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GA203- France: A Cultural Mosaic

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Speaking Out Through Street Posters

Coming from the United States, we have become accustomed to cultural diversity, especially through our experiences at Agnes Scott. From our course, France: A Cultural Mosaic, I was expecting to find similar occurrences in France. However, that was not the case. This was first brought to my attention in our lecture on immigration with our historian, Seloua, on our first full day in Paris when she told us that once a person immigrated to France, they were expected to disown their original nationality and fully accept French nationality and culture. From this point on in the trip, I made it my mission to find examples of people breaking that norm of acceptance. The main way I saw any kind of dissent against the idea of being the perfect Parisians was through street posters. In this paper, I will discuss two different pieces of street posters, the importance I saw in each for multiculturalism in France, and how I saw that multiculturalism acted upon while in France.

The two posters described are both products of the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste, NPA. Established in 2009, the NPA is a political movement to break with capitalism and put an end to sexism and racism.¹ They wish to see a more feminist and ecologically friendly democracy formed. The NPA works directly against what they see as the “right” and “far right” within the European Union.

¹ “Qui sommes-nous?,” *Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste*, 22 septembre 2008, <http://www.npa2009.org/node/24>.

Racism



Racism

The NPA takes a strong stance against racism in France. On their website they cite specific examples of racism that is shown across the country, and though I took this picture in Paris, there are examples of this poster along other streets across France. Along with the photo the NPA states, “Nous dénonçons la propagande réactionnaire, raciste et xenophobe, homophobe qui arme le bras des agresseurs.”² I believe it is important for these statements to be on the streets of Paris, because even though France claims to be progressive in anti-discrimination, which is not what I saw while in France.

During one of our walking tours, Lucy brought up the subject of discrimination in France. She said that in order to eliminate discrimination, nobody is allowed to ask about race or ethnicity. I initially found this information interesting because of my history studying the European Union, and within the European Union, the member states do polling for almost every issue and policy area. In these polls, called Eurobarometers, the results are broken down by state, age, socioeconomic class, and education. However, they are not broken down by race or ethnicity because of the states, such as France, who will not allow that. There are, however, Eurobarometers that discuss discrimination within the states and the Union as a whole. In the 2012 Eurobarometer for discrimination, 64% of French people polled stated that discrimination on the grounds of ethnic origin was “total ‘widespread’” for France. This is the second highest result of all EU states, second only to Sweden (66%).³ That means that French citizens believe that discrimination is very widespread within their own communities. I would have to agree with that, even if I was only there for two weeks.

² “Racisme: une aggression intolérable,” *Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste*, 26 mai 2013, <http://www.npa2009.org/node/37360>.

³ “Discrimination in the EU in 2012,” *Special Eurobarometer 393*, European Commission, November 2012, page 21, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_393_en.pdf.

Something that I noticed that was interesting and that I believed needed more attention was the amount of biracial relationship being portrayed in advertising materials. In the United States, there has been recent controversy over a commercial with biracial parents. In France, that was a normal phenomenon. Even advertisements in the trains were full of biracial couples. However, I did not personally view many biracial couples in the open throughout France. This is interesting, because it seems as if France is trying to portray themselves as being racially equal and accepting, but I did not observe the same thing happening in actual life.

Just because the state does not allow people to ask about racial and ethnic diversity, it does not mean that those differences are not there. What is happening is that people are ignoring the differences. In ignoring those differences, the people of France are just adding to the discrimination. For an issue as serious as discrimination to come to light and be discussed in a manner that is meant to put an end to it, it first has to be acknowledged. Currently, the issue is not being acknowledged. What this poster, and posters like it across France, does is brings the average person's attention to the message they are trying to get across. That message is that racism is present in France and is not being dealt with. Posters such as these make it hard for the general public to ignore their message.

Gay Rights



Gay Rights

Gay and lesbian rights were the most widely discussed political issues while we were in France. According to the NPA, “Depuis plusieurs mois, on assiste à une légitimation de l’homophobie par le débat autour du <<marriage pour tous>>.”⁴ It is because of these legitimizing acts that the NPA called for a backlash including rallies and posters, like the one pictured above. However, from what I saw, the France population is still very divided on the subject of gay marriage and gay adoption, regardless of the gay marriage laws that have passed in France earlier this year.

One of the most poignant examples of this divide in France I witnessed was on the metro in Paris on the last full day that we were there. It started in the morning with anti-gay marriage stickers stuck to the window of the train. Before a woman got off the train she tried to pull the sticker off of the window. She even stayed on the bus an extra stop to see if she could finish off what was left of it. Later that day, a few of us were on the metro when a group of three people got on. While they were standing there talking, one of the men unrolled an anti-gay marriage flag that he had just received from the protests. The instant that he unrolled the flag the mood shifted on the train. Passengers sitting on the train began to stare openly at this group, some with grimaced expressions others with open enthusiasm. One woman got out of the train and the next stop and moved to a different train car. Another person asked this man where he had purchased the flag so he could get one for himself. The second that these three got off of the train, the mood went back to a normal train environment, with everyone keeping to themselves and paying nobody else any mind.

⁴ “L’homophobie n’est pas une opinion,” *Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste*, 19 avril 2013, <http://www.npa2009.org/node/36725>.

Much different from the Eurobarometer for discrimination based on ethnic origin, the Eurobarometer for discrimination based on sexual orientation is much more split. Within French citizens 46% of respondents believed that this discrimination was “total ‘widespread,’” while 44% stated that it was “total ‘rare.’”⁵ Though no longer at the head of the group, France is still 5th for the amount of people who feel discrimination on sexual orientation is prevalent within the French community, compared to the other 26 member states of the European Union. I think this split correctly aligned with the sentiments I saw while in France. Along the same line, this poster supporting gay rights was hung on streets where posters opposing gay rights were displayed as well, such as the one in the train that the woman tried to tear-off. Just as the NPA called for, the sentiments between opposing groups are battling each other directly. When one group rallies for gay rights, the other group must rally for the status-quo.

Conclusion

Though I have examples of street posters concerning both issues, it was evident which issue was more important to the people of France. This was possibly the only poster I saw throughout France calling for people to accept the fact that racism was a prevalent problem within French culture. However, there were many instances where posters and other forms of street art were present to call for the acceptance or denial of gay rights. While the French government is ignoring the problem of racism, they are directly working on the issue of gay rights. Though the difference in importance levels between the two issues could lie within historical controversies, I think it is important to point out that both are gaining attention. If not by the government or population as a whole, at least the issues are gaining recognition in some form of public communication.

⁵ “Discrimination in the EU in 2012,” *Special Eurobarometer 393*, European Commission, November 2012, page 22, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_393_en.pdf.

Works Cited

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