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Mayanthi L. Fernando, *The Republic Unsettled: Muslim French and the Contradictions of Secularism*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2014. 313 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$94.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8223-5748-3; \$27.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-8223-5748-3.

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In the first of three “field notes” that interleave *The Republic Unsettled*, Mayanthi Fernando recounts a tense exchange between two members of the Stasi Commission, a government panel tasked with studying the question of *laïcité* in public schools, and a small group of Muslim French students.[1] The January 2004 conference at the Université de Paris II featured commission head Bernard Stasi and sociologist Jacqueline Costa-Lascoux. Both situated the Commission’s work squarely in the French secular tradition and framed its recommendations in the language of universalism, feminism, and human rights. After their remarks, the moderator invited questions and comments from the audience. When Fernando’s friends, Claire and Najette, rose to ask a question, the moderator first studiously ignored them and then “sarcastically” dismissed their unspoken question, stating: “yes, yes, we know what *your* question is” (p. 31). Before other Muslim students in attendance could ask further questions, the meeting was adjourned. Fernando’s description of the 2004 exchange at the Université de Paris II captures, in many ways, the story Fernando seeks to tell about the challenges and complexities that being Muslim French pose in—and for—contemporary France.

Trained as an anthropologist, Fernando conducted nearly a decade of fieldwork in Paris, Nantes, and Rennes with Muslim political activists and associations. Informed by Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s distinction between “an object of observation” and “an object of study,” she has written both a closely observed ethnography of Muslim French life and a critical history of what she calls “secular governmentality” in France. Across six chapters, Fernando scrupulously reproduces the words and ideas of her Muslim French interlocutors in order to foreground how they conceive their citizenship, faith, identity, and place in France and Frenchness. She also reconstructs the history, theory, and contemporary practice of “secularism” in modern France, and in particular the political and discursive limits it imposes on being “Muslim French.”

Fernando’s critical historical and ethnographic project is vital precisely because anxieties over postcolonial immigration have provoked an obsession with national identity in contemporary France. Juridical and sociological debates over the 2005 *banlieue* uprisings and Muslim sexual pathology, Nicolas Sarkozy’s national conversation about French identity, and obituaries of France and the French republic penned by the Zemmours and the Finkelkrauts: the French cannot stop talking about what it means to be French. Such debates unfailingly feature Islam, its compatibility with republican institutions, and its place in France as a central preoccupation. State policy, social science, republican legal theory, and the media have coalesced around the question of Islam’s compatibility with a purportedly secular France, a convergence that has circumscribed a difficult, even paradoxical, terrain for French Muslims to inscribe and describe themselves as French.

Fernando terms this constellation of social forces, state policy, and intellectual debate “secular governmentality,” and she draws from the work of Michel Foucault, Talal Asad, Saba Mahmood, and others to understand *laïcité* not as a descriptive term but as a particular theory and technique of French republican governance (p. 20). Classical social theory portrayed secularism as a form of disenchantment, a modernist project that disentangled self, power, and politics from God. French republicans, for example, understand *laïcité* as simultaneously a normative feature of modernity and a crucial requirement for juridical and civil *égalité*, and it emerged as one of the key grounds for thinking about the republican politico-social subject’s equality. This right—to define the bounds of the republican subject—constitutes secularism’s true power, and contemporary efforts to incorporate and discipline Muslims into an *Islam de France* are consistent with secular governmentality’s historical emergence and practice (pp. 121-2).^[2] *The Republic Unsettled* traces a doubled, yet interconnected narrative: it historicizes the republican state’s efforts to discipline Muslim citizens into “proper” citizenship, and it follows how Muslim French challenge *laïcité*’s strictures in order to articulate their citizenship and faith on and in their own terms.

The Republic Unsettled’s six chapters, organized into three parts each introduced by a “Field Note,” combine rich ethnographic detail with a complex historical and theoretical argument. Chapters one and two focus on Muslim French social and political activists and explore, through the reflections and theorizations of the activists themselves, Muslim French efforts to craft forms of social and political citizenship that link their Islamic faith to their republican citizenship. The state’s effort to differentiate secular and holy space in Paris’s Goutte d’Or neighborhood and the foundation of the Institut des Cultures d’Islam (ISI) constitutes the focus of chapter three. Chapters four, five, and six turn to the relationship between Islam, and gender and sexuality. Chapter four centers on Muslim French women’s refashioning of concepts of freedom that move beyond secularism. Chapter five turns to the *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* movement and how its carceral feminism intersects with ongoing forms of secular governmentality. The final chapter examines tolerance’s intersection with forms of state discipline and how the injunction that Muslims uncritically accept liberal norms not only casts them as exceptional and extra-European, but displaces liberalism’s internal contradictions. Rather than summarizing each chapter in turn, the balance of this review will follow Fernando’s overarching arguments, in particular her analysis of secular governmentality and her account of Muslim French efforts to fashion their own modes of being French, in order to better discuss and illuminate the theoretical sophistication and empirical wealth of her remarkable book.

Central to *The Republic Unsettled* is a genealogy of secular governmentality in France and a close attention to both its institutional force and its capacity to make and unmake socio-political subjects. Fernando tracks the state’s efforts to regulate and assimilate Muslims and secularism’s entanglement in forms of national and political belonging. While proponents cast secularism as a defensive principle that bars communitarian and sectarian interests from shaping state policy, Fernando shows that *laïcité* permits and perhaps even compels the state to intervene in religious matters. Fernando suggests that, “modern power does not always seek to homogenize or obliterate difference, it also ‘works effectively through institutionalized differences... disaggregating subject populations in order to better administer them’” (p. 19).^[3] Secularism, in other words, requires that the state assiduously observe and cultivate religious faith. And, seemingly in contravention of republicanism’s own principles of universalism and liberty, in the name of *laïcité* the French state divides out its postcolonial populations and implements protocols for their observation, regulation, and assimilation. *Laïcité*, in other words, comprises a powerful tool for managing and incorporating heterogeneous subjects into republican forms of governance.

Despite its purported universalism, *laïcité*’s history is riven with inconsistencies, incongruities, and antinomies, exceptions that are key to its techniques of power. “The fragmentary and unsettled nature of republican secularism,” Fernando argues, “does not diminish its power but rather enhances it through a continual process of reiteration, rearticulation, and regeneration” (p. 12). She reminds us that, since the

Revolution, the only way the secular state could function was to continually fashion exceptions to its own rules in order to integrate religious institutions and practices into the state's ambit. Secularism actually required, not benign neglect, but close monitoring and cultivation of religious practice (p. 11).^[4] Since the Napoleonic era, the French state has liaised with national councils of Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish leaders, in order to grant religious bodies official representation before the government and to establish limits on civil religious practice. Since the early twentieth century, the French state has sought an analogous arrangement with France's Muslim populations, but the fact that Sunni Islam, which eschews a formal clerical hierarchy, constitutes the predominant form of Muslim belief in France has hampered the state's initiatives. While Interior Minister, Sarkozy prioritized the formation of a permanent body to represent France's Muslims and in 2002 he oversaw the creation of the Conseil Français du Culture Musulman (CFCM). The CFCM, Fernando suggests, represents one element in a broader strategy to cultivate an Islam deemed "commensurable" with French republican values (pp. 121-2).

Fernando suggests that questions of compatibility and propriety are signal concepts for the various state and civil projects that aim to elaborate and disseminate an *Islam de France*. In this context, "proper" denotes an Islamic faith and practice that is disentangled from public space and politics, and limited to the proper realm of private and personal faith. In other words, it is an Islam that is in line with the central tenets of modernist secularism. "Propriety," and secular governmentality more generally, encompass both punitive and productive forms of discipline, in order to discourage forms of faith judged inimical to republican values and to encourage (and incorporate) those forms thought compatible with secular principles. Thus the state funds and encourages Islamic cultural institutions and supervises the construction of new mosques while it simultaneously monitors Muslim citizens, imams, organizations, and mosques. Combined, these twinned forms of discipline demarcate a limited ideological and national space in which one can be both Muslim and French.

The foundation of the Institut des Cultures d'Islam (ICI) in Paris's immigrant Goutte d'Or neighborhood provides a case study in the twin practice of spatial and cultural regulation. Conceived as part of Paris mayor Bertrand Delanoë's *vivre ensemble* campaign, the ICI hosts programs and events that highlight the cultures and arts of Islam, and opens cultural practices like the *hamman* and religious rituals such as the *iftar* to non-Muslims. Yet Fernando shows that the ICI is as much disciplinary space as a cultural one, as it has worked to "transform Muslim habitus" through the aestheticization of religion (p. 125). At the ICI, faith is subordinated to culture, and religious difference is translated into cultural difference, both "proper" forms of difference "commensurable" with Frenchness (p. 120). In the ICI's work of translating Islam into the "aesthetics of modernity," the ICI also comprised part of the city's efforts to regulate Muslims' use of public space (p. 125). It took over a busy Goutte d'Or mosque where Friday prayers "insalubriously" spilled into the street. Paris officials were anxious to reestablish the "proper" order between the secular space of the street and the holy space of religious devotion, and the ICI's construction displaced the Goutte d'Or mosques to a former barracks some ways away across the Périphérique, where prayer was confined inside and out of public sight (p. 124). More than a cultural institution, the ICI helped regulate the proper dissemination of ideas and the proper arrangement of bodies and spaces.

Fernando's account of the French political establishment's official celebration and promotion of Fadela Amara's and Loubna Méliane's *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* (NPNS) movement in chapter five charts secular governmentality's effects in a different register. For Fernando, NPNS's feminism is carceral as it is allied with state power, particularly judicial and police power, and it calls on the state to "save" Muslim women from Muslim men, cast as the bearers and enforcers of a violent and sexually pathological culture (p. 201). Fernando shows how the alliance between female critics of "Islamic culture" like Amara and Méliane and state power repeats a colonial logic—from *sati* to colonial education to debates over female genital mutilation—in which white European men, the bearers of universal culture, must save the colonized female from male sexual violence, which indexes the pathology and barbarism of the

colonized's culture writ large (p. 197). Intervention--first through colonial regimes, now through state discipline--is justified through the defense of women's bodies, and the distinction between European civilization and non-European savagery is reinstated. In a parallel move, the figure of the hypersexual and violent Muslim male comes to stand in for *all* male violence. Broader patterns of male sexual and gender violence, the continuity of patriarchal institutions, and the persistence of sexual and gender inequality--hardly unique to Muslim culture or societies--are "deferred and displaced" onto pathologized and particularized Muslim bodies (p. 6).

Ni Putes Ni Soumises repeats colonial logics in other key ways, in particular how it marks out the contours of an "exceptional" female Muslim subject capable and deserving of incorporation into the French body politic. Like the *évolué* of an earlier era, today's *évoluée* proves the universalism of the republican state even as it sets the parameters--feminine, secular, and modern--of an acceptable Muslim female identity. Both Amara and Méliane, Fernando points out, reflect modern French ideas and images of femininity and feminine sexuality, and yet in media and political discourse both remain figured, despite their lack of faith, as Muslim feminists. Their "commensurable difference" must be maintained, Fernando argues, because "discursively and ideologically...republicanism produces and depends on commensurable forms of difference" (p. 192).^[5] Yet universalism's affirmation must always be "in transition:" "These women's difference must be overcome in order to fulfill citizenship's universal promise, but in fact it cannot ever be overcome: the universality of secular-republican citizenship depends on that moment of transition" (p. 218). Fernando argues that forms of Muslim difference that narrowly accord to secular norms are figured as commensurable, a sanction that both delimits the acceptable bounds of Muslim identity and mobilizes women's bodies as the terrain on which to construct and reconstruct the republic.

Secular governmentality delineates a proper Muslim French subject through repression and cultivation. It posits commensurable and incommensurable forms of being Muslim in France, with the promotion of "exceptional" forms used to justify the disciplining and exclusion of those deemed deviant. *Laïcité* as state policy and discourse mobilizes a series of antagonistic dichotomies--secular/religious, citizen/immigrant, universal/communal, choice/constraint, autonomy/authority, tolerance/intolerance--to set the *a priori* grounds of socio-political discourse. These dichotomies construct a public sphere and interpellate a subjectivity that severely constrains Muslims' ability to carve out a Muslim French identity because, in its most important disciplinary technique, the terms of *laïcité* are placed outside the realm of debate.

But as Fernando recounts, contemporary Muslim French activists refuse to concede the terms of the debate. They overtly and implicitly contest secular governmentality's disciplinary power. An additional strength of *The Republic Unsettled* is its centering of French Muslim articulations of their own forms of political subjectivity, national belonging, and faith and piety. Other scholars have described the clash between secular state and religious citizen, but Fernando's group ethnography of young Muslim activists emphasizes the depth and complexity of France's diverse Muslim population. The portrait that emerges is of a generation of politically savvy activists who recognize the strategic necessity of framing their demands--for rights, for identity, for civic status--within those terms most legible to the French state even as they challenge how such terms narrow political and social discourse in France. In the course of her conversations and interviews with Muslim French activists and students, Fernando tracks the push and pull between Muslim demands to be treated like "banal" citizens and their belief that being pious means that their ethical and political commitments cannot be disentangled from their faith. She insists that in the act of navigating, reworking, and appropriating these strictures for their own purposes, Muslim French are engaged in the practices at the heart of the republican project.

The chapter, "The Republic is Mine," looks at how faith and public religiosity differentiate her interlocutors from the *beur* activists of the preceding generation. As an identity, Fernando reminds us that *beur* was "purposefully secular, formulating its relationship to the Islamic tradition as a cultural

attachment rather than a religious or ethical one,” and that *beur* activism foregrounded “ethno-cultural,” rather than religious difference (p. 38). The young activists gathered in the Jeunesse Musulmans de France (JMF), the Union de Jeunesse Musulmans (UJM), and the Etudiants Musulmans de France (EMF), broke from previous generations of Maghrebi and immigrant activists by insisting that their identity as French citizens and as devout, practicing (and not just cultural) Muslims is inseparable.

While *beur* activism privileged campaigns for equality and against racism, the second-generation activists are as concerned with Islamic piety, reform, and education as they are with civic and political activism. Inspired by writers and reformers like Tariq Ramadan, who urge a combination of Islamic reform and civic and political engagement in order to enunciate a distinct European Muslim identity, younger activists in the JMF and UJM, like Mohammed and Younès, “treat Islam as an authoritative source of disciplinary practice and reject the separation between public politics and private faith that is so central to secularism” (p. 40). Born and raised in France, culturally and socially French, they reject the supposed antipathy between Frenchness and Islam and insist that there is nothing remarkable about being both Muslim and French. France, after all, is “their *bled*” and in their estimation Islam is not only part of their identity, but part of *French* identity (p. 62). As Fernando recounts, younger Muslim French insist that their faith cannot be separated from their Frenchness or from their ethical and political praxis.

Fernando argues that Muslims in France are paradoxically both invisible and hyper-visible. The intense focus that politicians, academics, and since 9/11, security services have directed toward France’s Muslim population has made French Muslims hyper-visible socially, a visibility that Islamic religious practices, from veiling to the *salat*, reinforce. Yet politically and socially Muslims are invisible as they do not, *as Muslims*, possess civic or political standing. To counter their simultaneous conspicuousness and erasure, Muslim French demand what Fernando calls a “right to indifference” (p. 70). In their demand to this right, Muslim French call on the principle of *égalité* central to republican political and social theory even as they refuse to concede that Islam must comport to French concepts of “proper” religiosity. Activist Houria Bouteldja phrased this demand to Fernando as, “on veut le droit d’être *banal*,” while Younès, a member of the Collectif Musulmans de France, expanded: “If one is a French citizen of Muslim faith, that means that all spaces of dialogue, of debate, of social transformation—all these spaces concern us” (pp. 79–80). Muslim French demand the right to be French citizens plain and simple, for their political and civic engagement to be considered as “banal” as the work of other French. Fernando proposes that what is provocative and unsettling about Muslim French activism is that that they “[reconfigure]—indeed, unsettle and resettle—France into a robustly cosmopolitical entity, writing themselves into its past, present, and future” (p. 96). By linking together Muslim and French, Fernando argues they pose an immanent critique that challenges French “universality” and Muslim “particularity” to show the already-existing multiplicity of France (p. 98).

In later chapters like “Reconfiguring Freedom” and “Asymmetries of Tolerance,” Fernando prominently features Muslim French voices in her discussions of veiling and accusations of Muslim intolerance. While Fernando neither condones nor condemns every aspect of their thinking, she insists that attending attentively to Muslim French and their contestation of the terms of secular governmentality lays bare the limits and internal contradictions of the French republican project. Fernando argues that Muslim French conceptions of choice and constraint, autonomy and authority, tolerance and acceptance, and self and social norms, expose the antinomies at the heart of the French, and European, liberal tradition and consider community, nation, culture, religion, and subjectivity in new and productive registers.

In chapter four, for example, Fernando looks at the dialectic between choice and constraint, autonomy and authority, around the question of veiling. Whereas French educators, policymakers, and many feminists insist that veiling can only be a sign of submission and that Muslim women veil only under duress or coercion, Muslim French women like Héra, Amira, Héléne, Zeynep, Nawel, and others insist

that choosing to veil is a complicated and deeply spiritual decision. The women Fernando interviewed emphasized that they did not take the step lightly and that it took years of prayer, study, and contemplation before they chose to veil. For Muslim French women, to be pious was a choice, but once they chose piety, they believed they were obligated to live and practice that piety. As Fernando phrases it, “the headscarf, like other practices, is both a choice and, importantly, an obligation, a divine prescription incumbent on all Muslim women. The choice here lies in whether or not to accept the obligation of veiling” (p. 157). Further, for the women, piety became central to their subjectivity; drawing on the work of Saba Mahmood, Fernando states that for the women she interviewed, “the headscarf is not just a sign of one’s modesty but also, fundamentally, an ethical practice...the veil becomes essential to its wearer’s sense of self” (p. 161). Fernando argues that secular republicans could not understand the nuance in her interlocutors’ arguments, their concepts of ethics, autonomy, coercion, and self, because they could not conceive forms of subjectivity in excess of liberal concepts of autonomy and authority.

Similar dynamics are at work in the common accusation that French Muslims refuse to extend tolerance to others. In chapter six, Fernando notes an “asymmetry of tolerance,” in which Muslims are enjoined to tolerance, but this injunction is not extended to those deemed European. For example, Fernando describes how abortion and homosexuality divided Muslim members of the Collectifs Féministes pour l’Egalité (CFPE) from the collective’s non-Muslim members.[6] Asked to observe the anniversary of legal abortion and to march for same-sex marriage rights, the women asked for time in which to discuss and reflect on if and how they, as devout Muslims, could support or condone abortion and homosexuality. Talking with her informants, Fernando stresses that what the women requested was time for discernment, and that many were genuinely troubled and torn, with one woman describing herself as at an impasse. Following extensive self-discernment and self-questioning about their commitments to Islam and to *respect de l’Autre*, most concluded that as Muslims they could tolerate, but not condone abortion and homosexuality. Yet, despite following the principles and practice of liberal tolerance, non-Muslim members of the collective accused the women of hypocrisy and intolerance.

More sinisterly, European writers and politicians cast Muslim intolerance as a grave civilizational threat, even while forms of intolerance rooted in European traditions—such as the *Manif pour tous* demonstrations against marriage equality—are deemed compatible with European values. Ironically, contemporary European liberal demands that European Muslims practice tolerance instantiates the very illiberal intolerance that liberals purport to denounce, as they command Muslims to accept without question practices that their religion proscribes. Fernando compellingly demonstrates that to label Muslim French as intolerant reverses the classic Lockean definition of tolerance—that states should allow minority religious practice—and papers over the internal contradictions and antinomies of liberalism’s own conception of tolerance. It also occludes Muslims’ powerlessness in France and in Europe. Criticisms of purported Muslim intolerance mask the structural marginalization of European Muslims, and deny standing to Muslim social, political, and religious-ethical claims, and justify the deferral or outright denial of Muslims’ claims to citizenship. European Muslims thus are suspended in the double-bind Fernando described in chapters one and two, called on to repudiate their faith to guarantee their citizenship, a summons that will never—and, as a core technique of secular governmentality, must never—be closed.

Impeccably researched, theoretically sophisticated, carefully constructed, and beautifully written, what few critiques I have of *The Republic Unsettled* are minor. I found Fernando’s argument linking neoliberalism to secular governmentality one of the few unconvincing moments in the book. I also wondered why Francophone critics of French cultural universalism from the Caribbean, Africa, and the Hexagon were—with the notable exception of Frantz Fanon—mostly absent from the book’s extensive theoretical apparatus. Yet such criticisms only serve to underline the book’s qualities. As an account of Muslim life in contemporary France, it supplements and expands on the work of Joan W. Scott, John Bowen, Naomi Davidson, and others; and as a critique of French universalism it rests comfortably

alongside works by Gary Wilder, Etienne Balibar, and Eric Fassin. In short, *The Republic Unsettled* fulfills its promise to be both an “an object of observation” and “an object of study.”

What most struck me while reading *The Republic Unsettled* is how much has happened in France in the dozen-odd months since it was published: the tumultuous events of *Charlie Hebdo*, the Bataclan attacks, and France’s unprecedented state of emergency. Fernando’s book anticipated the burden, both representational and disciplinary, under which France’s Muslims labor, and the extraordinary and exceptional position they are made to play in the republican imagination. Upon reaching the final page, I was left wondering what her interlocutors are thinking, feeling, speaking, and doing in this moment of increased surveillance and securitization. How have heightened tensions in France made being Muslim French that much more difficult? How do Muslim French think and live this new political and social reality? Do they remain committed to the project of reconciling their faith and their Frenchness, or has a more pessimistic note set in? Selfishly, I hope Fernando might follow up with an essay or some interviews with her friends and informants to illuminate what being Muslim French means in the present state of emergency. For the questions Fernando poses in *The Republic Unsettled* about liberal secular-republican institutions and Muslim French life seem more urgent than ever.

NOTES

[1] Following Fernando, I will use *laïcité* when referring to the French secular tradition, and secular when referring to secularism more generally.

[2] The category “Muslim” in France is, of course, a capacious term that describes all peoples who originate from Muslim majority regions, whether they are practicing Muslims or not.

[3] Fernando here quotes Talal Asad.

[4] Fernando points out that locales including Alsace, Guiana, and Mayotte have, for both historical and pragmatic reasons, special rules and laws governing the relationship between state and faith.

[5] Fernando draws here on the work of Gary Wilder, and particularly his argument about the “antinomy” inherent to republicanism’s dual universalist/particularist logic.

[6] CFPE was a feminist group that emerged in 2004 to unite feminists of diverse backgrounds and which opposed the *loi de voile*.

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