

REVIEWS

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HEADSCARF HYSTERIA

In a series of mid-twentieth century essays the Hungarian historian, István Bibó, attempted to explain the blindness and irresponsibility that had characterized the interwar politics of the Central European states—Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary—and led them to catastrophe. In doing so he proposed a new concept, that of political hysteria. Bibó's central hypothesis was that when a community fails to find within itself the means or energy to deal with a problem that challenges, if not its existence, then at least its way of being and self-image, it may be tempted to adopt a peculiar defensive ploy. It will substitute a fictional problem, which can be mediated purely through words and symbols, for the real one that it finds insurmountable. In grappling with the former, the community can convince itself that it has successfully confronted the latter. It experiences a sense of relief and thus feels itself able to carry on as before. Anthropologists have explained the magical practices of 'primitive' societies along similar lines. Communities which feel themselves defenceless before a nature that they cannot control will people it with invisible powers—gods, djinns, spirits—that are its masters. At a stroke, these communities provide themselves with a means not just to understand the forces of nature but to affect them, by propitiating their gods with sacrifices and incantations.

Bibó borrowed the notion of hysteria from psychiatry, and above all from Freud, although he does not explicitly cite him. For Freud, the chief symptom of hysterical anxiety is phobia. His description of it in the *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* is well known:

What he [the patient] is afraid of is evidently his own libido. The difference between this situation and that of realistic anxiety lies in two points: that the danger is an internal instead of an external one and that it is not consciously recognized. In phobias it is very easy to observe the way in which this internal danger is transformed into an external one—that is to say, how a neurotic anxiety is changed into an apparently realistic one . . . Let us suppose that the agoraphobic patient is invariably afraid of feelings of temptation that are aroused in him by meeting people in the street. In his phobia he brings about a displacement and henceforward is afraid of an external situation. What he gains by this is obviously that he thinks he will be able to protect himself better in that way. One can save oneself from an external danger by flight; fleeing from an internal danger is a difficult enterprise.

Bibó is fully aware of the methodological questions that arise from deploying a notion taken from individual psychology to account for collective behaviour. If political hysteria may offer a rostrum for particular hysterics, it has its own causes and does not spring from a mere aggregation of personal hysterias. It embraces numerous individuals who, in personal terms, are perfectly balanced and healthy—even if they are actively propagating political hysteria. Bibó's formulation of the relation between collective and individual experience avoids both simple identification and absolute dissociation:

The internal processes of a community may display astonishing analogies with individual psychological processes. The man who recoils in fright before the task ahead, yet blusters and grows aggressive to hide his fear, is the model for certain types of collective behaviour. But that does not mean that the community possesses a consciousness [as a man does] or that the two modes of behaviour, individual and collective, obey the same rules. The collective process both combines and structures individual reactions, thus implying a greater number of possible combinations but also a more important role for intentionality, shared objectives and conventions.

With these precautions in mind, it is tempting to consider whether the debate over the Muslim headscarf that has convulsed the French Republic over the past year, leading to the new law of February 2004, can be understood as an episode of political hysteria. The heated nature of the discussion and the quasi-unanimity—transcending the usual political divisions—of those urging that the headscarf be banned from state schools indicate that the diagnosis could be appropriate. Here, I will attempt to sketch in broad outline what such a pathological interpretation might reveal.

In this instance the root cause of the hysteria, the initial problem, would appear to be twofold. Firstly, there is the 'breakdown of integration' as it affects France's 5 million-plus Muslim community: segregated cities, irreducible pockets of misery and unemployment, ghetto schools, educational failure, discrimination in the job and housing markets, workplace racism—and, finally, the retinue of bitterness and violence that these phenomena provoke in their victims, especially the young. Secondly: the slowdown or stagnation of any equalization of the sexes. Since its victories of the 1970s on contraception and abortion, the women's movement has made scant progress. The gap between male and female salaries persists, women are largely excluded from the highest ranks of the political, administrative and economic hierarchies, domestic violence continues unabated, the porn industry is more profitable than ever. In other words: stalemate here, too. Finally, one point where these two—distinct—problems converge is in what the French call the 'sensitive' cities or districts, where the status of women is low and the constraints of male domination weigh most heavily.

Attempts to solve these problems—legislative drafts, plans, projects: the entire parliamentary and administrative arsenal—have so far proved utterly ineffective. In each case, a massive build-up of habit, prejudice and vested interest needs to be confronted head on; both mentalities and behaviour have to change. A huge social restructuring programme would be needed to get rid of the ghetto-like estates. In the same way, a thorough-going equality of the sexes would challenge innumerable routines and personal advantages, sanctified by custom. In both cases, these are tasks that must be carried out not just by the social order as a whole but by each of us, in our own lives. No power, however well intentioned, could perform them in our place.

Educated by the political culture of the last two centuries, the French tend to rely on the role of the state and law in the conduct of public affairs and are ill-equipped to deal with problems that call for other modes of collective action: education, persuasion, example. Besides, precisely because they would challenge established customs, egotism and privilege, any such transformations are bound to be unpopular. Who in the political, intellectual or media establishment would take the risk of proposing or defending such root-and-branch solutions, in a 'democracy of opinion' such as France?

Nevertheless, the undeniable extent and persistence of these problems—racial exclusion, sexual inequality—come as a brutal affront to national *amour-propre*. The French like to consider their Republic the home of the Rights of Man, blessed with liberty, fraternity and equality; an example to the rest of the world. All the more painful to accept the reality that belies this complacent portrait. In France as elsewhere, exclusion is growing, inequalities are deepening, racism is as virulent as ever. The Republic is scarcely qualified to give lessons to its neighbours.

Powerless before problems that it has not the energy to master, its narcissism wounded, its self-image under assault: confronted with such difficulties, the hysterical community will substitute a fictive problem that can be solved purely in terms of discourse and symbols. By this means, it gives itself the illusion of having triumphed over the attack. During the past year in France the headscarf issue has fulfilled the role of fictive problem very neatly. To be credible, the hysterical substitution must satisfy certain conditions. Firstly, it must bear some manifest relation to the actual problems it is called upon to replace, so that in speaking of it one can have the sense that one is grappling with them—although without ever needing to do so explicitly. The headscarf is worn by Muslim girls, nearly all of whom come from immigrant families; at a stroke, it invokes—genie-like—the problems of cultural exclusion and gender inequality.

Initially, it is true, the headscarf seemed ill-suited to play the role of substitute national problem, due to the scant numbers of girls actually wanting to cover their heads in school. According to official statistics—Education Ministry and Renseignements Généraux—there were barely 1,200 incidents of girls wearing headscarves at school in 2003, out of which less than thirty led to court cases, resulting in only four actual exclusions under the Conseil d'Etat ruling of 1989 (which debarred 'ostentatious' religious signs or dress that constituted 'proselytism or propaganda'). The statistics also suggest that these figures have barely changed since 1989. Such a slender base was clearly insufficient to sustain a 'great national debate'. It therefore had to be enlarged.

Ironically, Chirac's establishment in July 2003 of a Presidential Commission to investigate the matter—a 20-strong body headed by Bernard Stasi, Mediator of the Republic—has in itself played a major role in this enlargement. One merit of the Stasi Commission's Report, now published as *Laïcité et République*, is its faithful reflection of both the rhetoric and the growing strength of French hysteria. A key first move was to cast doubt on the value of the official statistics—the classic tactic of breaking the thermometer when it fails to demonstrate the desired results. Instead of the state's figures, the Stasi Commission chose to rely on the accounts of 'actors in the field', all of whom reported a far tenser situation on the ground. While such evidence is no doubt qualitatively valuable, it is not clear that it is so useful in quantitative terms. Still, it allowed the Stasi Commission to conclude that the state administration had been overtaken by events, that the crisis had escaped not only its awareness but its control.

Various commentators have since estimated that the official statistics should be multiplied by four, at the very least. Since even then the total is scarcely impressive, a second argument has been brought into play: this sum itself represents only the tip of an iceberg whose underwater mass

we can only guess at. The four schoolgirls are only the outriders of a vast army, manipulated by ominous forces who are probing our defences before giving the order to attack. These shadowy elements are encountered on nearly every page of the Stasi Report: 'politico-religious activists', 'extremist politico-religious tendencies', an 'activist minority', 'organized groups testing the resistance of the Republic', 'communist politico-religious groups', etc. The Report is careful to give no hint of the actual identity of these bodies—indeed, their anonymity makes them all the more powerful. Nevertheless, we are allowed to surmise that they form some part of that vast Islamic-fundamentalist nebula of which—as we all know—al-Qaeda is the core. Their goal is nothing less than the destabilization of our institutions and our democracy: 'the very future of our public services is at stake'. What is more: 'these dangers are menacing the entire structure of our judicial system'. In such circumstances, those who stubbornly insist on the official statistics—two dozen cases, four exclusions—only demonstrate their own inability to see what is staring them in the face.

'In politics, the emotion of fear often grows at the expense of all others. One is willing to be afraid of everything, when one no longer has a strong desire for anything at all', wrote Tocqueville in *The Old Regime and the Revolution*. How else indeed might such a blasé, disenchanted population as the French be stirred, if not by making it tremble every so often before imaginary threats? The process is all the more effective since, as Guizot observed in his *Memoirs*: 'Men are made in such a way that they find fantastical dangers the worst. They will fight against bodies. They lose their heads—either from fear or rage—before ghosts.'

An essential difference between individual and collective hysteria needs to be borne in mind here. In the individual case, the original problem is thoroughly repressed, buried in the unconscious, and the substitute alone occupies the front stage. Such an occlusion is impossible at the collective level, since no shared unconscious exists. The real effects of the original problem thus continue to draw attention, and there will always be a few observers spared by the pathology. Collective hysteria thus proceeds not so much by repression as by neutralization, via a technique that we might call 'doffing one's hat in passing'. The initial problem is invoked, but by a form of rhetorical artifice that immediately sets it in parentheses, so that the discussion can turn back to the substitute and carry on as before.

Laïcité et République offers a textbook example of this process. Far from glossing over the problems of racial or ethnic exclusion in France, it provides a very pertinent description of them. It rightly notes that, within the current social context, the retreat into religious identity may often be inflicted rather than desired, and gives a powerful description of the process by which a stigma may be transformed into an emblem of pride, along 'Black is

beautiful' lines. In its final summary, the Report delivers a categorical verdict: 'Secularism only has meaning and legitimacy if equality of opportunity is guaranteed in every corner of the land'. The innocent may be tempted to conclude that since, as the Report itself attests, equality of opportunity is far from being assured in France, secularism currently lacks both meaning and legitimacy. On the contrary:

Certain social situations render rights less credible, and thus hinder their victims from assuming their [social] duties. But one should not take advantage of this to declare the demands of secularism illegitimate, nor desist from affirming them on the pretext that social injustice exists.

So the hand is played: social injustice—whose eradication has just been presented as a necessary condition for secularism—has now metamorphosed into a mere pretext, to be scanted without further ado. We can thus rule it out, and carry on as before.

If the Stasi Commission is to be believed, the method can be applied in every instance, on the grounds that, 'In any case, high principles are not refuted by low practice'. As the reciprocal proposition is no less true—high principles do nothing to prevent low practice—one can, in the same breath, proclaim the principles and abandon the practices to their baseness. This would certainly explain the extreme poverty of the Report's concrete proposals on integration. The Commission 'hopes that the policy of fighting . . . discrimination will be a national priority'. Racial exclusion thus joins dangerous driving, help for the disabled, cancer research, care for the elderly, health insurance reform and a host of other national priorities—a list that can be extended all the more freely, since there are no resources to deal with any of it. The Commission further notes that:

The future independent high authority charged with responsibility for all forms of discrimination will have to modify practices and develop modes of behaviour with regard to direct and indirect racism and religious intolerance.

This is the Cartesian method, as described by Leibniz: take what is necessary, do what is convenient, and you will end up with what you are looking for. What resources will this high authority have at its disposal? Will it act by persuasion or coercion? Will it be endowed with disciplinary powers? What representation will it have at ground level, and what type of personnel will be at its disposal? The Stasi Commission saves its views on these questions for another occasion.

With the realities of discrimination and exclusion safely sent on their way, the discussion can retire to the ethereal realm of high principles, whose all-purpose mobilization is a well-known speciality of French political

rhetoric. *Laïcité et République* is no exception. Freedom of conscience, personal autonomy, the critical spirit, tolerance, equality of opportunity, the secularism of school and state: all the great values of the Republic are summoned, with the sole exception—not entirely innocent—of fraternity. Yet the exaltation of these lofty principles runs the risk that, sooner or later, one may be required to translate them into facts. Here it is important that the murky realities so recently shown the door should not be allowed to climb back in through the window. The Stasi Commission deploys a tactic that typifies the general argument of those calling for a new law against the headscarf. Firstly, a principle is invoked to which one attributes an absolute, universal value. Secondly, and in short order, its application is essentially limited to schoolgirls' headgear, to the exclusion of virtually all other objects and occasions.

Many opponents of the headscarf—or veil, as they now prefer to call it—have stressed its symbolism as a form of women's oppression, for which reason it is not to be tolerated in the Republic. 'Objectively', Bernard Stasi explained to the newspaper *Ouest France*, 'wearing the veil translates as female alienation'. 'Objectively': meaning, taken on its own, independent of the status, the feelings or beliefs of those who wear it. But if this is the case, surely it is not just teenage girls but all women who should be banned from wearing the veil, and not just in state schools but everywhere: universities, corporations, the market, on public transport and in the street. And surely the interdiction should be extended to other, non-Islamic veils—those of nuns, for example. Naturally, the headscarf's opponents do not envisage this sort of extension of their ban; but on the same grounds, one may question the universalism and absolute nature of their proclaimed principles—all the more, since so many other aspects of 'female alienation' escape these lofty condemnations. And if universalism is at stake, why restrict the ban merely to objects of apparel? The Stasi Commission rejoices that 'public administrations have more consideration than formerly for dietary restrictions based on religious convictions'. Yet surely the refusal to share a common meal is at least as 'ostentatious' a sign of religious affiliation as wearing a scarf?

As a further limit to universalist principles, the headscarf is only to be banned within the public education system. Under the Debré law of 1959—which aimed to settle the longstanding 'school wars' between public and private systems in France by declaring private education to be a 'public-service mission'—any fee-paying school can enter into a contract with the state whereby the latter will pay the teachers' salaries while the school, although subject to national inspection programmes, etc., is free to plan its activities in accordance with its own 'special character', officially recognized by the state. As Jack Lang recalled in a recent debate, the public-service

mission of these establishments obliged them ‘to welcome all children without distinction of origins, viewpoint or belief . . . in full respect for freedom of conscience’; it is on these grounds that the schools are entitled to state finance. Why then are they absolved from the secularist principles that are supposed to govern the public service?

The Stasi Report goes so far as to suggest that the ‘obligations of neutrality’ imposed on public services ‘should be mentioned in the contracts drawn up with enterprises delegated as public service’. Naturally, this does not include contracted private schools. For Jack Lang, as for the authors of *Laïcité et République*, the principles of secularism and neutrality do not apply to these establishments, thanks to their ‘special character’.

Better yet, the Stasi Commission considers them a guarantee of religious liberty: ‘The existence of faith-based schools, in contractual agreement with the state, allows for the full affirmation of religious freedom, taking their special character into account’. Elsewhere, the Report insists that ‘no ruling prevents the creation of Muslim schools’, while ‘certain Muslim parents already prefer their children to have a Catholic schooling, so that their children can benefit from an education in religious values’. This seems to suggest that an acceptable answer to the headscarf question would be the expansion of state-contracted Islamic schools, where wearing the scarf would be not merely authorized but prescribed, in the name of the school’s ‘special character’. As to the effects of such a solution on the ‘integration’ of the girls concerned, the Commission seems not to have judged it opportune to interrogate itself too closely on that point.

In the same way, the Report is careful not to call into question the special status of Alsace-Moselle. In 1905, when the law separating church and state was passed by the French parliament, terminating Napoleon’s Concordat with the Vatican of 1801, Alsace and Moselle were still incorporated into the German Empire. Returned to France in 1918, they were permitted to retain their concordat status. The salaries of Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist and Jewish clerics there have been paid by the French state, and religious education is integrated into the curriculum. Intrinsic elements of the Republic, these departments are tangible proof of its ability to practice its secularism as it pleases and to offer the broadest latitude when it is so inclined. The Stasi Commission sees nothing abnormal in this:

The Commission finds that the reaffirmation of secularism does not lead to any questioning of the special status of Alsace-Moselle, to which the population of these departments is particularly attached.

That local popular attachment should be sufficient argument to justify a derogation of the national law rings oddly in a text devoted to the denunciation

of communalist interests. Although the Report is not specific about this, it would seem that Alsace-Moselle need not be too worried about a law forbidding the manifestation of religious affiliation in their state schools.

This gulf between the appeal to universalist principles and their narrow application demands further explanation. Some speak of cynicism or hypocrisy. I would argue that such glaring inconsistencies are standard symptoms of political hysteria. The hysterical community feels a compulsive need to recite its principles and values, the repetition serving as reassurance and reaffirmation of its own self-image. This does not mean that it is prepared to act on them, if to do so would lead to a painful confrontation. Which French government will question the Alsace-Moselle statute or the Debré law, in the name of secularism? In the end, it is the principle of opportunism that wins the day. Logical rigour gives way to a—perfectly understandable—longing for tranquillity. What could be more natural? Still, if only to avoid troubling simple souls, it would be wiser for the great men of the Republic to be less categorical about their principles.

Finally, what of the scope and consequences of the new legislation itself? The basic provision states: 'Items of dress and signs that manifest religious or political affiliations'—the political interdiction, slipped in by the Stasi Commission, has attracted little comment—'are forbidden in state schools, colleges and *lycées*'; and further, 'the dress and signs forbidden are ostensible signs', not 'discreet' ones. In a strange spasm of remorse, the Report assures us in the very next paragraph that 'this is not a question of imposing a ban'. A fine example of Freudian denial: of course it is imposing a ban. We may summarize its effects.

First, the law is supposed to provide clear guidelines for teachers, headmasters and headmistresses, allowing them either to resolve cases or despatch them for litigation as speedily as possible. On this point, the disputes that have already arisen around the interpretation of the term *ostensible*, and the exact boundaries between the (forbidden) ostensible and the (authorized) discreet, are hardly reassuring. In enumerating the 'difficulties' of the situation that prevailed after 1989, the Stasi Commission notes that 'the adoption of case-by-case decision-making assumed the possibility of headmasters or headmistresses taking on responsibilities'. It is not clear why this assumption of responsibility should be considered a difficulty—some might consider it the definition of their job. In any case, they will not be relieved of it by the new legislation, since 'dialogue' and 'mediation' under their auspices will still precede any legal sanction.

The law will not be entirely ineffective. In all probability, a higher number of teenage girls will be expelled from school, and at a faster rate. At two points in its Report, the Stasi Commission registers its distress at the recent growth of de-schooling. The law based on its recommendations

will undoubtedly contribute to the phenomenon it deplors. Elsewhere, the Report acknowledges in heartfelt terms the ‘drama’ of teenage girls’ lives on the streets of our cities. But how will the banning of the headscarf *inside schools* transform life outside? We are told that it will constitute a ‘strong sign’, addressed to ‘Islamic groups’. It seems more probable that it will give them free rein to denounce this attack on freedom of belief, and rally more young people—teenage girls in particular—to their cause.

In sum, the new law will bring no useful reforms. It will have nil effect on the problem of racial exclusion, or that of sexual inequality—areas in which real progress depends very little on legislation, far more on deeper forms of social transformation. Nor will the headscarf question now disappear, as if by magic wand. If it loses any of its acuity, this will only be due to a change in media focus.

Much ado about nothing? Not entirely. Imagine a hysteric whose phobia is centred on the idea of bodily dirt. In the grip of an irresistible compulsion, he washes his hands fifty times a day. The ritual is a protection from his inner fear; but it is more than that. Each time he performs the act, he gains a moment’s respite, a temporary relief. The headscarf ban will have the same effect. Between July 3rd, 2003, when Chirac appointed the Stasi Commission, and February 10th, 2004, when the National Assembly voted by 494 to 36 in favour of legislation based on its recommendations, France has undergone a prolonged debate on the question. Politicians, journalists and intellectuals from every point of the compass have come together to assert their common celebration of Republican values against the Muslim schoolgirl menace. Such instances of fusion and unanimity are rare—and, in themselves, provide some temporary relief. The opponents of the headscarf can pride themselves on their valiant stand for the values of free expression and national cohesion against the ‘obscure forces’ on the prowl. In short, the process has brought a measure of national satisfaction which it would be wrong to scorn. True, such satisfaction will exact a price, but only the sceptics will notice. And even they will have to admire the way that, in the name of liberty and integration, it has been necessary to pass a bill whose most obvious effects will be to ban and to exclude.

A French-language version of this text will appear in *Mouvements*, and in Charlotte Nordmann, ed., *Le foulard islamique en questions*, Editions Amsterdam.