

French Semantics

Expanding the French media's discourse on 'minorities' and racism

The mere existence of 'minorities', 'races' and 'ethnic groups' in France is not even generally acknowledged,



reports **Serge Gordey**. Here he looks at the media's sidestepping of such realities...

IN JULY 1998, France won the soccer world cup. Journalists talked of "a black, white and 'beur' (French citizens of Afro-Arab origin) France" to describe the team, which was in fact made up of players from different ethnic backgrounds. Jacques Chirac, the country's president, rejoiced in the success of a "France of all colours".

For a week the streets were overrun with enthusiastic crowds. Youth from the working-class suburbs invaded the public spaces. As the stock market rose, France found itself a multi-cultural country, young

'beur'

Perhaps France had changed its image, but the images on television remained the same. In October 1999, the "Collectif Egalité" (Equality Collective), an initiative of black artists and writers, met with the Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel, the regulating authority for radio and television in France. The members of the collective protested against the under-representation of minorities in the French media. They insisted that quotas be established to guarantee that the on-screen presence of comedians, animators and television journalists be proportionate to

contemporary French society, or which does so only in a marginal way, practically never giving leading roles to minority representatives: the 'Maghrebins' (people originally from the Maghreb, or from North Africa), present in the country's daily life, are practically absent in French drama."

In May 2000, the Collectif Egalité called for a street demonstration which drew several thousand people. Shortly afterward, the government published a decree aimed at changing the mandate of public television, in order "to take account of the richness and diversity

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and full of hope. Had the old chauvinistic France, usually hanging onto its glorious past, truly changed its image?

To tell the truth, many political and cultural figures could hardly disguise their discomfort: on the right, where the supporters of racism and xenophobia had gained a lot of ground over the last 15 years, it was difficult to associate with these crowds, where the joys of victory had mixed the 'pure' French with the so-called 'half-breeds' from northern Africa. The intellectual left restrained its pleasure: the fraternising between France's rich and poor seemed a little too pretty, and France's social inequalities and institutionalised racism too readily forgotten.

the demographic significance of their members' communities. The Conseil commissioned a report.

The report's findings were harsh: "[In studio shows and news programmes] even when they are represented, the visible minorities are rarely given the right to speak. If one

in the backgrounds of the cultures comprising French society, to fight against discrimination and to strengthen civil society, particularly for youth".

Such a proclamation caused a heated debate in the media, among the intellectuals and among political leaders.

In a country like France where political struggles often take on a philosophical dimension,

looks at TV drama, one finds that 81% of them show, at one time or another, members of minorities. However, 74% of these dramas are foreign, mainly American, and only 26% are French ... This analysis signals an undeniable shortcoming in French drama production, which fails to reflect the diversity of

The differences declared were not about stating the facts or about the need for solutions. The very nature of the debate, as well as the solutions advanced, brought to light some sharply opposed positions: was it necessary to establish quotas in order to force television to reflect the country's reality? And



North Africans being deported from Europe.

REUTERS



The French (multi) national soccer team.

how do you define 'ethnic diversity'? In what way does respect for 'ethnic diversity' mean reconsidering established concepts about society and its institutions?

The quota question gave rise to a dispute over the "chartered accountants in charge of verifying the mathematical concordance between what was on our screens and social reality, the number of women or men, of Christians, Protestants, Jews or Muslims, of blacks and other persons of colour, of the young or the old, of the handicapped, of homosexuals..." (Zair Kedadouche, President of the association, Integration France, in *Liberation*, 15 November 1999). Is this a way of enforcing, according to the first article of the French Constitution, "equality before the law for all citizens, without regard to origin, race or religion", or is it rather a means to identify citizens according to their belonging to certain communities or races? The debate harked back to the very definition of the Republic, born of the French Revolution.

"When Zinedine Zidane (a soccer champi-

member of the Conseil National du Parti Communiste and Vice-President of SOS Racisme, *Liberation*, 30 May 2000).

Around this question of defining the country's citizenry, what asserts itself in the French debate is the concern of dividing society along ethnic, racial and religious lines. How do you establish objective criteria for defining a 'minority'? How do you avoid having citizens judged not according to merit, but according to their ancestry and skin colour?

The other expressed concern is that in overemphasising the alleged genetic and cultural differences, one underestimates the social question: would the constant presence of 'blacks' or 'Arabs' on our television screens not in fact hide the real social and economic inequalities faced by immigrant workers (often from ex-colonies) and their families?

Among the television professionals, the question of minority access to the media raised political questions about the role of public television: "Very well, ensure that the

particularly, must actively intervene in this alchemy, so that the minorities, whoever they are, whether they identify themselves as such or not, are able to recognise themselves and perhaps understand themselves better. Differences do exist. It is necessary to accept them, and to show them in programming, in the treatment of news, in the content of documentaries, in the subjects of film or drama" (Jerome Clement, President of the public television broadcaster, La Sept/Arte, *Liberation*, 3 July 2000).

In a country like France where political struggles often take on a philosophical dimension, the question of minority representation thus becomes an acid test. It reveals institutional shortcomings, a distance between laws and enforcement, between ideals and practical realities. The problem is that the most heated struggles over 'principles' go along with a marked sluggishness in putting reform mechanisms to work. In this debate, the risk is that neither the ideas nor the practice will change.

In May 2001, M6, a French commercial television station, broadcast "Loft Story", the French version of "Big Brother". The game is for two contestants, a man and a woman, to win together a luxury home, after defeating their rivals. Among the 11 contestants at the start, there was a young man Aziz and a

young woman Kenza, both of Arab origin. They were never defined as such, though one was able to hear during the show insults with

racist connotations. The large French anti-racist organisation, MRAP (Movement Against Racism and For Friendship between People) decided to take the channel to court for calling for

racial hatred, while the contestants themselves pretended the slurs were only harmless jokes, commonly exchanged between youth from different communities.

Aziz was the first man 'eliminated' by the audience, and Kenza the first woman. Was this 'progress' in the fact that the exclusion of Aziz and Kenza didn't have any particularly overt ethnic connotation? Or was it, on the contrary, a sign of a xenophobia even more pernicious, potentially acted upon without a word being uttered? To this day, the question has hardly been considered by the mainstream French media.

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'half-breeds'

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on) scores, France wins. And hundreds of thousands of young people, immigrants and not, proudly wave the national flag. The blue, white and red unites us. These are not the colours of a 'majority', but those of an enlightened and humanitarian France," affirmed another source (Nasser Ramdane,

anchors are people of colour. But we must be careful that this does not serve as a cheap way out when it comes to dealing with a real problem within our democracy. Exchange comes from knowledge of the culture, of the cultural options and ways of life of each minority, not from quotas. Public television,

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