

Title—The Other French Exception: Virtuous Racism and the War of the Sexes in Postcolonial France

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Argument Synopsis:

In response to the economic rules of globalization, France has invented the category of the ‘French exception’—this can be seen in the continued success of the French film industry. Guenif-Souilamas’ article is focused on a negative French exception, namely the spread of a virtuous racism through the belief that there is an ongoing war between the sexes in disadvantaged suburbs. She argues that this idea is deeply rooted in French colonialism and the civilizing mission. Drawing the line of who is included in the new Frenchness and who is not echoes the labeling of the civilized and uncivilized during the colonial period. She argues that this new Frenchness resists hybridization and contamination by its internal Other, in this case its growing Muslim population. Sexism is constructed as the exclusive practice of uncivilized men, i.e. the descendants of the former colonized, leading to the belief that there is a war of the sexes happening in the suburbs, where the majority of the French Muslim population resides. Specifically, she is focused on the new archetypal figures of the ‘illegitimate’ that are being produced and used in order to maintain the status quo in the face of debates about equal rights, public policy against racism and discrimination, and new emerging French identities. These figures include: the Arab man, the veiled Muslim woman, and the secular Muslim—she refers to it as the native-immigrant-Muslim triad. Guenif-Souilamas claims that French law is postcolonial but is often applied with an unconscious colonialist notion of hierarchy.

Guenif-Souilamas highlights the paradoxes inherent in the dynamics of contemporary France. The end of industrial society brought about by globalization is thought to guarantee a high employment rate, but in reality the globalized economy had brought an end to full employment for migrant workers, making the male descendants of colonial immigrants the prime victims of racism and discrimination. The invention of an economic, political and social Europe is still very much in the making, and yet in France there is a prevalence of French ethno-nationalism that views the communities of Muslims as its opponents. Guenif-Souilamas seeks to analyze an abstract egalitarian French universalism that works as a cultural and ethnic particularism which justifies the practical and symbolic exclusion of those who do not match it perfectly. She argues that the rhetoric denouncing the spread of communalism has become a part of this negative French exception. She argues that the postcolonial population of migrants is identified as either feminine or masculine, and explores the way that Arab boys and girls are pitted against each other in terms of scholastic success and loyalty to the French republic.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- New and detestable enemy (Arab man) is the expression and invention of a quintessentially French particularism: ethno-national separatism in the name of universalism
- Fear of alleged communalism is used to justify Islamophobia and to undermine claims for equal rights to Muslims in France
- Urban landscape of France has become heavily segregated by housing policies that group people according to economic and ethnic criteria