geopolitical technology for identifying and managing social and cultural difference. In this final section of the article I want to suggest a new path forward for a study of laïcité from a particularly geopolitical angle by focusing on a particular facet of laïcité's geopolitical framing within the *école républicaine*: the tension between the intense attention paid to 'infringements' (*atteintes*) against laïcité and the lack of geographically specific official knowledge about *where* they arise. In the case of the *école républicaine*, incidents of worrying student behaviour in individual schools are often aggregated into wider evidence of a national crisis situating France as a bulwark of Western liberal ideals against illiberal global Islamism. For the remainder of this article, I focus on a narrative of spatial indeterminacy that tends to inform public discourse about the meaning of *atteintes* against principles of laïcité. As will be seen, what prevails is a sense that the prevalence and location of these infringements are, ultimately, *unknowable*, and therefore contribute to a pervasive sense of imminent danger to the integrity of the Republic that must be urgently addressed.

'A daily occurrence', but where?

The deep ambivalence surrounding the French Ministry of Education's understanding of *atteintes* can be seen across multiple events and incidents. Perhaps one of the most high-profile occurred following a series of Islamist-motivated killings in January 2015 in and around Paris and notably at the offices of the satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo*, targeted for its notorious depictions of Muhammad. About two hundred students disrupted a nationwide moment of silence in schools for the victims, leading Parliament to summon then-Minister of Education Najat Vallaud-Belkacem for an explanation and spurring the creation of a Ministry of Education initiative called 'The School's Great Mobilisation for the Republic's Values' (*La Grande mobilisation de l'École pour les valeurs de la République*). Despite a flurry of media accounts that informally located the incidents in *banlieues* and priority education zones (e.g. Dusseaux 2015; Verduzier and Beyer 2015), the Ministry of Education has never released the locations of these incidents. Other government investigations into respect for laïcité in educational settings commissioned in the wake of the January 2015 attacks showcase a similar sense of quantitative as well geographic indistinctness. This indeterminacy tends to be accompanied by a sense of unease about the unknown dimensions of the problem. For instance, a 2015 report of the French Senate titled 'Return the Republic to the [republican] School' (*Faire revenir la République à l'École*) sums up a discussion of incidents in which 'republican values' are challenged with the following:

The DGESCO [*Direction générale de l'enseignement scolaire*] is not able to quantify this phenomenon, 'as the incidents are communicated to us according to the broadest categories'. **The accounts gathered by the commission show that these challenges are, in certain schools, a regular, if not daily, occurrence.** (Grosperin 2015, Section I.B.3.b.3; bold in the original)

Notably, despite the recurrence of public concern with *atteintes* against laïcité, the mechanism for collecting and compiling data about *atteintes* has tended to remain

somewhat fractured and incoherent. The apparatus of the national French education ministry charged with monitoring and enforcing laïcité policies is, of course, complex and has undergone frequent administrative changes over time. A full analysis of this apparatus is outside of the scope of this article, but a brief description, drawn from a 2019 report (Jellab et al. 2019) by the Inspection générale de l'Éducation, du Sport et de la Recherche (IGESR), is instructive: since the beginning of the 2018 school year, the Ministry of Education has operated a national administrative centre called Valeurs de l'école de la République (VALEREP). This centre works in close partnership with, but is operationally distinct from, a parallel apparatus for the prevention of radicalisation under the auspices of the Ministry of the Interior (for a discussion of this parallel apparatus, see Beunas 2021). VALEREP, in turn, coordinates a series of 'valeurs de la République' teams, with one in each *académie*³ responsible for collecting reports of *atteintes* against laïcité within their territory and providing support to on-the-ground educators. Finally, an expert council (*conseil des sages*) is charged with 'specifying the position of the educational institution regarding laïcité and religion as a cultural phenomenon (*fait religieux*; 5)'.

The IGESR report indicates that, overall, reports of explicit *atteintes* against laïcité have slightly diminished over the time period studied from January 2018 to August 2019. Some spatial patterns are visible: for instance, out of 30 total *académies*, six (Créteil, Versailles, Toulouse, Nice, Grenoble and Montpellier) account for 60% of all reported *atteintes* (8), while *atteintes* tend to be reported more often in primary than secondary education (8–9). However, the report is quick to point out the unknowns embedded in these data, particularly the geographic unknowns. Unable to explain disproportionate differences in levels of *atteintes* across and within *académies*, it hypothesises, for instance, that they can be explained by 'territorial effects' (8): high concentrations of priority education zones, levels of 'low diversity' (*mixité*), or the presence of more experienced educators in matters of laïcité who choose to defuse rather than report incidents. For their part, *académies* believe that the existing level of reported *atteintes* provides if anything a 'very incomplete vision' (16) of their actual prevalence in schools. As such, they offer their own interpretations of the data, highlighting, for instance, 'abnormally low' levels of *atteintes* where they might otherwise be expected due to concentrations of groups labelled as 'ultra-communautarisés' (9). They report likewise that two administrative features almost certainly result in an inaccurate count of the number of daily incidents of *atteintes*: first, the category 'other incidents interfering with the school's functioning' applies to an eclectic group of reports that includes not only incidents but also more mundane requests for advice, often as a prophylactic against specific incidents (11). Second, the existence of a variety of pathways for educators to record and report incidents of *atteintes*—for instance, through a Web app directly to VALEREP, to their *académie*-level teams, and informally to immediate superiors—means that not all incidents are recorded centrally (13–16).

Ultimately, the IGESR proposes bureaucratic and institutional culture changes that will allow the French state to better apprehend the unquantifiable phenomenon of widespread *atteintes* against laïcité that it assumes to exist. To be sure, this assumption is not without basis: at many points, it refers to interviews with individual educators or *académie*-level teams who indicate that applying principles of laïcité on a day-to-day basis involves a great deal of discretion and misunderstanding of the rules to be enforced, both of which lead to conscious decisions not to record certain *atteintes* (e.g. pp. 9, 16, 21,

43). What is notable, however, is a sense of urgency directed not so much at the prevalence of *atteintes* themselves, but rather at the fact that they are poorly documented.

Overall, documents such as the IGESR report and 'Return the Republic to the School' attempt to square the circle of what they presume on the basis of anecdotal evidence to be widespread *atteintes* against laïcité when, according to official data, it appears as a relatively marginal phenomenon whose number is remaining stable or even declining. To be sure, official attention paid to *atteintes* occurs—or does not occur—within a larger political context: the ministry of Jean-Michel Blanquer, under whom the 2019 report was drafted, was known for its prioritisation of tracking *atteintes*. In contrast, Pap Ndiaye, who took over the ministry in May 2022, almost immediately came under heavy criticism from the French right⁴ for allegedly 'hiding' statistics about *atteintes*. Following the release of statistics in late July 2022 indicating a modest increase in *atteintes* overall but a marked increase in *atteintes* involving religiously significant clothing, Ndiaye announced an intention to collect data monthly rather than each trimester (Battaglia 2022). Nevertheless, despite differences between governments in the relative priority given to tracking infringements of laïcité-enforcing policies, the underlying surveillance apparatus, and indeed the ministry leadership, remains ambivalent in its efforts to minutely locate individual incidents. Following up on the more frequent data-collection effort in an interview with *Le Monde* conducted on 13 October 2022, Ndiaye offered little specificity to questions about a rise in the September *atteintes* figures (Lecherbonnier et al. 2022).

What may be at play in the lack of geographic specificity is a form of 'strategic ignorance' (McGoey 2019) through which the French state is attempting to both acknowledge a widely recognised problem while avoiding the worst excesses of stigmatising focus on particular places and individuals. At this point, this is only speculation and remains to be explored in further work. What is clear, though, is that tensions exist between official geographic *knowledge* and unofficial geographic *imaginaries* that are key to understanding where ostensible threats to a closely held element of political culture lie.

Conclusion

I have argued that laïcité, as a heavily contested understanding of the state's neutral stance towards any religion, is a concept that is usefully understood as geopolitical. 'Geopolitical' here is meant as pertaining not only to the governance of space, but also to the spatial imaginaries that inform that governance. Laïcité has, over time, accumulated a set of spatial imaginaries in which its presence and enforcement, particularly in the space of the public school system, are seen as a synecdoche of French state authority. As such, respect for laïcité within the walls of the school is considered a bellwether of the republican pact, and infringements of that respect—overlain with heavily racialised understandings of who and what are at the root of those infringements—are seen as signs of imminent breakdowns in national unity. Nevertheless, this weight given to *atteintes* against laïcité is not necessarily matched by a willingness to publicly locate such infringements, instead continuing to be framed as a national problem requiring a national solution.

I have argued that this disconnection between national aspiration and on-the-ground reality is reflective of *laïcité*'s geopolitical nature. As *laïcité* has generated a spatial sorting of identities, with 'universal' traits of civilisation and order assigned to public space and parochial beliefs relegated to behind-closed-doors private spaces, the state has consistently struggled to promote the former as exemplars of *laïcité*—and by extension authentically 'French' identity—while containing the latter. The role played by ground-level personnel of the Ministry of Education in evaluating and managing ostensible threats to the Republic's values has been well-studied, showing that more often than not, educator experience, local sociocultural conditions and occasionally ignorance lead to idiosyncratic approaches to managing individual incidents in which students challenge *laïcité*. These idiosyncratic approaches have, in turn, been situated against national-level discourses, but there remains a gap in our understanding of the reverse: that is, little is known about how local experiences are reabsorbed into the French state's understanding of *atteintes* as a geographically variegated phenomenon. The IGESR report reveals an emerging desire to add geographic specificity to what has, until now, tended to be a problem framed exclusively at the national scale. It remains to be seen if, and how, this nationally scaled framing will be nuanced in the near future.

Understanding how *laïcité* will be scaled in official discourse going forward is not simply an abstract concern; indeed, the centrality of *laïcité* to founding myths of the modern French nation makes the question of how it is understood spatially fundamentally important. On the one hand, its reigning status as a 'universal' facet of French republican citizenship means that it has not traditionally depended on adaptation to local circumstances to secure its legitimacy as a governing principle. In the context of increasing challenges to current republican modes of citizenship, it may be the case that for *laïcité* to retain its legitimacy as a core unifying value the geographic imaginaries that underpin its claims to universal applicability may have to adapt to the emerging socio-spatial realities of the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss in detail, there is a deep and unfortunate scholarly divide between Anglo-American (critical) geopolitics and French *géopolitique*, despite their often-overlapping insights (see Fall and Rosière 2008). To over-generalise, Anglo-American critical geopolitics and political geography have become heavily influenced by critical social theory (ironically, by French social theorists who remain marginal in French geography such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Rancière and Alain Badiou), while French *géopolitique* tends to emphasise empirically grounded work over complex theorisation.
2. There is, of course, a contemporary international context in which compulsory schooling systems develop: for instance, education is seen as a means to gain geoeconomic advantage over potential competitors, and 'best practices' are transferred between contexts (e.g. the much-lauded 'Finnish model').
3. *Académies* are the highest-level administrative unit of the French education system below the national scale; they roughly—although with important differences—correspond to the level of the *région*.
4. Ndiaye has also been a heavy target of both explicitly racist abuse as well as more coded attacks from the partisan and non-partisan far-right.

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