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CULTURAL GOVERNANCE, DEMOCRATIC ITERATIONS, AND THE QUESTION OF SECULARISM: THE FRENCH HEADSCARF AFFAIR

Abstract

The aim of this article is to extrapolate the questions posed by the French headscarf affair in order to understand theoretically the dimensions of the French principles of secularism and the problems supposedly solved by the political doctrine of secularism. The claim is threefold: first, the French principle of secularism, although similar to the liberal principles of liberty, equality and neutrality, is better understood as a republican conception embedding the abstract principles of secularism in a concrete horizon of national unity and popular sovereignty; second, the French conception of secularism is to be understood and criticised with the term cultural governance, which points at the political authority and sovereign power of institutionalising and internalising the secular values in the regulation and everyday living of the French citizenry inherited in the French political tradition; and third, this mode of governing secularism produces paradoxes that alternatively could be brought into negotiation with the iterations of the Muslim girls and women wearing headscarves. These points of view challenge the conception of democracy implied in the French principles of secularism by affirming democracy as an open-ended process.

Key words: Secularism, democracy, cultural governance, religion, politics

Introduction: The French headscarf affair

On December 17th, 2003 Jacques Chirac, the President of the French Republic, commented publicly on the report handed to him a few days earlier by Bernard Stasi, the French ombudsman and commission chairman who Chirac had appointed in July 2003 to examine the application of the principle of secularism («laïcité») in the French Republic, and especially in public schools. All the children of France, whatever their background, whatever their origin, whatever their beliefs, are daughters and sons of the Republic. They must be recognized as such, in law, but
above all in fact. By respecting this requirement, overhauling our policy of integration and our ability to ensure equal opportunities at the practical level, we will restore full vitality to our nation’s cohesion. [...] We will also do this by keeping alive the principle of secularism, which is a pillar in our Constitution. It expresses our resolve to live together in mutual respect, dialogue and tolerance. Secularism guarantees freedom of conscience. It protects the freedom to believe or not to believe. It guarantees everyone the possibility of expressing and practising their faith, peacefully and freely, without the threat of the imposition of other convictions or beliefs. It allows men and women from all corners of the globe, from all cultures, to be protected in their beliefs by the Republic and its institutions. Open and generous, the Republic is the place of choice for meetings and exchanges where everyone can give of their best to the national community. It is the neutrality of the public arena which permits the various religions to coexist harmoniously (Chirac 2003).

The focal point of Chirac’s speech appears to be his emphasis that the principle of secularism plays a constitutive role for the French Republic. Furthermore, he refers to the associated ideals of protection of civil liberties by the republic, in casu the freedoms of religion and conscience and the creation of equal opportunities and a neutral public sphere for «mutual respect, dialogue and tolerance.» Thus, he conceives the principle of secularism and the associated ideals of liberty, equality and neutrality, mutual respect, dialogue and tolerance to represent the conditions of national cohesion and harmonious coexistence in the French Republic. As such, these principles work as an integral part of the French republican history, tradition and culture. In order to ensure social cohesion, the principle of secularism and the implied neutrality of the public sphere must be encouraged as the constitutive values one lives by and are worth fighting for when challenged. As Chirac explains:

There can be no toleration, under the guise of religious freedom of people contesting the Republic’s laws and principles. Secularity is one of the Republic’s great conquests. It is a crucial component of social peace and national cohesion. We cannot allow it to weaken. We must work to consolidate it. [...] The idea is not to invent new rules or move the boundaries of secularism. It is to set out with respect, but clearly and firmly, a rule we have practiced for a very long time. [...] I very solemnly proclaim: the Republic will oppose everything which divides, everything which discourages participation, and everything which excludes! The rule is «everyone together» because this places everyone on an equal footing, because it refuses to distinguish on the grounds of sex, origin, colour or religion (Chirac 2003).

In other words, the principle of secularism that is constitutive for the French Republic and integral to the republican heritage is conceived to be threatened by religious forces aiming at subsuming the national law under their own rules in their sections of society and, thus, advancing social inequality and splitting society. Against these threats and tendencies, Chirac claims the principle of secularism to be the point of reference for establishing common ground in respect of societal diversity. This principle is therefore to be implemented and reaffirmed in practice in the everyday life and routines of public institutions and workplaces, especially public schools on account of their crucial role for encouraging the republican values of neutrality, equality and liberty. Chirac thus supports the Stasi Commission’s proposal for a public school Secularity Act.
Consequently, Luc Ferry, the Minister of Education and Research, proposed January 28th, 2004 a Secularity Act applying the principles of secularism in public schools by prohibiting wearing religious signs and symbols, i.e. wearing of the Christian cross, the Jewish kippah, the Sikh turban, or the Muslim headscarf (Ferry 2004). The Act passed in the National Assembly on February 10th with a majority vote of 494 for and 36 against. It was adopted in the Senate on March 3rd with a majority vote of 276 for and 20 against; and it was supposed to take effect in the new school year, September 2004 (Loi No. 2004–228).

Although the Act prohibits the wearing of all ostentatious religious signs and symbols in public schools, it is the culmination of fifteen years of passionate public debate concerning the right of Muslim females to wear headscarves in public schools, the so-called «l'affaire du foulard.» This debate began when three Muslim girls were expelled from their school in Creil (Oise) on October 19th, 1989 (Cf. LHumanité, 2003). Several more expulsions followed over the next fifteen years. The highest French administrative court, «Conseil d'État», was asked to evaluate the cases and provide instructions, and more ministerial circulars were given to the headmasters of the public schools emphasising the principle of secularism and the ideal of a neutral public sphere.

Within these fifteen years of passionate public debate, the entire history of the French Republic and its constitutive values were repeatedly reiterated. The principle of secularism was set into the frame of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen from 1789 and the civil liberties of conscience and belief, the public debate on congregations in the Third Republic and especially the culmination in the law separating Church and State from December 9th, 1905, and, finally, the constitution of the Fifth Republic from October 4th, 1958 (Assemblée nationale 2005), e.g. the first article stating that: «France shall be an indivisible, secular, democratic and social Republic. It shall ensure the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of origin, race or religion. It shall respect all beliefs.» Thus, the core values of the French Republic and national political culture in terms of the principle of secularism, the civil liberties of conscience and belief and the neutrality of the public sphere were reproduced within the public debates regarding the right to wear headscarves in public schools, culminating with the Secularity Act. This Act and its associated stories, secular, religious, republican and feminist, are the point of reference in the article.

The aim of the article
On the basis of the French headscarf affair, this article addresses the debate on secularism and democracy in political theory. The aim of the article is to extrapolate the questions posed by the French headscarf affair in order to understand theoretically the dimensions of the French principles of secularism and the problems supposedly solved by the political doctrine of secularism. This follows the tendency in political and social theory to grant priority to democracy over secularism (Asad 2003; Bader 1999, 2003; Connolly 1995, 1999, 2005; Stout 2004; Weithman 2002). From this point of view, the
relationship between religion and politics is subject to democratic negotiations. Consequently, secularism is one of several voices in the public debates and democratic political-decision making rather than the precondition of democracy. The claim here is threefold: first, the French principle of secularism, although similar to the liberal principles of liberty, equality and neutrality, is better understood as a republican conception embedding the abstract principles of secularism in a concrete horizon of national unity and popular sovereignty; second, the French conception of secularism is to be understood and criticised with the term cultural governance, which points at the political authority and sovereign power of institutionalising and internalising the secular values in the regulation and everyday living of the French citizenry inherited in the French political tradition; and third, this mode of governing secularism produces paradoxes that alternatively could be brought into democratic negotiations, e.g. with the iterations of the Muslim girls and women wearing headscarves.

In order to support this claim, the article engages the thoughts of two political theorists who have considered the question of secularism and democracy in relation to the French headscarf affair from different perspectives. One is the French political theorist Cécile Laborde, who applies the dominant conception of secularism in political theory, the liberal secularism of the American philosopher Robert Audi, to the French case. The other is the American political theorist Seyla Benhabib, who conceives the debate from the point of view of the notion of deliberative democracy (Audi 2000; Benhabib 2002, 2004; Laborde 2002, 2005). The first section presents liberal secularism, represented by Audi and the application to the French case by Laborde, who situates the liberal principles of secularism in the French republican tradition and political context. In the second section, this contextual conception of the principle of secularism is conceived as a question of political authority and sovereign power rather than a principled matter, as in Audi’s and Laborde’s conceptions of secularism. This is done by introducing the theoretical term cultural governance, which points toward the diverse dimensions involved in the use of political authority and sovereign power in the regulation of the relationship between religion and politics. The third section engages Benhabib’s interpretation of the French headscarf affair from the point of view of the idea of deliberative democracy, especially her use of the theoretical term democratic iterations. In that sense, the structure of the article supports the steps in the threefold claim, which points at the movement from secularism as a principled matter to the democratic negotiations of the relationship between religion and politics involving the use of political authority and sovereign power, narrative strategies and democratic iterations. This will be illustrated by including materials from the French headscarf affair, the official reports on the French principle of secularism, the debates in the National Assembly and public speeches (Cf. Année 2004; Chirac 2003; Commission 2003; Ferry 2004; Loi No. 2004–228).
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Principles of secularism

The relationship between religion and politics in the French case is understood and regulated with reference to the principle of secularism («laïcité»). This follows the general tendencies in the dominant American and European discourses, where secularism constitutes the lens through which the relationship between religion and politics is viewed. Therefore, the aim of this section is to reconstruct the political doctrine of secularism as understood traditionally in political theory in general and specifically as regards the French case.

The point is that secularism forms a vocabulary and scheme of thought that claim the separation of religion and politics as institutional arrangement and individual reason – i.e. political institutions are to be organised in such a manner that they are independent and free of religion. Furthermore, this organisation of the political realm is justified by the use of secular or public reason – i.e. in order to organise a neutral political realm and take impartial political decisions based on commonly accessible reasons, one must translate religious beliefs and convictions into a common political language and, thus, not take these into consideration. In other words, one could characterise the dominant American and European discourses of secularism in terms of the institutional arrangement and individual reason separating religion and politics for the purpose of political ideals of tolerance, impartiality, neutrality and universality, liberty and equality (Audi 2000).

This dominant mode of secularism reflects the conceptual history of secularism. Etymologically and historically, secularism was an integrated part of medieval Christianity and the Reformation (Taylor 1998). However, the dominant mode of secularism as a political doctrine was forwarded in the early Enlightenment in order to establish a neutral foundation for political order and social cohesion that could settle the religious conflicts and wars and end the persecution of religious minorities, heretics and free-thinkers. One of the early Enlightenment approaches to a neutral foundation conceived the human being a rational being and, thus, demonstrated confidence that human beings could establish a neutral political order independent of religions by the use of reason. This has been the dominant approach in the articulations of secularism in political thought, historically and actually. Today, this is formulated in terms of secular reason or public reason. In this article, the dominant mode of secularism is to be presented with reference to Robert Audi’s principles of secularism because, generally, these are the targets of the actual theoretical debate on secularism (Habermas 2006; Weithman 2002) and, specifically, Cécile Laborde has applied Audi’s principles of secularism in her reconstruction of the reasons for the French ban on religious signs and symbols in public schools (Laborde 2005).

The constitutive problem of secularism is, according to Audi, «[…] how a free and democratic society can achieve an appropriate harmony between religion and politics» (Audi 2000:3). In order to solve this problem, he aims at examining whether there is «[…] a way to structure democracy in general, and in particular a way to shape the framework of moral principles appropriate to it, that leads to socio-political standards by which people of differing religious views – or none – can cooperate as citizens in
an atmosphere of mutual respect?» (Audi 2000:4). In that sense, Audi’s principles of secularism represents a response to the question of political order and social stability in a plural society divided between diverse citizens’ fundamental values and points of view, religious as well as non-religious, echoing the aim of early Enlightenment secularism. He approaches the question by focusing on principles for the separation of religion and politics to be institutionalised in a liberal democratic regime and society.

Audi combines the principles instituting political order and social cohesion with a conception of secular reason as the legitimate mode of how discourse and ethical judgment is to proceed in the public sphere. The core element for establishing and justifying moral principles for democratic government stressing a broad range of equal freedoms and liberties, protection of rights etc. is the assumption that citizens are rational, informed and capable of using secular reason. To uphold these circumstances, the strict separation of religion and politics must be reflected in the principles. By the use of secular reason, one can get at an independent ground of knowledge and justification that renders it possible to establish a moral principle without relying on religion and taking religious beliefs and regulations of life into consideration. In that sense, the idea of secular reason reflects a number of principles operating on what Audi refers to as institutional and individual levels. These principles stress the importance of the separation of religion and politics and are to be implemented in a constitutional democracy forming the political order of secularism.

The institutional principles are as follows: The first principle is labelled the libertarian principle or the principle of tolerance. According to this principle, «[…] the state must permit the practice of any religion, though within certain limits» (Audi 2000:32). The state ought to avoid interfering in religious affairs as long as they do not disturb the public order. The libertarian principle is a principle of freedom comprising freedom of religious belief, freedom of worship and freedom to engage in the practices and rituals of one’s religion. In the case of France, one could say that the libertarian principle is reflected in Article 10 of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen from 1789 and the Law of Separation from 1905. In the ‘headscarf affair’, it was argued that headscarves in the public sphere would infringe on the right of religious freedom and the protection of the liberty of conscience of others on the grounds that they are considered an ostentatious religious symbol. In that sense, they represent a threat against the public order.

The second principle is termed the equalitarian principle or the principle of impartiality. According to this principle, «[…] the state may not give preference to one religion over another» (Audi 2000:33). The aim of the principle is to secure equal opportunities so that a government or a dominating majority with a preferred religion does not violate the standards of basic liberty and basic equality. In other words, the second principle underlines the idea of equal opportunity irrespective of religion, race, ethnicity, class or gender. In the French case, the equalitarian principle refers to the reasoning of the 1905 Law of Separation, i.e. the abolition of the privileges of the Catholic Church. In the ‘headscarf affair’, headscarves also infringe on the equality of the pupils from the point of view that public institutions should be difference-blind to all religions in order to secure equal opportunities.
The third principle is referred to as the *neutrality principle*. "It says that the state should neither favour nor disfavour religion (or the religious) *as such*, that is give positive or negative preference to institutions or persons simply because they are religious" (Audi 2000:33). The neutrality principle not only comprises the relationship between religions as well as between religious and non-religious people; it also includes the policy-side in terms of *neutrality toward religion* (Audi 2000:37). The neutrality principle not only states equal freedom of religion as a fundamental value; it also attempts to facilitate equal opportunities and exercise of religious liberty. Hence, the public sphere is to be free of religious signs and symbols in order to guarantee equal treatment, i.e. the secular reasoning refers to a neutrality principle – e.g. according to the 1905 Law the official recognition of the possible social utility of religion should be put to an end. Argument was forwarded in the ‘headscarf affair’ that the recognition of headscarves would violate the principle of neutrality by introducing what was supposed to be a private matter into the public sphere.

In consequence of the principles at the institutional level demarcating the separation of political and religious institutions, Audi questions how to justify governmental coercion understood as coercion through law or policy and, especially, how to justify governmental interference in religious institutions. The point of departure is that government should not restrict the freedom of citizens; however, situations can arise in which this becomes necessary. In such a case one must formulate conditions for justifying the restrictions. The foremost point is that the person is rational and, thus, able to understand the reasons for governmental coercion and perceive its relation to liberal-democratic ideals. It is with such very reference to rational, informed persons that Audi articulates the idea of secular reason. This idea of secular reason indicates that the question of religion in politics is not merely relevant at the institutional level, but also at the individual level with respect to the role that religious considerations play in the conduct of ordinary citizens, especially in relation to religious fundamentalism. Audi tentatively responds that religious citizens prefer to live in a liberal democracy because it protects their freedom of religion and religious exercise, thereby providing optimal opportunity for their flourishing. This answer is substantiated with the two principles at the individual level, *the principle of secular rationale* and *the principle of secular motivation*. These two principles imply that the individuals reflect on the reasons for legislation and public policy so that the laws and policies do not violate the fundamental values of liberty and equality.

With Audi’s secular stance in political theory, one gets a clear example of how secularism becomes articulated around principles of separating religion and politics based on an idea of reason justifying these secular principles integrated in a democratic constitution. This point of view is underlined by the French case. The French principle of secularism generally indicates a strict separation of church and state in order to guarantee state neutrality. Thus, it refers religious affairs to be a private matter by setting airtight borders between the public and private spheres. Furthermore, as Cécile Laborde emphasises, the French principle of secularism (*laïcité*) must be understood with reference to the «Rousseauist Jacobinism» and «the founders of the Third Republic» and their aim at constructing «an independent secular ethics» associated with a
'public' identity of citizenship» (Laborde 2005:315). In other words, the strong centralised state of the sovereign monarch and its characteristics were transferred to the ideas of popular sovereignty in the revolutionary area of 1789 in order to strengthen the national unity and identity. This tendency was enforced in the Third Republic in the struggle between the Catholic Church and the Republican state on the control of education, i.e. the republican ideals of creating citizens on the basis of public values of democracy and civic symbols that transcend particular loyalties and belongings that followed the Law of Separation in 1905 (Baubérot 2004). In that sense, the public schools formed the battleground for the creation of autonomous citizens adopting ‘universal’ values of the French Republic by excluding ‘particular’ religious and other loyalties and belongings.

In addition to the above mentioned liberal principles of secularism, then, the French republican principles of secularism emphasise the collective, popular sovereignty, not just the individual reason. This includes the following principles: first, the state ought to promote a homogeneous political community and political identity, a point of identification and sense of belonging to the French people, i.e. one refers to a principle of national unity – this is historically articulated as an alternative to the Catholic Church and its power over the souls of the French people. In other words, this principle constitutes the frame for the other three principles of liberty, equality and neutrality reconstructed with reference to Audi in the sense that they are embedded in a homogeneous political community making sense of the public identity. In the ‘headscarf affair’, headscarves were considered as undermining the cultivation of such a public identity (Chirac 2003).

Second, this frame of national unity is associated with ideas of an autonomous state independent of the church and a self-governing people with common affairs and shared values, i.e. one refers to a principle of independence and self-government. With reference to these principles, one has a picture of the dominant republican conception of the principle of secularism. Wearing the headscarf was consequently conceived as granting priority to the believer on behalf of the independent and self-governing citizen.

Third, in this republican conception of the principle of secularism, the public schools are conceived as a privileged place for the promotion of the shared values in terms of the principle of secularism and the associated principles of liberty, equality, neutrality, national unity, independence and self-government. As Laborde writes, the «republican schools would promote principles of equality, mutual respect and national unity. The republican school, therefore, was conceived as a microcosm of republican political society: within its walls, children would learn to become citizens, a shared public identity that transcended their local, cultural and religious affiliations» (Laborde 2005:323). Historically, this privileged role of the public schools in the French Republic refers to the Third Republic and the struggles over the educational laws in the 1880s and the 1905 Law of Separation (Baubérot 2004). This crucial role of public schools was also the focal point in the recent French debate on prohibiting religious signs and symbols in public schools, i.e. the headscarves, because the public schools are supposed to be the neutral space in which the children are cultivated to become autono-
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mous citizens in accordance with the liberal and republican principles of secularism just mentioned (Ferry 2004).

Secularism: Cultural governance of the religion/politics relationship

If one follows the steps in the reconstruction of the French principles of secularism above, there appears to be a movement from the abstract political principles of liberty, equality and neutrality and the associated ideas of secular reason to the concrete political context. This movement appears in terms of the principles of national unity and self-government with reference to the general notions of the nation-state and the people, and in terms of the specific public institutions representing the secular values, the public schools. In other words, the abstract political principles are embedded in a specific political context adding further principles and institutions – what is labelled the shift from liberal to republican secularism. In consequence of this movement, the claim in this section is that secularism is to be conceived a political strategy within a specific political context rather than an abstract principled matter.

This understanding of secularism reflects, at a general level, the thoughts of the anthropologist Talal Asad: «Secularism is not simply an intellectual answer to a question about enduring social peace and toleration. It is an enactment by which a political medium (representation of citizenship) redefines and transcends particular and differentiating practices of the self that are articulated through class, gender, and religion» (Asad 2003:5). In other words, the question of secularism is about how secularism is articulated as a political strategy aiming at political authority and sovereign power to institute the universal principles of citizenship so that they become integrated in the self-understanding and practices of the citizens. As mentioned above, the claim in this section is that this political strategy of secularism is better understood in the terms of cultural governance than just secularism as a political doctrine because the governing of the relationship between religion and politics in the French case involves diverse cultural dimensions of the exercise of power. Informed by this theoretical term one can dig a spit deeper into the power relations between state and citizen articulated as political principles.

If one then returns to the French debate on the ban of religious signs and symbols in public schools the subject of the dispute seems to be how one must understand the national political culture of the French Republic and how to institutionalise, encourage and internalise this understanding of the French national political culture among the citizens. This is the point where the term governance enters the stage because it is not only a question of how to reiterate the French national political culture creating a narrative horizon of meaning, but also how this reiteration is institutionalised and internalised in the French citizenry and how it is thought to encourage the citizens to become autonomous. Thus, the ban on religious signs and symbols has much broader cultural
implications and institutional effects than the single law and formal principles of secularism in itself, hence cultural governance.

In order to elaborate on this term as a specific mode of political authority and sovereign power involved in the French debate on secularism, I refer to the American political theorist Michael Shapiro’s general reflections on cultural governance in relation to the exercise of power at state-level: «Especially since the nineteenth century, state representatives have been active in various modes of cultural governance, seeking to complement coercive monopolies with diverse modes of cultural containment» (2004: x). And he continues: «[…] I treat governance […] as a historical process in which boundaries are imposed, and peoples are accorded varying degrees of cultural coherence and political eligibility – not on the basis of natural divisions, but as a result of the exercise of power» (Shapiro, 2004: xvii). From this point of view, cultural governance is a use of political authority and sovereign power that over time produces identity and imposes boundaries in order to create coherence and unity in a national political culture. One could say that cultural governance grants priority to logics of identity with the ambition of creating national unity at the same time as it produces differences. In other words, the inclusion of the cultural dimensions of the exercise of power at state-level is emphasised by the relationship between inclusion and exclusion in the creation of national political culture. Shapiro uses the term bio-politics to express this specific mode of political authority and sovereign power: «To make the connection, it is necessary to treat the modern state not simply on the basis of its sovereign or external exclusions but also as a set of homogenizing practices within – as an active producer of biopolitical distinctions» (Shapiro 2004:19). This indicates that as cultural governance, a sovereign’s use of power not only regulates the citizens by formal means, but also intervenes in the entire life of the people, their way of living and their embodied points of identification crucial for their self-understanding. Thus, the authoritative horizons of meaning, the social imaginaries etc. produced by the exercise of power are integrated into the institutional frames and bio-political practices that regulate all aspects of the life of the citizenry.

This comes to the fore in the French debates on the ban: first, in how the entire history of the French Republic and its crucial values are reiterated occasioned by the question of secularism, the meaning of the French principle of secularism (laïcité) in a contemporary context and the boundaries imposed by this reiteration; second, this is shown in how the public schools form the institutional frame for practicing the principle of secularism and, thus, constitute the battleground for the regulation of future French citizens and their internalisation of the crucial Republican values embedded in French national political culture. In other words, the constitution of the French national political culture through reiteration and the cultural governance taking place in the public schools according to the Secularity Act reflect and reproduce what is considered the crucial Republican values since the French Revolution. The point is that the state-centred conception of sovereignty inherited from the French absolutist regime frames how the citizenry of the French Republic is conceived in the French political tradition and culture by the Jacobinism of the revolutionary area and the 19th century (Arendt 1963) and especially the effects it had had on the crucial role that education had in the
public discourse on secularism in the Third Republic (Baubérot 2004). In that sense, it is indirectly revitalised when the crucial values of the French Republic are questioned and the entire story of the Republic(s) since 1789 is reiterated as regards the principle of secularism creating a common understanding of the French national political culture that encourages national cohesion at a time when the nation appears split into fragments. This kind of sovereign exercise of power and regulation are what the term cultural governance aims at strengthening the analytical glance to perceive by emphasising the institutional and bio-political dimensions of governing.

In his speech quoted in the introduction, President Chirac emphasised that the principle of secularism (laïcité) is a pillar in the French Constitution and, consequently, French Republican identity; it is therefore a source of national cohesion and community. From that point of view, the French Secularity Act prohibiting religious signs and symbols in public schools is an example of cultural governance granting priority to what is conceived as constitutive values for the French Republic and national political culture. This kind of cultural governance is not only a creation of a horizon of meaning with reference to the secular values of the French Republic in terms of narratives on the citizens’ constitutional rights and liberties and the separation of religion and politics. Rather, it is also integrated in an institutional frame for bio-political practices in terms of the use of political authority and sovereign power on the regulation of the citizens’ embodied points of identification in their everyday living.

First, the secular narrative consists of the general characteristics of the French principle of secularism, neutrality in the public space, the separation of church and state, citizens’ equal opportunities and liberties of conscience and expression constituting an authoritative horizon of meaning and social imaginary of national unity. The emphasis in the French principle of secularism is on how the public space is kept free of religion in order to be neutral rather than how the citizens can exercise their freedom of religion (Gunn 2004). In that sense, it is the imagination of a neutral public space that is supposed to create national unity.

Second, the secular narrative pays attention to the special role that public schools play in the continuous reiteration of the secular values of the French Republic. The struggle about public schools has been a crucial aspect in the entire history of the articulation of the French principle of secularism from the Third Republic until today, and it is also the case in the recent public discourse on secularism (Baubérot 2004). For instance, in the law proposal Luc Ferry, the Minister of Education and Research, points out the privileged role of public schools for encouraging the secular values of the French Republic (Ferry 2004: 2). In other words, the public schools are the institutional frame for the idea of neutral public spaces making it possible for pupils and students to acquire knowledge and become autonomous citizens able to live a free life in accordance with the republican values irrespective of religious belonging, race, ethnicity, class or gender (Chirac 2003). However, the public schools are supposed to promote some specific values for how one can become an autonomous citizen rather than being neutral. They constitute the institutional frame for the implementation of the principle of secularism embedded in the secular horizon of meaning and, thus, they are an impor-
tant part of the practices of the cultural governance of secularism promoting secular values.

Third, the secular narrative conceives the Muslim women wearing headscarves to be an expression of their submission to a patriarchal religious society and social structure and, thus, of the Muslim women’s inequality imposed by religion. By prohibiting the wearing of religious signs and symbols, the aim is to (re)establish the secular value of equality. From this point of view, the French Secularity Act imposes a regulation of some citizens’ embodied points of identification in order to promote the secular value of equal opportunities for all citizens and, thus, the cultural governance of secularism includes the regulation of the subjected citizens’ embodied points of identification crucial for their self-understanding (Chirac 2003; Commission 2003; Ferry 2004). However, this kind of regulation is based on the assumption that Muslim women wearing headscarves are suppressed, but this question is hardly posed in the reports preparing the Act (cf. the next section).

To summarise, in the case of the French ban on religious signs and symbols in public schools with reference to the principle of secularism, the public schools constitute the institutional frame for the internalisation of the crucial values of the French Republic through everyday practices of learning and exercise at the same time as they are supposed to be neutral. However, what is added to this dimension of governing is that the subject of the sovereign’s regulation in the ban is the specific way of dressing among Muslim school girls and students, making their bodily marks and points of identification a matter for public scrutiny and political intervention to be cast into doubt. Thus, this influences their self-understanding and physical and psychological well-being in negative ways. In that sense, the debate is not only about how to reiterate the entire story of the crucial values of the French Republic(s) since 1789 – especially the principle of secularism – but also how a dominant narrative strategy becomes materialised as institutional frames and bio-political practices of self-governing.

Democratic iterations

Focusing on the critique of secularism included in the term cultural governance, one could pose the question whether the implementation of the French principle of secularism fulfils the aim of religious freedom and equal opportunities in order to tolerate and include differences within the republic as a coherent unity. Rather, it appears as though the exercise of sovereign power at all levels of the citizens’ life creates a very strong sense of identity that excludes differences. One could then point out how secularism produces paradoxes, e.g. it aims at inclusion with reference to an ideal of universality, but produces exclusion because of the particularity of this ideal. From this point of view, the Secularity Act could be characterised as a double exclusion. The girls wearing headscarves are not included as coming French citizens on equal terms with other children by prohibiting that they wear headscarves. Rather, from the outset, they are considered marginalised and this marginalisation is intensified by the prohibition, i.e. they are excluded twice (Balibar 2004). Thus, in order to break this vicious circle
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of exclusion they must be included on equal terms with other children by allowing them to wear headscarves, it has been claimed (Balibar 2004; Benhabib 2002, 2004; Galeotti 2002; On 2006). The aim of this section is to discuss the question, whether democracy can encourage such equal opportunities by recognising religious signs in public schools rather than prohibiting them.

In her interpretation of the French ban on the Muslim headscarf in public schools, Seyla Benhabib points out that the Muslim schoolgirls and students who were the target of the ban should have been listened to and included in the political process which they hardly were (Benhabib 2002:94–100, 2004:183–198). This situation is problematic in two ways. First, that the degree of participation and deliberation in the process was very low from a democratic point of view, and second, that the dominant cultural assumptions implied in the process expressed conservative prejudices without being challenged. In other words, Seyla Benhabib aims at combining her theory of deliberative democracy with a dynamic conception of culture and, thus, forwarding a democratic point of view that includes cultural contestation in a diverse society and the involvement of civil society in government. She expresses this double aim with the term *democratic iterations* which she describes as «repetitions-in-transformation» that «not only change established understandings but also transform what passes as the valid or established view of an authoritative precedent» when «democratic majorities re-iterate [democratic] principles and incorporate them into democratic will-formation processes through argument, contestation, revision, and rejection» (Benhabib 2004:180–181).

From this point of view, the public sphere in a democratic regime is what could be called the field of ‘democratic iterations’ where meaning is produced by interaction and contestation between narrative strategies. Benhabib’s use of the term ‘iteration’ is inspired by the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida’s conceptual elaboration on the term, pointing out how the repetition of a concept transforms the meaning or produces new meaning rather than merely representing an original meaning (Derrida 1988). The iteration often refers to a concept that has acquired an authoritative status and is associated with a given horizon of meaning, but it situates the concept in a new context addressing that which becomes recognised as new problems. In that sense, one transforms and constitutes new horizons of meaning and points of identification by reiteration reflecting what one recognises as new situations. Thus, the use of the term iteration is a challenge to any idea of fixed meaning and identity. Rather, it points out the continuous production of meaning and points of identification by telling narratives and relating these narratives to diverse circumstances that one ascribes meaning.

As regards the democratic dimension of the term iteration, the point to follow up in this section is that the production of horizons of meaning and points of identification by reiteration transpires within the public sphere in public discourse reflecting democratic political decision-making and the values of a democratic political culture; it can also change how they are evaluated and ascribed meaning. From that point of view, the public sphere in a democratic regime is constituted by the interrelations, dialogue, negotiations and contestations of peoples’ diverse iterations and, thus, it could be characterised as a field of democratic iterations wherein a plural production of meaning...
takes place. Consequently, by using the term democratic iterations and the implied references to diverse narratives, one emphasises the potentials for democratisation in the authorisation of political power and the struggle about meaning in the public sphere and public discourse.

In the case of the French ban on the Muslim headscarf, Benhabib points out how new and valuable insights in the political process could have been obtained if the Muslim school girls and students had been listened to more seriously. Counterfactually, Benhabib claims, if the Muslim school girls had been included one could obtain more knowledge of what the headscarf meant to them instead of reproducing cultural prejudices and stereotypes that the headscarf *per se* meant repression from a Patriarchal Muslim culture. As interviews have shown, it could be that it meant something else for the involved Muslim girls and women than traditionally intended in Muslim culture reflecting the French secular values in some sense (Bouzar & Kada 2003; Gaspard & Khosrokhavar 1995; Lévy and Lévy 2004). Benhabib writes: «Ironically, it was the very egalitarian norms of the French public educational system that brought these girls out of the patriarchal structures of the home and into the French public sphere, and gave them the confidence and the ability to *resignify the wearing of the scarf*. Instead of penalizing and criminalizing their activities, would it not have been more plausible to ask these girls to account for their actions and doings at least to their school communities, and to encourage discourses among the youth about what it means to be a Muslim citizen in a *laic* French Republic?» (Benhabib 2004:191).

Benhabibs point about the diverse meaning ascribed to the headscarf by Muslim women living in the Western world is emphasised by the study of the Turkish sociologist Nilüfer Göle, who underlines that the Muslim womens wearing of headscarves does not constitute one single horizon of meaning and signify one single gender identity within a patriarchal Muslim society. Rather, it is a question of how the Muslim women signify their own wearing of headscarves and conceives it in relation to their religion, position and opportunities in French society. Thus, one can generally refer to the ambiguity and reflexivity involved in the wearing of headscarves by Muslim women in the public space that disturbs both «traditional Muslim and secular modernist» social imaginaries (Göle 2002). From that point of view, the narratives of Muslim women imply a signification of the meaning of wearing headscarves that is both religious and secular and this meaning is practiced in the womens everyday lives and shown in their signs of identification crucial for their self-understanding. This implies what is usually referred to as multiple identities, *in casu* the Muslim women’s articulations of relations between educational plans, carrier dreams, autonomy, family, religion (Islam), national belonging (France) and political engagement as their diverse points of identification that constitute their horizon of meaning and orientation in their practices. In that sense, in order to be recognised as an equal French citizen, it is a question of whether the multiple identities of the Muslim women are taken into consideration as they become expressed in their democratic iterations. This does not seem to be the dominant picture of the French Secularity Act. Rather, this produces what is supposed to be a universal citizenship by granting priority to some historically settled constitutive values of the French Republic institutionalised and internalised in the sup-
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posed practices of the citizens rather than opening new possibilities for the interpretation of these values in respect of the actual composition of the French society and the equality of all citizens.

From this point of view, it seems plausible to bring Benhabib’s term democratic iterations to the fore on the grounds that she paves the way for an understanding of democracy as an ongoing contestation between various narrative strategies. However, it does not appear as though she applies this perspective on the state-level regulation of the ban of the Muslim headscarf, but focuses narrowly on the cultural re-significations within the public sphere in civil society among a small group of Muslim girls and women. In that sense, Benhabib does not get the whole advantage of the term democratic iterations, because the term is applied only to narratives within civil society but not narratives at the state level and the implied structures and institutions of political authority and sovereign power. In other words, one can say that she establishes an analytical vigilance for narrative strategies within the public sphere and their importance for cultural processes of re-signification and identification; however, she seems to miss the similar analytical sensibility for narrative strategies at state-level referring to the institutionalised dominance, i.e. the cultural governance of secularism. This is the difference between the point of view of Benhabib’s deliberative democracy and the point of view of cultural governance forwarded in this article.

Conclusion

With this focus on secularism as narrative strategy from the point of view of the theoretical term cultural governance, the article has articulated an analytic vigilance for the dimensions of the power relations between state and citizen instituted by secularism instead of conceiving secularism as abstract political principles. Furthermore, the article has used the theoretical term democratic iterations to pay analytical attention to the polyphonic religious and non-religious voices that take part in political decision-making and the creation of democratic political culture. This follows the three steps in the overall theoretical argument of the article, the movement from secularism as a political doctrine over secularism as cultural governance to secularism as a narrative strategy within a field of democratic iterations and, thus, the tendency in political theory to grant priority to democracy over secularism.

Notes

1 I would like to thank the participants in the workshop, «New Directions in Cultural Politics» at the ECPR Joint Sessions, Granada, April 14–19, 2005 plus the editors and the anonymous referee of Nordic Journal of Religion and Society for valuable critique and comments on earlier drafts of this article.

2 I use the French term «laïcité» synonymously with secularism, arguing that secularism is not to be understood in singular, but in plural in terms of the different articu-
lations in public discourse, political regimes and political cultures, e.g. the French articulation of a principle of secularism as neutrality, equality and liberty.

3 When no specific reference is mentioned, these are the primary sources to the French debate whether to prohibit the headscarf in public schools.

4 Secularism is conceived as a political doctrine in its different articulations. It is to be distinguished from secularisation as a social process analysed within e.g. sociology forwarding the secularisation theses on the fading role of religion in modern life because of social differentiation, privatisation and rationalisation, cf. e.g. Asad 2003.

5 Benhabib refers to the interviews reported by Françoise Gaspard and Farhad Khosrokhavar in 1995 to be the first taking the points of views of the Muslim girls serious and presenting other narratives than the dominant secular prejudices of the meaning of the Muslim headscarf although it does not seem to change the dominant narrative (Gaspard & Khosrokhavar 1995). In her interpretation of the case she does not refer to the report by the Stasi-commission that did interview a few veiled Muslim women out of around 150 interviews, which count Saïda Kada, co-author of L’une voile, l’autre pas (Bouzar & Kada 2003), cf. Commission, 2003. However, this does not change her conclusion that the culturally inherited narrative of secularism was reproduced without taking their experiences into account, cf. also Asad’s analysis of the report from the Stasi-commission (Asad 2006).

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