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White Out: An analysis of France and her claim to Racial Democracy

In the weeks leading up to Global Awareness class' trip to France, the terms "multiculturalism," "melting pot," "diversity," "interculturalism," were continuously thrown about the room. Of all of these terms however, there was one principle that struck a chord, the idea of a "Cultural Mosaic," the course's name sake. A "Cultural Mosaic" by functioning definition is the premise that many diverse ethnic groups co-exist within a society, each culture's language, people, food, clothing, and overall aesthetic adding a vital piece of tile to the mosaic. This concept was introduced to the class in the context of France. Reading countless articles on France's capacity to facilitate many vastly diverse cultures, the class was prepared to see first-hand the immaculate tolerance the country had for diversity. However, what the trip allowed the class to discover was that France, far from embracing, was striving toward a hegemonic society, a "racial democracy." The question the class failed to ask was what France's mosaic depicted once all of the pieces were assembled. The answer - a vivid portrait of imperialism that had been scantily brushed over with white out.

Before France's claim to "racial democracy" is debated however, it is important to clarify some terms. The term "racial democracy" was first introduced in 1930 by congressman and sociologist Gilberto Freyre in his novel *Casa-Grande e Senzala* (The Master and the Slaves). The work brought forth images of early slavery within colonial Brazil from the master's perspective. On the onset, Freyre utilized the term to describe the then frowned upon, and yet growing interracial population in order to indicate how this mixing of cultures was vital to

Brazil's national identity. The term was later adopted by Brazil in entirety as the interracial population continued to grow. Not that the Brazilian government had a choice, those were simply the demographics. The first population census was conducted in 1872 at which time the population was divided into "free people" and "slaves." The results of that census read that 15% of the population was a slave and of African descent, the majority – white. The 2010 census, which marked Brazil's first fully digital census, revealed that 50.7% of the population identified as "Pardo" or "brown." Broken down further, 7.6% of that percentage identifies as "black" and 43.1% identify as "mixed" while 47.7% identify as white (brazil.gov).

It is important to note that during the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade it is estimated that Brazil imported 5,848,265 slaves. Brazil imported more slaves than any other country involved in this form of commerce. This number is an estimate due to the fact that thousands of slaves went unrecorded. With this in mind, how Brazilians chose to identify themselves is of great importance. Arguably more important however, is how Brazilian government chooses to categorize its population, and whether or not the distinct groups within that category are equally represented in a "racial democracy."

The idea of a "racial democracy" in Brazil has been hotly contested. While the effort is seen by other "developed" countries as a step toward social modernity, the idea of a racial hegemony also has many negative connotations. An example of this contestation can be seen during the festivities of Brazil's Carnival. Drawing nearly 4.9 million people in 2011, Rio de Janeiro's Carnival is one of the few stages in which Brazil can choose how the world perceives her. While Carnival lends itself to Catholic pre-Lent traditions, literally translating to "Farewell to the Flesh," the festival draws audiences of all ethnicities and religious affiliations.

During the festival, many volunteers with varying skin tones learn traditional African drum beats, wear black face, and colorfully parade down the Brazilian streets in an effort to embrace the cultural diversity of the state, but what it actually does is provide fodder for the imperialistic powers of Brazil who are attempting to establish a cultural hegemony that does not exist. On the one hand, by having multi-racial people playing African drum beats, the state implies that there is no discrimination within its borders, that all cultures are accepted. A fallacy if ever there was one. On the other, by denying the cultures that make up the mosaic the right to display their roots, Brazil is exercising a dangerous colonial mindset. After all, wasn't this the same mind the colonists held in order to achieve white hegemony in the first place? While Brazil is making desperate claims to being culturally diverse, and not culturally adverse, Brazil is not achieving either. "Racial Democracies" are constantly teetering between simply being a state that does not discriminate and blatant ignorance of the differences of the people who inhabit these countries.

France: A Racial Democracy?

Lucie Laureillard, Student Well-Being and Housing Coordinator for the CIEE Paris center, and also the program coordinator for Agnes Scott College's Global Connections trip. This five foot nothing Parisian was a portable plethora of information on French culture and history. From the hotel where the class would be staying in Toulouse, to the Metro stop that would drop one precisely at the Louvre, Lucie was the class' go to. One of the many cold, rainy days in Toulouse the class was touring the section of town that was notorious for its large immigrant population. Though the name of that particular region is regrettably forgettable, what was Lucie said that day was not. "In our census, race is not a question, we don't have it." This was the first indication that France identified as a "racial democracy." What a novel premise. To disregard a

faction of the census that is deemed unnecessary for liberal democracies. After all, republican forms of government are there to serve the people, all people, not specific interest groups. In the United States, before a high school student can take the high and mighty Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT), they must first “bubble in” their racial identification, gender identification, and religious affiliation. Not so standardized after all. What does the race of the student have to do with his/her intelligence? The same information is required of U.S. citizens on almost every form or document, including the census.

France’s take on the necessity of race within the census brought forward many arguments pertaining to the role of race within a society. One could argue that France is advancing modern sociological standards that do not require the colonial concept of race determining status. As Jennifer L. Palmer writes in her article “What’s in a Name? Mixed – Race Families and Resistance to Racial Codification in Eighteenth-Century France,” “In colonial society until the last quarter of the eighteenth century skin color was one factor among many in determining status... Race and status certainly were entwined, as free men of color barred from political participation because of their skin color and slaves who saw no whites among their numbers surely understood,” (p. 364). Palmer points out that while many other economic, educational and genealogical factors played into a person’s social position, it was detrimentally race that cast status. Is France then taking a step away from her colonial past and a step toward modernity?

It can be argued that France is actually perpetuating a colonial mindset by excluding race from her census. While impending on the hegemonic voice of the democracy, allowing race in census enables appropriate distribution of action from the government. In France, how can a particular group of people suffering from a problem unique to those people get effective assistance from their so-called “democratic” government if that government insists on denying

their existence? “Everyone is French,” Lucie went on to say, “There are no White, Black, Hispanic, just French.” If Lucie’s statement reads true and all of France’s citizens are “French” then there must be a universally accepted definition of a “French” person.

In 2004, the French government made a political move that made very clear who was and who was not considered “French.” In a law that was later named the “Burqa Law,” the French government made it illegal for school-aged Muslim girls to wear their Burqas within any school building in the country. The government claimed that it was a measure taken to “liberate women from religious sexism in France,” (opendemocracy.net). Good thing women don’t have agency and need male policy makers to “liberate” them. Those in opposition to the law stated that it was impeding on the religious freedom set forth by French revolutionaries in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and even the Terror. Then again, the secularist French could argue that the Declaration was for the Rights of Man.

In protest of the Burqa Law, several women stood their ground before the Notre Dame Cathedrale clad firmly in their Burqas. Drawing media attention, one of the women stated in an interview with CBN World News, “God willing, I am going to continue wearing this. We are free to practice our religion because it is our democratic right.” Conclusion: A “French” person is not Muslim.

A similar protest against French secularism made its presence known during the class’ time in Paris. A law was being debated to legalize gay marriage. Millions of protesters with pink and blue flags took part in a silent vigil on a bridge over the Sein. They lit luminaries and their flags depicted the nuclear family model – man, woman, boy, girl. The perfect “French” family. It is has been said that gay marriage has been one of France’s biggest social reforms since 1981

with the abolishment of the death penalty (reuters.com). Though Francois Hollande signed the bill into law May of 2013, making France the 14th country to allow gay marriage, it was very clear that the majority of the secular population was outraged. Millions protest the law to this day. Conclusion: A “French” person does not identify as gay.

Though extremely different in nature and approach, the socialist concept of French citizenship outweighing ancestry and birthplace is reminiscent of the neo-Nazi and Nazi movements of the first and second World Wars. The premise of these movements was that the aesthetic of a country’s people is more important than the lives of the people. To be German was to be “Aryan.” Everyone knows what happened shortly after. To imply that France would make genocidal strides to ensure the safety of its fundamentalist aesthetic is ridiculous, however the core principle is the same.

During the class’ trip to the “African Quarter,” Lucie gave the Global Connections course another glimpse at France’s “racial democracy.” As our guide lead us through streets overflowing with brilliantly colored store fronts and regionally specific markets, Lucie pointed out, “there are no flags. Just French flags.” She was right. From “Chinatown” to “Little India” to the “Algerian Quarter,” there was not a single flag that depicted the heritage of the residents. This brought about the question of whether the absence of flags was socially constructed over time, or forcefully instilled by French nationalist governments? What was perhaps more strange was the fact that while none of these culturally diverse regions flew the flags of their ancestors, the regions were very distinctly cut out from the great map of France to become the “Little India,” “African Quarter” and “Chinatown.”

The third glimpse of France's claim to "racial democracy" came in the form of a flippant guide named Eric. Earring clad and boisterous, Eric was the class' Toulousian guide. A professor at Dickinson University in Toulouse, he proved to know much about the city's history and landscape as well as many of its residents. On one outing to the Cathedrale Saint-Etienne de Toulouse, Eric ran into two of his students from the University. One of them was white, the other black. The white student took a look at Eric leading around a large group of beautiful, intelligent women from Agnes Scott and spoke in a common form of French the class did not understand. The black student then smiled in response and spoke hastily in French. After parting company, Eric turned to the group laughed, and asked if we had any idea what they said, the class nodded no. "Well, the white one said you were sexy, and the black one...erm, in France we don't have words like 'African American' or 'Native American' you're just black."

No flags, no Burqas, no gays, no race in census, no politically correct terms, but definitely a cultural mosaic, a pure racial democracy. While terms for diverse groups of people in the United States are in a constant state of change, no matter the term, there is always a sense of where one has come from. Arguably in the U.S. there seems to also be a national sense of respect, a want to address a person they would like to be addressed. As ancestry is shunned in France, it is no wonder respect for a person's history is neglected.

The final instance of "racial democracy" came at a pristine location - the Museum of Colonialism. The Musée de l'immigration in Paris stood in a foreboding manner atop a hill. On the outside are carvings of the many cultures France colonized. What was striking however was that the people all looked content, almost happy to be carrying goods to and from a ship under the orders of a master. Upon entering, the class was lead upstairs where we were met by a slightly ginger and slightly nervous museum employee. After Lucie informed the gent that we

were English speakers who understood French he seemed relieved as he didn't speak any English. Statistics and information regarding the history of the museum were interrupted at uneven intervals by Lucie trying desperately to translate. "The museum was started in an effort to erase French Colonialism. To erase the past and to highlight the benefits of colonialism."

After exchanging sideways glances with each other, the class was given some time to explore the museum at which time one of the students turned to Dr. Stamant and asked, "Are the Colonialism Erasers next to the Giant pencils in the store? More like white out." How is it possible for an entire museum –complete with an aquarium- be solely devoted to covering up colonialism, let alone looking at the positive aspects of this horrific form of commerce and dominance? Why don't they just call it "Imperialism: The Golden Years?" On the ground floor of the museum a grand portrait of French colonialism. Etched on all four walls were the French motto "Fraternity," "Equality," and finally "Liberty." The irony.

While The Global Connections class was able to physically see the many different cultures that make up the French Mosaic, France's claim to being a "racial democracy" is debatable. From the get go many of the students were unsure as to what the French mosaic would depict, but it is safe to say the image is transparent to us now – "racial democracy" is in quotes for a reason. The mosaic of France was and continues to be a picture of imperialism.

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