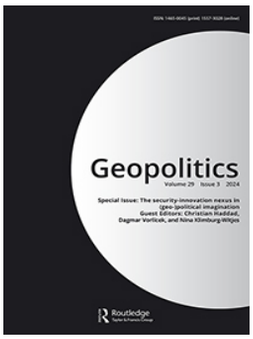

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The Prosaic Stateness of Secularism: Diversity, Incoherence and Divergence in the Application of laïcité

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ABSTRACT

France's idiosyncratic form of secularism, laïcité, is a highly contested principle bound up in centuries of conflict over the state's relationship to religious practice. Of late, commentators have interpreted it as taking somewhat of an authoritarian turn as it is used to disproportionately identify and suppress signs of overt Muslim religiosity, including notably within the public school system. I apply Painter's 'prosaic stateness' framework to understand how educators interpret and rework laïcité within the French public school to produce 'actually-existing' laïcité. In particular, I show that educators are situated within three 'spatialities' through which laïcité inhabits French schooling: the idealised space of the French republic set against religious obscurantism, schools as spaces of inviolable neutrality, and risky bodies who refuse to conform to norms of republican citizenship. Within these spatialities, educators enact a prosaic stateness of laïcité through their experiences of diversity of the student populations they serve, the incoherence of the institution they work for, and the divergence of the policies they end up applying.

Introduction

Political geographers have long been interested in understanding the everyday permeation of the state into social life. This body of investigation, which Dittmer (2020) loosely groups under the heading 'the New Statecraft' (74), contains a heterogeneous set of theorisations and approaches that variously emphasises effects, openings, contradictions and improvisations but that generally seeks to move away from ontologies of the state as a coherent entity monolithically wielding sovereign authority (see also Jones 2012; Moisio et al. 2020). What these approaches tend to share is a commitment to identifying sites in which the state is constituted through everyday practices and affects (Mountz 2004; Secor 2007), and particularly the actors within these sites who embody the state and its institutions (e.g. Prokkola and Ridanpää 2015).

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In this paper, I apply the broad insights of the 'New Statecraft', and in particular Painter (2006) concept of 'prosaic stateness', to state-sponsored schooling and its personnel (hereafter 'educators'). Doing so, I argue, reveals that in their daily work educators express a particularly key aspect of prosaic stateness: the fundamental spatial unevenness of the effects and relationships deriving from applications of state power (see also Jones, Pykett, and Whitehead 2011). To illustrate my claim, I draw on the example of the French school system. This system provides an ideal setting within which to examine contrasts between its appearance as a monolithic state bureaucratic-ideological nexus and its actual production as policy. In addition to being highly centralised and spatially hierarchical in its organisation, the French public education system is closely identified with the core 'republican model' of citizenship that posits the absolute equality of all citizens before the state, unmediated by associational or identity affiliations (Bleich 2001; Laborde 2008; Roebroeck and Guimond 2015). As such, it reflects what Painter identifies as assumptions inherent to the 'doctrine of sovereignty': state power – here in the form of educational policy – is thought to be exercised uniformly across the territory of the state. As I show to the contrary, actually-existing practices reveal a much more uncertain and spatially variegated landscape of policy and enforcement.

I demonstrate this variegated landscape by examining the application of one foundational aspect of the republican model within French schooling: laïcité, France's idiosyncratic secularism. Laïcité is, as Almeida (2022) notes, an 'indeterminate and contested construct' in which the core idea of the state's neutral stance towards organised religions is assembled into politically and administratively contingent manifestations of concrete policy (see also Altglas 2010); indeed, Baubérot (2015) has identified seven discretely identifiable historical and contemporary 'laïcités'. Since at least the 1980s, these laïcités – separately and in combination – have contributed to framing the presence of Islam in France as a security problem (Alouane 2020; Bowen 2009; Hajjat and Mohammed 2013; Peker 2021). In particular, this has resulted in bans on clothing with potentially religious significance in schools that are widely understood to be *de facto* regulations of Muslim religiosity (Bertossi and Bowen 2014; Bowen 2007; Thomas 2006).

Laïcité provides an especially potent case through which to observe the geographic unevenness of prosaic stateness, as it is itself unevenly refracted through geographic imaginaries (Gregory 2009) at several scales: first, by contrasting an idealised French republican space with looming forces of religious obscurantism. Second, by constructing the French educational system both as a whole and in the form of individual schools as spaces of inviolable neutrality that must be defended at all costs from the risks posed by religious extremism. Third, by specifically locating this risk on individual bodies who ostensibly refuse to conform to norms of republican citizenship.

While these geographic imaginaries are widespread and hegemonic, however, they do not produce consistent applications of laïcité policies. Importantly, the outcomes of these policies are produced through educators' interpretations of the incoherencies, opportunities and uncertainties inherent in the public school system. Educators appear as both objects and agents of the prosaic state as they interpret the possibilities of action enabled by their institutional positioning through three primary categories: the *diversity* of the student populations they serve, the *incoherence* of the institution they work for, and the *divergence* of the policies they end up applying.

In making the claim that the practice of laïcité in schools can illustrate the geographic uneven application of state power, this paper contributes to several areas of scholarship. Empirically, it broadens our consideration of prosaic stateness to include education and educators. Theoretically, it shows how educators contribute to the uneven cultural production of state space through their enactment of laïcité policies. It also contributes to a recent trend within the geographies of education of 'outward-looking' investigations of schooling (Hanson-Thiem 2009). Nguyen, Cohen, and Huff (2017) echo this in calling for 'centring schooling in theory generation rather than studying education as a test site for existing geographic theories' (2). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to engage fully with the geographies of education subfield, this paper acknowledges this call by placing educators and the school at the centre of an analysis of prosaic stateness.

The rest of this paper proceeds as follows: after discussing the study's methodology, I turn to a conceptual framework, first briefly describing the prosaic stateness framework as developed by Painter (2006). Then, echoing Bowen's (2009) formulation of three 'temporalities' that have shaped the policy and political landscape around Islam in France, I briefly sketch three 'spatialities' that inform how laïcité inhabits the French public educational setting. Following that, I situate the subjects of my research, educators, within the geographic imaginaries and practices making up these spatialities. Their position within these spatialities, I argue, is key to understanding the spatial variegation of laïcité policies' deployment and enforcement. I illustrate this with empirical material drawn from interviews with educators to demonstrate how they experience their institutional and local contexts and transform those experiences into practices of 'actually existing' laïcité within the space of the school. Finally, I conclude with some comments on the implications of elaborating prosaic stateness through schooling.

Methodology

Empirically, I draw from a selection of eight interviews from a larger project involving 20 interviews carried out over three research periods conducted between July 2011 and June 2016. The period of research reflects a shift in

focus over time: I began my work by interviewing educators who had been impacted by changes to regulations concerning school assignment zones (the *carte scolaire*). A wave of terrorist attacks in January 2015 and a resulting series of incidents characterised as infringing on principles of laïcité (*atteintes*) turned my attention to state interventions targeting these infringements. As a result, interviews carried out in June 2016 were conducted with educators in schools where one or more of those interventions' principle measures had been carried out. It was not possible to follow up with the same educators I had initially spoken with for several reasons, including scheduling and the fact that many of my original interviewees had changed jobs in the interim.

All the educators served in Paris-area schools or district administration (specifically, in the regional-level administrative districts, or *académies*, of Paris, Versailles and Créteil), many in priority education zones (which will be described in a following section). I have marked interviews that took place with educators in these zones. The educators were, with two exceptions in the overall sample, in their early 30s to early 40s. Women were heavily overrepresented in the overall sample, with all but one interviewee being female. This exceeds the more than two-to-one overrepresentation of female over male instructional personnel in the system as a whole (DEPP, 2020). Except in one case when an interviewee spontaneously referred to her own Black identity, the interviewed educators were not asked about their racial or ethnic background. Because the French Ministry of Education does not directly collect statistics about racial or ethnic identity, if such data had been collected it would not possible to say how the sample compares to the overall population of educators. The interviewed educators were likewise not asked about their personal socioeconomic profile. However, the trend from the mid-20th century onward has been for people from middle- and upper-middle class backgrounds to be slightly overrepresented among all educators in France relative to the overall population (Berger and Benjamin 1964; Delhomme 2015; Farges 2011).

The corpus of interviews was analysed using a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967) in which a set of etic research categories guided the initial creation of interview topics and questions, but with the expectation that emic categories would emerge over the course of the research (see Babbie 2017 [1998]). These etic categories focused heavily on the identity of students, both in the context of shifts in the *carte scolaire* (the initial focus of the research) as well as the aftermath of the events of January 2015. What emerged from the research was one identity-focused category (*diversity*) as well as one focused on the institution (*incoherence*) and one on practice (*divergence*), orienting the study towards a more holistic view of schooling.

Exemption from in-depth ethical review was obtained from my institutional research board under University of Washington IRB Exempt Category 3 (application numbers 40937 and 50338),[1] based on an assessment that the proposed research involved participants who would not be at personal or

professional risk if their views were known outside the context of the study. I obtained written consent from all participants to participate in the study, and participants were informed of their ability to withdraw from the research at any time during or following the interviews. Interviews were conducted in French and translated by me; any errors in translation are my own. My own subjectivity forms part of the research material as well: I am a US-born native English speaker who, as a result of living and teaching primary school English in France, have achieved a high level of proficiency in the French language. My national outsider status sometimes encouraged French educators to perhaps speak more candidly than they might with French researchers. However, not being embedded in the French public school system alongside my interviewees means that I cannot appreciate the complex interplay between different elements of the state education apparatus as they may be able to.

Laïcité's Spatialities as Settings for Prosaic Stateness

The Geographically Uneven Prosaic State

Painter (2006) concept of 'prosaic stateness' is one that is inscribed in the larger attempt to displace conceptions of the state as a unitary, coherent entity. While noting that understanding how the state enters into ordinary social relations is a long-standing concern of scholars, he suggests that the prosaic stateness framework offers an especially intricate understanding of this permeation. Taking the latter term of his formulation first, Painter adopts 'stateness' as a way of moving beyond claims of sovereign statehood to emphasise the practices and effects that point back to these claims. Likewise, Painter's deployment of the term 'prosaic' itself draws on a lineage of scholarship stemming from Mikhail Bakhtin's development the concept, of which he notes two qualities that distinguish his concept of prosaic stateness from other models. First, drawing on Campbell (1996) and Morson and Emerson (1990), he emphasises the fundamentally disordered and discordant array of voices, interests and events that populate the everyday world; second, he underlines the importance of non-rational, non-cognitive and affective elements that inform action and reaction. These perspectives, Painter admits, do not set prosaics fully apart from other approaches that examine relations, assemblages and affects. Nevertheless, he points to prosaics's emphasis on the ordinary, the diverse and the unintended as points where it can add value. In particular, he contrasts the prosaics approach with Foucaultian notions of discourse and governmentality, arguing that while both examine mundane practices and discourse's productive capacities, the latter's focus on the authoritative and the rational contrasts with the prosaic emphasis on improvisation and indeterminacy (Painter, 2006: 763).

Painter's application of his own concept to attempts by the British government to tackle 'anti-social behaviour' is an illustration rather than a rigorous

analysis, and it has fallen to others to apply the prosaic stateness perspective in various empirical contexts (e.g. Aiken 2016; Jones, Pykett, and Whitehead 2011; Qian and Wei 2021). The object of research within the prosaic stateness framework likewise requires specification. Jones (2012; see also Jones 2020) elaborates on Painter's observations to argue that despite a growing interest in moving beyond notions of the state as a monolithic entity to consider the production of the prosaic or everyday state, such work has tended to reify a binary between the 'production' of the state and the 'consumption' of the state. Against this trend, he emphasises that 'there is a need to focus explicitly on the social and spatial encounters between state agents and citizens coming within their orbit', (2012: 810) which in addition to destabilising the boundary between the state and the non-state can also examine how the identities of state agents and non-state agents are relationally produced.

A limitation of this paper is that I do not consider students' perspectives on laïcité policies, and as such do not fully analyse 'encounters' in Jones's terms, something that other scholars of laïcité in educational settings have done (e.g. Almeida 2022; Lorcerie and Moignard 2017; Roebroeck and Guimond 2015; Vivarelli 2014). Nevertheless, as will be seen later, educators do conceive of their laïcité enforcement work in relation to their perceptions of their own values, their institutional settings and their students' circumstances. Overall, I consider the educators tasked with carrying out laïcité policies as, in Painter's terms, both objects and agents of policy; that is, as one of the elements making up the 'particular space-time configurations' (Painter 2006: 768) that 'effectuate (or sometimes fail to effectuate) particular kinds of state effects' (Painter 2006: 767) concerning laïcité. To delineate the space-time settings that condition these state effects, I next identify three spatialities within which contemporary understandings of laïcité have developed, and which shape the professional and social fields within which educators enact a prosaic stateness of laïcité.

Laïcité's Three Spatialities

As numerous scholars have shown, laïcité is an essentially politically contested concept (e.g. Altglas 2010; Baubérot 2012, 2015; Kheir 2008; Laborde 2008). Crucially, I argue that it is also a *geopolitically* contested concept; that is, it has been shaped by geographic imaginaries and spatial practices delineating the territorial competencies of state power over religious authority (Lizotte, 2023). Following Bowen's (2009) elegant heuristic that proposes three 'temporalities' prior to the 1990s that have 'shaped policies and politics towards Islam in France' (440), we can likewise speak of three 'spatialities' that have shaped laïcité's contemporary relationship towards Islam. That is, the geographic imaginaries and spatial practices animating contemporary laïcité policies are made and unmade *within* specific spaces (Lizotte, 2023; see also Lizotte 2020a).

The first of these spatialities is the imagining of the French republic as a space of freedom in contrast to religious obscurantism and superstition. Most recently, it is France's extensive post-colonial ties with the majority-Muslim countries of North and West Africa, and especially Algeria, that have most powerfully shaped how laïcité is seen in these terms as a yardstick for determining belonging within the French national community (see Bowen 2009; Guénif-Souilamas 2006; Tiberj 2014). In particular, this yardstick has developed alongside the accumulation of postcolonial-descended populations in France's decaying urban peripheries, the *banlieues* (Dikeç 2007; Kepel 1991), the construction of a French Muslim political identity (Shields 2007) and French anxieties about that identity (Bowen 2009; Hajjat and Mohammed 2013; see also Croft 2012). These concerns are folded into the long-standing tradition of state hegemony over religious organisations to frame an acceptably 'domesticated' French Islam whose relationship with the French state is mediated through 'privileged interlocutors' such as the *Conseil français du culte musulman* (French Council of the Muslim Faith), or CFCM (Selby, 2011; Bowen 2012).

This leads to the second spatiality, expressed in part through the discourse of *communautarisme*. Dhume-Sonzogni (2016) identifies this term, with no real English equivalent, as a 'chimera of French nationalism' that stigmatises and disarms demands for cultural accommodation from the Muslim minority (Seniguer 2017; Taguieff 2005) by recasting them as aggressive attempts to establish alternative sovereignty (Geisser 2021). Crucially, such ostensible aspirations to alternative sovereignties are identified with particular spaces – neighbourhoods or even entire towns – where a critical mass of visible signs of Muslim religiosity marks them as 'subtracted from the Republic' (Baubérot 2012). Within the *communautariste* narrative, schools are particularly scrutinised as sites of liberation from what are assumed to be the bad-faith – so to speak – ambitions of religious oppression and secessionism (Orobon 2020; see also Laborde 2008).

The visible symbols of this malicious religiosity make up laïcité's third spatiality, the gendered and racialised Muslim body. Within this spatiality, the veiled woman or girl appears ambiguously as both a victim of oppressive and violent Muslim men as well as a potential vector of Islamist fundamentalism into public space (Delphy 2006; Hancock 2015). The genesis of this narrative is often attributed to the 1989 'headscarf affairs' in the city of Creil, where three girls were expelled for refusing to remove their *hijabs* upon entering their school (e.g. Alouane 2020; Roebroeck and Guimond 2015). Following further highly-publicised incidents, the geographic imaginary of risky female bodies was made policy when the recommendations of the Stasi Commission, seated by then-president Jacques Chirac to investigate the state of the application of laïcité, led to the adoption of a 2004 law banning primary and secondary students from wearing 'conspicuous' (*ostensible*) signs of religious affiliation. In 2010, the liberationist impulse again intersected with

a narrative of halting fundamentalist violence to produce a law banning full-face veils (such as the *niqab*) in all public space (Selby, 2011). Another high-profile application of this logic emerged again in the summer of 2016 following an Islamist terror attack in Nice, concerning local bans by towns along the Côte d'Azur on the modest swimwear dubbed 'burkinis'.

To be sure, within the churn of practices and effects that make up the prosaic stateness of laïcité, these three spatialities are not ontologically separate but rather mingle freely with one another, collapsing constructions of risk from the global to the school to the individual body. This is illustrated through events such as the 2002 publication of Georges Bensoussan's (under the pseudonym of Emmanuel Brenner) *The Republic's Lost Territories*, which identified aggressive, if not violent, 'Islamist' student behaviour as evidence of a breakdown of republican order within particular schools – and by extension, their surrounding communities. Indeed, the book heavily contributed to convincing then-president Jacques Chirac to seat the Stasi Commission in 2003 (Bacqué 2017). Educators are likewise positioned within these spatialities such that they are called on to draw these connections from the global to the intimate in order to identify and mitigate the risks posed by religious extremism, usually represented by the individual bodies of ostensibly aggressive Muslim boys and oppressed Muslim girls (Kakpo 2005; Donnet 2020; see also Guénif-Souilamas and Macé 2004). However, although these spatialities of laïcité are hegemonic, they are not determinative of how laïcité policies operate through schooling on an everyday basis. The particular characteristics of different elements of French schooling are situated within these spatialities such that the outcomes of laïcité policies are not predictable.

Situating French Schooling

In the broad context of modern national state-sponsored education systems, scholars have established that schooling aims at forming an ideal national citizen. This ideal citizen embodies a geohistorically specific set of desired values and competences that are broadly derived from the priorities of the dominant social class (e.g. Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Mitchell 2003; Popkewitz 2008) and as such are more or less implicit (e.g. Apple 2004; Bowles and Gintis 1976). However, the driving forces behind educational aims can be multiple and contradictory, reflecting larger societal disputes about the core purpose of public education (Labaree 1997).

These disputes are themselves often expressed through a key spatial tension at the heart of schooling: it is both bureaucratically centralised to greater or lesser degrees but also dispersed in the form of individual school locations and individual practitioners with their own rationalities and aspirations (Riggan 2018; Silver 2007). This has led to important insights regarding the spatialities of contemporary education and how they express or resist state economic,

cultural and geopolitical aims (Cheng 2016; De Leeuw 2007; Moisio 2018; Nguyen 2016). Indeed, schooling itself is a geopolitical site (Lizotte and Nguyen 2020) in which 'schools themselves become sites in which notions of risk, vulnerability, and security circulate from discursive to material realms and back again' (933). In other words, schooling, and particularly educators, are enrolled in prosaic stateness as both objects and agents of policy aimed at identifying and managing risk.

As I have argued, although it is possible to analytically discern global, national, local and intimate scales within laïcité's spatialities, in practice they are freely collapsed into each other through the manifold geographic imaginaries and spatial practices implicated in the governance of laicite. Likewise, the educators working in the *école républicaine* experience these spatialities in all their combinations and contradictions, rather than as discrete discourses. Nevertheless, it can be useful to map some of the unique aspects of French schooling and French educators against these spatialities to understand how they are operationalised as elements of laïcité's prosaic stateness.

Instituting the Nation

Like compulsory schooling in many other contexts, the *école républicaine* has long been a key nation-building institution through which the French state has attempted to homogenise language and culture (see Durpaire 2016). In line with these ambitions, the idea of a state-run, secular school system with jurisdiction over public education across the entire space of the nation was one that first arose with the French Revolution and reached a zenith with the *lois Ferry* of 1881–1882 and the establishment of free, laïque and obligatory education (see Muller 1999). The *lois Ferry* were not definitive, and were passed amidst ongoing struggles over the structure and content of education with locally- and regionally-embedded religious interests (Hirsch 2011; Kheir 2008; Luc, Condette, and Verneuil 2020). Nevertheless, the *école républicaine* was promoted as a mission of forging national unity on the basis of a common, non-sectarian morality to be taught by a loyal and dedicated corps of *instituteurs*, so-named for their duty to 'institute' the nation (see Berger and Benjamin 1964).

In general, laïcité's first spatiality – its constitution as a national guarantee against religious superstition focused on Islam as the foil to laïque neutrality – has continued to inform the tenor of the school's uniting mission. In the contemporary era, this has largely been made manifest in what Ribert (2006) calls a continuity of 'typically French . . . methods of managing social dissension' (15). The typical pattern since the 1989 Creil incidents has been to respond to spectacular events that indicate an imminent Muslim youth disengagement from French republican values with interventions meant to rebuild a sense of loyalty and affection for the nation. Within these interventions, incidents not directly related to laïcité such as the disruption of

a friendly Algeria-France football match in 1998 are nevertheless enrolled into the overarching logic of a looming sense of disaster for republican unity.

Local Socioeconomic Profiling

Laïcité's second spatiality, the intensely localised gaze directed at neighbourhoods for signs of detachment from republican laws and ideals, intersects in complementary and contradictory ways with a long-standing element of schooling's governance. Because directly collecting statistics based on racial or religious identity is illegal (Bleich 2001), the French state constructs its knowledge of educational space through the territorial mechanism of priority education zones. Originally developed in the 1980s as the *Zone d'éducation prioritaire* (ZEP), this classification system has been subject to consistent innovation and overhaul (particularly in 1990, 1997, 2011 and 2014; see Éduscol 2022) to re-emerge as priority education networks (*Réseaux d'éducation prioritaire*, REP). Despite differences in priorities and aims, all of these programs have had the same overall goal: identifying school catchment areas and individual schools in need of additional state intervention. As Laborde (2008) demonstrates, ZEPs and their descendents reflect deeper struggles over the nature of the ideal republican citizen: the ZEP and its kin are tacit admissions of structural links between racial and ethnic identity and socioeconomic deprivation, while 'official' republican discourse attempts to deny any such relationship. As a sort of uneasy compromise, priority zones are exclusively established on the basis of socioeconomic categories legible to the French state that are nevertheless shot through with euphemisms for ethnicity and race: for instance, language ability, a parent's place of birth, and, at times, the presence of 'large families' (*familles nombreuses*) (Éduscol 2022).[2]

The facially race-neutral official categories that mark out priority education zones intersect with *communautariste* narratives to produce racialised geographic imaginaries of the risks to national unity posed by such zones, as in Brenner's book (Dhume-Sonzogni 2007). Such normative views about low-performing schools and neighbourhoods can likewise be transferred to students through educators' pre-existing low expectations of these populations (Lorcerie 2009; see also Van der Bergh et al. 2010) or through educators' informal but nevertheless heavy-handed policing of students' ostensible proselytising impulses (Orange 2016). On the other hand, educators can also use their knowledge of their students' socioeconomic and ethnic profiles to compensate for what they see as those students' structural disadvantage. Farhat (2020), for instance, provides an insider's perspective on this process as he observes teachers in a vocational high school where the student population is in general particularly economically deprived give students who they feel are

marginalised considerable leeway in the application and enforcement of laïcité.

"L'univers des instituteurs"

The individual discretion indicated by Farhat (2020) points to a key aspect of laïcité's third spatiality: educators' beliefs concerning the value of laïcité as a unifying pedagogical goal, which necessarily informs their interpretation of student utterances and practices. Classic sociological studies such those by Berger and Benjamin (1964), Ozouf and Ozouf (1992), Peyronie (1998) and Compagnon and Thévenin (2001) reveal that although the image of the idealised *insituteur* acting as an evangelist of republican virtue has eroded over time, educators continue to tend towards a version of laïcité emphasising their own religious neutrality in their work. In addition, their training is steeped in an institutional vision of laïcité that regards children's still-developing sensibilities as in need of defence against religious indoctrination (Deloyé 1994). These more general tendencies, in turn, have merged with the general trend of problematising Islam in security and national unity terms to produce a particular sensitivity in educators to visible signs of Muslim religiosity (Bozec 2020). The most recent survey by the Institut français de l'opinion publique (IFOP) on teachers' attitudes towards laïcité – despite working with a relatively small sample size – confirms some of these general trends (IFOP 2018). More than two-thirds of respondents indicated that the definition of laïcité best describing its actual manifestation was either 'the Republic's guarantee of the liberty of conscience of all' or 'the state's neutrality towards religions and political parties'. 79% furthermore agreed that the principle of laïcité was 'integrated in teaching'. Nevertheless, educators in the sample do not appear to perceive that challenges to laïcité are overwhelming: for instance, 62% of respondents claimed that students 'never' challenge the 2004 ban on religious clothing and symbols. Neither do heavy-handed responses to such challenges appear to be frequent: of the 38% who answered some form of 'yes' (delineated as 'often', 'from time to time', 'rarely'), 82% claimed that disciplinary procedures are not engaged in these cases.

A further recent trend within the sociological literature on French education has been to trace the emergence of an improvisational spirit as one of the fundamental skills needed by a contemporary schoolteacher. Against the backdrop of reforms that increased the overall school population through prolonging mandatory schooling and increasing minimum qualification standards (e.g. the 1959 *réforme Berthoin*, the 1975 *loi Haby* and the 1989 *loi Jospin*), *communautarisme*'s scrutiny placed on high concentrations of socio-economically or ethnically marginalised populations within schools, and the increasing salience of Anglo-American-style 'school choice' market dynamics among parents (e.g. Oberti 2007; Rhein 2004; Van Zanten 2012), scholars have

documented an increasing awareness among teachers of the need to adapt their training to the complex needs of their student populations (e.g. Perrenoud 1996; Van Zanten et al. 2002).

French educators are, therefore, positioned ambivalently with regards to the application of republican principles in the classroom where they often finds themselves caught between opposing normative attitudes about Muslim students. While the centralised hierarchy of the French school system circulates official knowledge concerning educational space, educators adapt to their environments and bring their own identity to their work. However, individual biographies and attitudes are not the last word as actual on-the-ground experience and improvisation also steer the management of laïcité towards what Bozec (2020) calls a 'certain pragmatism' that can override even widespread negative impressions of Islam. Likewise, Lorcerie (2010) argues that what has occurred between the ideal form of the *école républicaine* and its actual manifestation in the real world is a form of 'normative confusion' on the part of school agents. In trying to adhere to a model that is supposed to be indifferent to the expression of religious or cultural identity, they are confounded by what appear to be students' insistence on nevertheless expressing those identities. Without explicit instruction from higher levels of the education hierarchy, teachers are led to 'improvise alone' (70) and cater to their students' needs while maintaining some adherence to the republican model.

Producing Prosaic Stateness: Diversity, Incoherence and Divergence

As the above discussion has demonstrated, educators are positioned within *laïcité*'s spatialities such that they are positioned not only within hegemonic narratives but also knowledge of local circumstances, personal biographies and the demands of on-the-ground reality. Embedded in these intersecting and at times contradictory situations, they enact laïcité through the uncertainties and improvisations that produce geographically uneven prosaic stateness.

I substantiate this claim by drawing on two sets of interviews: interviews carried out in the context of a study on the relaxing of school attendance zones (*assouplissement de la carte scolaire*) as well as interviews with educators working in the aftermath of the January 7–9, 2015 series of terrorist attacks carried out in the greater Paris region. Despite being conducted in the aftermath of the 2010 ban on full-face coverings in public space, the first set of interviews did not deal with laïcité and the topic was not broached. What did come up, however, were analytical categories indicating broader elements of laïcité's spatialities that develop Painter's 'space-time configurations' within which laïcité policy is enacted, and which bridge the gap between the two sets of interviews. These categories are, first, a geographically-specific awareness of *diversity* that deeply informs educators' understanding of their work and their institution. Second, the

institutional *incoherence* that drives educators to develop their own resources for pedagogy and administration. The interviews most directly focused on laïcité largely pointed to the *divergences* between 'official' and 'actually-existing' laïcités, but also contained evidence of the first two categories. Across this convergence, the January 2015 attacks serve as a pivot point in the direction of the research more definitively towards laïcité, and so I begin with a brief description of those events.

The Grande Mobilisation de la République

From 7 – 9 January 2015, three gunmen carried out a series of assissnations, hostage takings and unplanned murders concentrated on – but not limited to[3] – the offices of the satirical cartoon publication *Charlie Hebdo*. The attackers' stated motivation for targeting the weekly magazine - a notorious reputation disproportionate to its marginal circulation for its frequent and irreverent portrayals of religious figures including Muhammed - catapulted *Charlie Hebdo* to the status of avatar of freedom of expression. As such, condemnation of the attacks, represented in shorthand by the Twitter hashtag IAmCharlie (JeSuisCharlie), was quickly transformed into a litmus test of support for "French" liberal democratic values (Klug 2016). Following the attacks, a planned moment of silence in the country's schools generated around 200 incidents of student 'non-compliance'. The locations of these incidents were not, and have not been to date, publicised beyond media anecdotes (e.g. Dusseaulx 2015; Hébert 2015; Verduzier and Beyer 2015). Nevertheless, an anxious public filled in the gaps on the basis of the *Lost Territories*-driven geographic imaginary of an out-of-control Islamisation occurring in schools in the deprived urban peripheries.

Thrust into a crisis mentality, Parliament summoned Minister of Education Najat Vallaud-Belkacem for a series of reports on how the Valls administration planned to respond. The promise to not 'take a single [incident] lightly' promised by Vallaud-Belkacem in the 14 January session of the *Assemblée nationale* (Assemblée nationale, 2015) was made manifest as the *Grande mobilisation de l'École pour les valueurs de la République*, the 'Great mobilisation of the [public] school for the Republic's values', composed of eleven 'principal measures' covering both disciplinary and curricular elements. Two of its thematic headings particularly reflected the anxiety generated by a presumed crisis of commitment to secular republican values among youth: 'place laïcité and the transmission of republican values at the centre of the school's mobilisation' and 'combat inequality and promote educational diversity to reinforce a feeling of belonging to the Republic' (Gouvernement de la République français 2015).

While the creation of the *Grande mobilisation* involved an expansion and strengthening of the existing infrastructure for addressing issues of non-

compliance with laïcité (notably at the *académie* level), it remained at the discretion of local educators to determine the severity of 'incidents' (*atteintes*). While educators absorbed the discourses the state used to build a case for these interventions, they nevertheless drew upon their own knowledge and understandings of their situations and their students to respond to this situation.

Diversity

The geoeconomic inequity demarcating different schools' immediate environments filters into the awareness that school personnel bring to their work. Individual establishments find themselves obligated to manage the social difference – or lack thereof – that comes to their doors. As a result, educational agents develop a capacity to categorise and classify the educational spaces where they work to fulfil their responsibility to provide equitable educational opportunities to the students that they receive in their establishments.

Mixité (diversity) appears as a common term for characterising the socioeconomic profile of student populations. Within my interviews, two normative understandings of diversity emerged. The first, advanced with waxing and waning enthusiasm over time by Ministry of Education officials, mirrors some of the arguments that have been advanced in the Anglo-American context: enhanced diversity will result from increased 'choice', allowing students to escape underperforming schools and encouraging such schools to improve their offerings (see e.g. Oberti 2007). The other understanding, expressed by educators with situated knowledge of their local populations, cast diversity as a euphemism for a re-segregation of student populations on the basis of socioeconomic status. Indeed, for establishments having difficulty retaining their best students, increased flexibility in student mobility has the perverse short-term effect of exacerbating the segregation that it was meant to correct. In one instance, *mixité* was referenced against a then-recently passed policy relaxing geographic attendance zones, as she lamented the effect that this had on her student populations:

> . . . [E]veryone keeps advocating for diversity (*mixité*). Except that, having relaxed geographic attendance zones (*l'assouplissement de la carte scolaire*), there's no more diversity. You see, our good students want to leave . . . so that actually means that us, for example, we can lose – like we did last year – an entire class's worth of students. Afterward, you can't say that there's educational diversity if you can't mix really good students with average ones, and with students who are struggling. And then, there's no more diversity. That's the case here and for the [local] high school. Because in fact, there's such a negative representation of the neighbourhood (*cité*) that everyone wants to leave (author's interview, 6 July 2011; principal, priority education).

The 'negative representation' the principal mentions alludes to fears not only that resegregation will lead to low student performance but also to *communautarisme*'s stigmatising gaze in which socioeconomic segregation acts as an

automatic signifier for ethnic and racial segregation, and from there to perceived anti-republican demands for religious accommodation. As the term 'representation' implies, within an atmosphere of liberalised school choice what matters more than actual student performance or *communautariste* demands are the word-of-mouth perceptions that parents hold of schools. This view was palpable during a conversation with the principal and assistant principal of a high school in a working-class town south of Paris. They expressed frustration with the gap between what they saw as their school's negative image and its actual rather strong performance:

> There's a lot of statistics, they're done at the request of each school, [but] parents won't see them. It's all about word of mouth. Which creates, for example, here we have a super modern school, it's extraordinarily modern . . . compared to [nearby school], where I worked last year, they're [the teachers] really, really ahead and [nearby school] is really, really behind. But parents don't know that. They don't want to know, all that they want to know is that at [nearby school] there are kids who are rich, come from privileged backgrounds, and they want their own kids to go there because they think that because the other kids are rich and privileged, their own kids will succeed. It's totally crazy (*fou*)! It's totally crazy (author's interview, 11 May 2012; principal and assistant principal, priority education).

Educators work in an environment in which not only official socioeconomic profiles but also public geographic imaginaries situate their schools as inhabited by potentially restive or even risky populations. This forms the background against which educators are called on to manage issues and policies around laïcité, themselves heavily overlain with embedded geographic imaginaries and practices. Nevertheless, educators are not bound by these perceptions and often recast the composition of their populations in more practical lights:

> **A**: I'm not in a neighbourhood with only whites, it's very mixed (*mélangé*). But there's no *communautarisme*! Where I am, I have a little of everything in the [school] district, I've got – let's start with me! I could claim other origins,[4] but we can see right off the bat that it's not a problem for the school's functioning, it's my seventh year here. I've got everything in my schoolyard – blacks, blonds, Arabs (*du noir, du blond, des arabes*) . . .
>
> **Chris**: So you think that the diversity (*mixité*) that exists already, that creates . . .
>
> **A**: It didn't, it doesn't create *communautarisme* that could create pressure – yeah? – sometimes, something that creates pressure, something that leads to a situation where conflict is born. I don't have those kinds of conflicts at all. (Author's interview, June 24-b[5] 2016; principal).

Here, racial diversity is spoken about in a frank and casual way that belies the euphemisms and indirect indicators usually used in official discourse. In this instance, it is not seen in and of itself as particularly good or bad, but rather as a situation that can be managed so that it does not become problematic. Indeed, the sense that emerges from this excerpt is a degree of confidence that was not often reproduced in other interviews.

Incoherence

Amidst a strong awareness of the social and economic disparities that characterise the French educational landscape, local school agents find themselves forced to work through what are appear at times to be staggering lapses of ministerial authority. Indeed, in the two cases above where educators felt at the mercy of school choice mechanisms, they also cited a lack of ministerial support in dealing with the problem. In other cases, to the extent that higher levels of the ministry do provide direction, this direction is given in the form of responsibilising individual schools and their staff to make up for oversights or other unforeseen problems arising from policy initiatives. Referencing the question of providing remedial education to newly-transferred students attracted by the relaxation of geographic assignment criteria, one principal described the attitude of her superiors:

> We're told "if worst comes to worst, charge [any costs incurred] to us. Write up a proposal, and ask for additional funding according to the situation". The funding isn't always necessarily given. And what creates a problem for us, is for example – as it [the influx of new students] wasn't foreseen – that means that the time to write a pedagogical proposal, to send it off while saying "okay, we'd like to set this up, we've got students who we need to support with additional funding" and then – except that since it wasn't planned before the start of the school year, it's more difficult to implement (author's interview, 9 May 2012; teacher, priority education).

As a result of a perceived lack of coordination and support at higher levels for local problems, school staff have tended to turn inward for innovative solutions. Such instability is even more apparent in the case of pedagogical approaches to laïcité: despite being a core value that educators are meant to transmit through their work, it remains a marginal topic in the official teacher training curriculum – even following the promised reinforcement of this curriculum in the *Grande mobilisation* (Dautresme 2016). One consequence of this is that some teachers believe that they already have a perfectly serviceable understanding of laïcité, and so have no real need to continue to educate themselves about it until confronted by students who either challenge its precepts or are curious about its deeper meanings. As one teacher told me, she found her own knowledge coming up short when a group of students in her school began asking questions about laïcité she was unable to answer:

> So, not having a tool for [teaching laïcité] . . . I got in touch with the *académie* of Créteil, I found out by looking at the website that there were a lot of policy experts (*chargés de mission*) and also that there was one for the Republic's values. And so I got in touch with her. And it was her who put me on the right path, who I'd say gave me a lot of [teaching] methods, in fact. And also, what I thought was really great, what we saw with the history-philosophy professors, was that she also made some things clear for me that for a lot of professionals . . . well, it seems to have been my experience – that for a lot of professionals, we know what laïcité is. That's it – that we don't have to really talk about it because it seems obvious to us. Like something that, well, that doesn't really cause confusion in and of itself. (author's interview, June 23 2016; teacher).

In this particular case, the overall incoherence was mitigated as the teacher found the resources available from a particular policy expert very useful indeed, and was able to eventually parlay the support she received into a larger program for the school and its students around issues of laïcité in public.

Divergence

The flexibility and improvisational abilities that educators develop, partially as a consequence of the incoherence they experience, is of considerable importance for the management of laïcité when potentially sanctionable behaviours appear in schools. The penalties for violating the ban on conspicuous religious symbols, or otherwise challenging principles of laïcité, can be severe – up to and including expulsion. Indeed, many well-publicised cases of challenges to laïcité concern student expulsions, usually at the hand of a rigid school administration. However, it was often emphasised to me that such incidents were rarer than media coverage would suggest. One teacher in particular conveyed her annoyance to me concerning such an affair:

> There had been no problems concerning laïcité between students and teachers in [our] school until recently, when a non-event came up. This issue, which was blown out of proportion by journalists, came up months after we'd taken the decision to undertake one-on-one work around laïcité. (Email to author, 17 June 2016; teacher).

What caused this teacher the most frustration was the media-fuelled public view that her school had been totally ignorant of equity issues related to the application of laïcité – when in fact they had been deliberately working on that very topic for some time (email to author, June 17 2016; teacher).

Indeed, many educators appear eager to find solutions that cause a minimum of disruption to student education and their school's overall function. In speaking with the principal who had previously waved away a link between 'diversity' and *communautarisme*, she also expressed a discretionary approach to determining whether or not an item of potential religious adherence rose to the level of a 'conspicuous symbol':

> I don't have issues, I don't have students who come either veiled (*voilées*) or anything else, once everyone understands the rule . . . but a cross, my little thing, I don't go around with a cross . . . for the [school] personnel, it's clearly not allowed, that something be visible. But when it comes to children, and then you have something small, but something insignificant – if I'm dealing with a little scarf (*foulard*) on a [student's] head, I can say that it's to make her look pretty. It's not necessarily "visible" (Author's interview, June 24-b 2016; principal, priority education).

As has been pointed out elsewhere (e.g. Bowen 2007), such an attitude is something of a common trope among French educators. However, it is not necessarily insincere; as Bozec (2015) documents, many educators

demonstrate not only a practical but also a pedagogical attitude towards the ongoing succession of laïcité rules and regulations they are expected to follow both prior to and following the January 2015 incidents. There is likewise an awareness that certain terms are charged and need to be approached sensitively, as a teacher told me of her school's attempts to put together a pedagogical program on religious discrimination:

> And so, at a certain moment the staff told me, we can't do a debate on Islamophobia and anti-Semitism, we'd have to present it in another way. So they asked me, why not organize a debate on "Living together better", or "How do we use laïcité to live together better"? (Author's interview, June 24 2016–3; teacher, priority education).

Indeed, the 'pedagogical' aspect is one that appeals to many educators' instincts, in which they hasten to accompany new measures seen as potentially 'coercive' with material explaining *why* such measures are necessary (Bozec 2015: 8). Such an attitude appears to hold true within higher administrative levels as well: as a *chargée de mission* in the *académie* of Créteil told me, a purely coercive approach to laïcité holds little practical or principled value:

> If pedagogy and dialogue fail, if we really end up with nothing. Well, there are disciplinary measures that can be taken, but measures – you must understand that concerning this question, a disciplinary measure that isn't rooted in a [pedagogical] process, accompanied by all possible pedagogical attempts to make the student understand and bring him or her back to the heart of the republican school, would be a failure for the Republic (author's interview, June 24 2016-a; policy expert)

The accounts presented here are not radical departures from common depictions of laïcité or republican citizenship that circulate through French society. However, they represent divergences in the sense that rather than the imperious depictions of laïcité policies that sometimes appear, the more complicated reality is that teachers tend towards practical approaches to laïcité based on their understandings of their socioeconomic professional contexts. To be sure, good intentions are not a guarantee of anything, and the possibility remains that the targets of laïcité policies will find those policies oppressive, discriminatory or simply burdensome (see, e.g. Farhat 2020; Lorcerie and Moignard 2017). What can be said is that in these examples educators enact a prosaic stateness of laïcité that draws from, but does not neatly reproduce, abstract notions of defending republican values and educating future citizens.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that in their daily work, educators expresses the geographic unevenness of prosaic stateness. Rather than a straightforward relationship between state ideology and educational practice, the path from broad narratives and discourses to on-the-ground realities passes through the historically and spatially complex filters of the structuring concepts themselves,

education's institutional idiosyncrasies, and the situated knowledge of educators. This is demonstrated through a discussion of laïcité as it is manifested within the French public school: on the one hand, the governance of laïcité is embedded in a tradition of extending a centralised vision of citizenship over cultural and political peripheries. At the same time, the policies meant to accomplish this assimilating impulse are interpreted and adapted according to educators' accumulated knowledge-in-place. Situated as they are within laïcité's spatialities, educators also draw on life experience and especially the exigencies of the day-to-day to interpret their work through the categories of diversity, incoherence and divergence. As a result, they produce prosaic laïcités: bearing similarities to official narratives, but often improvised according to in-the-moment circumstances and needs.

In addition to providing opportunities to examine on-the-ground practice, casting teachers as enactors of prosaic stateness also helps us understand how agents of the state produce prosaic stateness in ways that surpass anyone's intentions. In many migrant destination societies, charismatic politicians have found electoral success in casting visible Muslim religiosity as the thin end of the wedge of a wholesale cultural and demographic takeover of the 'native' population (see Bialasiewicz 2006; Lizotte 2020b). In France, laïcité has been heavily implicated in this narrative by being leveraged to portray claims for the accommodation of Muslim practices as assaults on a dearly-held French value. While such a narrative is widespread among actors on the far-right, a version of it has also been firmly implanted in the 'mainstream' in the form of a geographic imaginary of Islamist 'separatism'.

Recently, an example of such 'separatist' imaginaries was seen in the logic informing a law proposed by President Emmanuel Macron in October 2020 and promulgated in August 2021 that significantly increased government authority to surveil individuals and sanction religious organisations (see Geisser 2021). As in other moments of heightened government scrutiny of adherence to laïcité, the law was catalysed by a school-based incident: in this case, the brutal murder of teacher Samuel Paty on 16 October, 2020 by a radicalised young man of Chechen origin for Paty's alleged discriminatory treatment of his Muslim students and his use of caricatures of Muhammed published by *Charlie Hebdo* in the context of a lesson on freedom of expression. Paty's murder reminds us that educators are not only agents of the values, intentions and ideologies that inhabit prosaic stateness, but also their occasional involuntary avatars. While, as Painter argues, a focus on practices and encounters remains vital to displacing a view of the state as a 'structurally coherent object or even a rational abstraction' (771) characterised primary by spectacular expressions of power, we must remember that even the mundane effects and affects left behind in the wake of prosaic stateness can precipitate reactions that catapult us from realm of the mundane back to the spectacular.

Notes

1. Available: www.washington.edu/research/hsd/guidance/exempt/#3d.
2. For more, see Le Minez (2020), who argues that on the basis of these indirect indicators, the national statistical service Insee effectively *does* collect ethnic statistics.
3. I emphasise this point in order to counter the tendency for the violence that took place on these days – notably including the hostage siege at *Hyper Casher* – to be overshadowed by the murders at the *Charlie Hebdo* offices.
4. At this point, the principal gestured to herself, indicating her identity as a Black French woman. I chose not to follow up on this point.
5. Three interviews were conducted on the same day; they are marked with – a, -b and – c to distinguish between them.

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