

‘It is forbidden to speak Breton and to spit on the ground’: Internal Racism, Diasporas and Regionalisms in Modern France

Nathan Gleyses

University College Cork

Outside of the academic world, the perception of France as a country that was practically the founder of a political open-mindedness followed by equitable democracy, pleonasmic phrasing to talk about a system which aims to ‘leave no one behind’, remains strongly anchored in the common world culture. This sort of collective presumption first of all tends to fade away, especially in the recent years which brought to light studies exacerbating rampant authoritarian tendencies in the Hexagon¹, and second of all completely veils the dark past of French intellectual history in regards to race and racial hierarchy. By the latter, one can emphasise the indubitable contribution that French intellectuals of the modern period, be they writers, philosophers or politicians, effectively put in place in the history of philosophical, scientific and political racism.

Despite other European testimonies of phrenological experiments, like those of William Bally’s 1832 collection of skulls which could have been used as a means of teaching in universities,² French intellectuals can be said to have operated a shift from racism as a mere and simple constatation of the existence of other races to racism as an organised ideology of hierarchisation of humans in races, thus conceptualising a model for the use of future generations. That is to say, not a racism solely based on the belief of the existence of different races within mankind, but an imperative to subdue and control other ‘inferior’ civilisations, presumably because their genetics would entice them to persevere in this inferior state.³

This essay will attempt to show that, given this state of affairs, this historical French racism has been the quintessential tool of the modern French state to assert its one and undividable nature on every parcel of its territory, going headlong into what it thought to be a danger for stability: regional cultures, languages and sometimes even the very individuals that composed this national mosaic. Firstly this was achieved through the implementation of a judicial arsenal, followed by a scholarly banishment of languages and regional studies and cultural productions which did not meet this agenda of unity under a single nation; this will be addressed in the first part of the essay. Secondly the general portrayal made of these interior minorities and of their population movements into bigger cities will be examined, emphasising the various methods of demonisation to which they were subjected in society.

Repression in legal structures and academic isolation: a discriminatory state in nature

If the French Revolution as a whole did indeed aim to bring about an ideal of freedom and equity among all members of the social order, which it did with the clear indication that “all men are born and remaining equal and free before the law”,⁴ it also brought along a certain idea of unity which trespassed upon the free will of the people to use whatever language they preferred. The French language is branded as becoming the “one and only language of France” and thus becomes the language of all

¹ H. Delzangles, S. Platon, L. Puech, “Dérive Autocratique : Mode d’Emploi”, in *La résistance du système juridique français face à un potentiel choc autoritaire*, Les Verts / Alliance Libre Européenne, July 2022.

² A. Cliff, *Coming home: Bally’s miniature phrenological system*, Science Museum Group Journal, Spring 2014.

³ C. Guillaumin, *Aspects latents du racisme chez Gobineau*, Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie, vol. 42, p. 145 - 158, January - June 1967.

⁴ First article of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, 1789.

administrations across the country.⁵ In 1789, it is estimated that only 15-20% of the population spoke French natively. Therefore, the mission of the new government appears clear: in a tentacular effort to instigate the revolutionary spirit through language, local institutions must abide by the implementation of this linguistic prerogative. Centralisation marches on, unstoppable. A study initiated by clergyman and Abbé Grégoire marked a very perceptible feeling that pre-empted similar work on regional cultures and languages throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. The title of his final report, handed in to the government in 1794, "*On the necessity to annihilate patois and universalise the use of the French language*", and his questionnaire aimed at "understanding the customs of the countryside people". Grégoire's work brought to light two central notions in the dynamic of the new Republic that would be the backbone of repression on regionalisms. Firstly was the immutable use of one language, that being French; secondly, the clear process of an 'othering' campaign: "us, who are the respectable revolutionary Parisian society, governing and knowing what is best for the birth of a nation, versus them, reactionary, backwarded and ignorant people of the Provincial countryside".

This hostility towards regional studies and towards determination of localities would have dramatic consequences in the cultural lives of the French Province. When it came to education, pupils from Occitania, the Basque Country, Alsace and other regions without French as a majority language were forbidden to speak in their native tongues at school, from the mid-1850s on. The most saddening, albeit representative, instance of this was in Brittany, where practically every school held placards on the walls next to playgrounds stating: "It is forbidden to speak Breton and to spit on the ground", not so subtly making pupils understand that their native language was not even worthy enough to be called one. To make a language go extinct, first divide its society: this is the exact method that the Parisian government followed. In 1850, it is estimated that the five biggest cities of Ile-et-Vilaine region held literacy rates in French three times as high on average than other villages of the département.⁶ In other terms, rich families were helped in acquiring the means to become respectable citizens, while more modest families were left aside to an inefficient integration.

In Toulouse, Southwestern part of the country, revolutionaries took the decision to close the Consistory of the Gay Science in 1791. It was the epicentre of Occitan poetry and philology whose activity had not ceased since its opening in 1323. Despite its re-opening a couple of decades later, the Southwest of France was sent a message that would persist in the following century and impact the advancement of academic research.⁷ This famously occurred in the 1870s when speculations around the historiography of the Song of Roland became artificially altered by university heads. Theories surrounding the possible inspiration of the Song by Occitan oral history seemed so unacceptable that the academia of the time thought it more relevant to promote theories suggesting a German origin to the Song, despite the recent loss of Alsace and Lorraine after the Prussian War.⁸ This arguably provides a scale to the resentment felt by modern French authorities towards regional cultures, when they would prefer even to cede their heritage to foreign nations rather than to their own internal minorities. Although surprising at first assessment, this happened at a conjunction of annexations which exemplify the difficulties encountered by new regions that hardly knew where to find their space in this nation.

⁵ Robespierre, decree of the 20th July 1794 declaring public servants responsible for an exclusive communication in the language of the Kingdom.

⁶ R. Gildéa, *L'enseignement en Bretagne au XIXème siècle: l'Ile-et-Vilaine*, Annales de Bretagne et des Pays de l'Ouest, vol. 2 - 84, p. 457 - 479, 1977.

⁷ P. Dazet-Brun, A. De Pérignon, M.P. Rey, *L'Académie des Jeux Floraux. 700 ans de poésie à Toulouse.*, Cairn, 2024.

⁸ P. Escudé, *L'épopée perdue de l'Occitan... a été retrouvée.*, symposium held at the Hôtel d'Assezat, Toulouse, France, 12th January 2023.

From a rural exodus to urban moral panics

19th century France met with a plethora of unexpected yet ever-shifting causes for new instabilities. Political turmoil and inconsistency was a primary cause and illustrated in several changes of regime across the century, bringing with them revisions of entire institutions and judicial systems. Collateral damage inevitably was shared in major conflicts engendered by this French “sneeze”.⁹ As mentioned before, two annexations occurred also in the 1850s/60s, those of the Nice country and of Savoy, which brought about regional control once more and imposed new challenges to the government. Finally, the second half of the century also saw the first wave of a rural exodus that would push 120,000 new urban inhabitants into cities every year.¹⁰

Just like the flow of Algerian and Moroccan workers after them, natives from all over the province came to either Paris or other hubs of trade, economy and opportunity in search of a better life. However, just like their coreligionists of pain from Belgium, Italy or Spain, French internal minorities started being used as an endless and replaceable *main d'oeuvre* to reduce their costs. Since the countryside in France has always had a tradition of being associated with poverty, this stereotypical vision of an “internal foreigner” being dirty, poor, badly-educated and hostile to good members of society was a recurrent trope. One instance of this is perfectly embodied by the role occupied by Auvergnats in the capital. Despite them owning three major newspapers and several dozens of businesses in Paris, the “bournats” were attributed with a legend that, far from being coherent, discouraged Parisians to engage in contact with them. In the same fashion as Schrodinger’s ‘cat in a box’ experiment, either Auvergnats were going to be the death of the capital, manipulating polls and elections and stealing businesses from honest, working Parisians - not too dissimilar to how Jews were portrayed in some literary works of the time - or else they were the pinnacle of the ghettos’ squalor, laziness and parasiting. Despite Auvergnat children being in the frontline for some essential works at the time, chiefly as chimney sweepers alongside Savoyard children, the press had a certain ungratefulness towards this population and warned - in capital letters - of the arrival of 500,000 Auvergnats in Paris in 1881. This in fact accounted for the total population of their descendants, past and present.¹¹ This example conveys a clear illustration of a xenophobia that exercises in class disdain: either internal minorities are succeeding too much, frightening the local bourgeoisie in their hegemony, or they are elevated as pariahs who intentionally refuse to integrate.

This very issue of a ‘refused integration’, when in fact very little is done to effectively integrate local populations, can be seen in other cities where the dichotomy of classes is added to another form of rejection: the perpetual division between cities and the countryside. In 1851, a manifesto was released for the “eradication” of Breton immigrants in the city of Nantes, who were then accused of spreading scabies in the city, parking in ghettos and intentionally refusing to speak French.¹² Squalor as a whole is almost systematically agglutinated to the idea of an underdeveloped countryside which would threaten the cities with going backwards and ‘poisoning’ the efforts of public services to work efficiently. Again, because of their lack of opportunity and access to education in ultra-rural areas, Bretons were also seen as stupid and brutal, with no concern for common sense or proper behaviour.

Intellectual jurisprudence notwithstanding, the issue went further than simple slander of rural populations. In 1831, Prefect Auguste Romieu very seriously suggested under the July Monarchy

⁹ The original quotation being “Whenever France sneezes, Europe catches a cold”, attributed to Austrian chancellor Metternich by Eric Hobsbawm in *The Age of Capital: 1848 - 1875*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1975.

¹⁰ J. M. Mayeur, *Les Débuts de la IIIème République*, Le Seuil, Paris, 1973.

¹¹ F. Raison-Jourde, *Endogamie et stratégie d’implantation professionnelle des migrants auvergnats à Paris au XIXe siècle*, *Ethnologie Française*, vol. 10, p. 153 - 162, April - June 1980.

¹² D. Guyvarc’h, *Un manifeste de 1851 contre les immigrants bretons*, *Genèses et Trajectoires*, vol. 24, p. 137 - 144, 1996.

imposing a colonial regime on Brittany's villages and its rural world in general, leaving aside the cities, more developed and apt to acquire the urban way.¹³ The use of the word 'colonial' here in some way implies a reversed process from that examined above: it implies that the state as an entity takes into management the most deprived and therefore inferior parts of the country, to prevent this colliding of the rural and urban worlds. As explained before, this ideal failed, and diasporas of Bretons, Auvergnats and others in bigger cities are common. Despite this, the rejection of Provincial regions, ultimately undissociated from their backwarded rurality, was genuine and included a racial dimension, as illustrated by historian Michelet: "Brittany is a colony, like Alsace and the Basque Country, even more so than Guadeloupe".¹⁴

Through this comparison, phrenological vocabulary and the active attempt at putting on the same level regional populations and colonised overseas territories was profuse, thus degrading a white population to the equivalent of 'sub-races'. This sort of 'racial downgrading' of which regional populations were victims will remain a constant state of affairs across the modern period and become the main concern of a eugenicist and racist branch of the intellectual life of the country. Antimeridionalism was in this way a restricted discriminating process towards populations from the Southwest of France, also called the 'Midi' region. Hyppolite Taine, eminent historian from the first part of the 19th century, writes about Meridionals: "Seeing them rumbling and speaking, one knows their race is different to our own. They are a mix of Carlin dogs and monkeys".¹⁵ Louis-Ferdinand Céline, pillar of French literature, wrote of Toulousians in 1942: "Southern Zone, full of bastardised Mediterraneans, degenerated Narbonnoids, Arabic parasites who ought to be thrown back into the sea".¹⁶ The use of the neologism 'Narbonnoids' here refers clearly to a racial classification like those found in Gobineau's work, designating corrupt genetics through the mixing of a noble race with a lower one. Later in the text Céline continues his hostility, aimed at the regionalist literary movement of the Felibrige, historically persecuted for their academic prowess on the Occitan language, history and sub-cultures.¹⁷ Another author, Vacher de Lapouge, proposes a classification of the Midi region between 'dolichocephali' and 'brachyocephali' to illustrate a 'bastardisation' of the inhabitants of the city of Montpellier from inhabitants from Lozere and Aveyron regions, once again the most rural parts of the area.¹⁸

General conclusion

Two main paradoxes can be brought to light with the presented facts of this conundrum. Firstly, this indubitable societal discrimination lived by French internal minorities was a factor in cultural construction and provided a heritage that would not have been achieved without the migration of those "undesirables" in cities and connected hubs of the country. Notably, entire extents of French contemporary argot have been constructed with terms that, at the time, had the use of racial slurs. One can think of the word "cretin": also used in English to talk of someone with limited intelligence: the French have used it since the beginning of the 19th century to describe the inhabitants of the Savoy region.¹⁹ Secondly, witnessed concurrently to the modern period was the creation of movements of

¹³ Revue de Paris, vol. 6, July 1831.

¹⁴ A. Dupouy, *Michelet en Bretagne, son journal inédit d'Août 1831*, Horizons, Paris, 1947.

¹⁵ H. Taine, *Carnets de Voyage (1863)*, Hachette et Compagnie, 1893.

¹⁶ L.-F. Céline, *L'école des Cadavres*, Editions Denoël, 1938.

¹⁷ A. Cazennave, *Napoléon Peyrat et Montségur*, Acte des Congrès Nationaux des Sociétés Historiques et Scientifiques, vol. 134, p. 97 - 110, 2001.

¹⁸ G. Vacher de Lapouge, *Race et milieu social : essai d'anthroposociologie*, Marcel Rivière, 1909.

¹⁹ M. Meyer-Hilfiger, *Qui étaient vraiment les Crétins des Alpes ?*, National Geographic Magazine (French edition), March 2025.

solidarity between those immigrants of the interior, sometimes even in the form of organised societies for the promotion and un-demonisation of their character (see for instance Ernest Laut's Valenciennese Society of Paris).²⁰ This deduced and implied duality therefore leads to a possible application of this reasoning to the apparent hypocrisy of the French intellectual elites of the time, when in fact others praised the diversity of the country precisely because of the variety of its regions.²¹

All in all, this topic embodies a unique yet effective social dimension in answering French contemporary turmoils surrounding the topic of immigration. As can be seen, moral panic targeting immigration at a time of factually low numbers of foreign immigrants remains an ongoing and fierce machine. This matter of fact is crucial in understanding the present rhetoric of the far-right regarding immigrants: this was especially shown before the French presidential elections of 2022, when historian Gérard Noiriel did not fail to remind the French public sphere that far-right (future) candidate Eric Zemmour did not suggest anything new in terms of ideology, but rather applied old concepts to a contemporary situation also vastly exaggerated. One could almost conclude that the Bretons, Occitans and Savoyards of yesterday are the French Arabic and French Black populations of today, observing the campaign of denigration imposed by an anti-immigration and racially motivated far-right.²²

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²⁰ Homage to Ernest Laut by the Société des Amis de Panckoucke, Nord-pas-de-Calais Press Club (blog), March 2025.

²¹ A.-M. Thiesse, *Les Deux Identités de la France*, Modern and Contemporary France, Vol. 9, 2001.

²² G. Noiriel, *Le Venin dans la Plume : Edouard Drumont, Eric Zemmour et la part sombre de la République*, Editions La Découverte, Paris, 2019.

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