

The Backlash to CRT in France, Extra Feature

Transcript

French audio clip.

MARIE-ALICE LEGRAND 0:05

We are so happy to have Professor Sylvie Laurent here with us today. She's a historian specialized in American and African American Studies. And she's Professor at Science Po in Paris, and an associate researcher at Harvard University. She's considered among the experts in France on everything related to American politics. And her perspective and current events in the US is highly sought after by the French media.

In your book, *Poor Little White Man*, you discuss how the stock story of a supposed dispossession of white power, and wealth by minorities. Notably brown and black people mobilized the support of white voters for Trump. Do you think that are any connections to the current presidential election in France and Eric Zemmour.

SYLVIE LAURENT 1:05

Thinking about the connection between the narrative which I unpacked in my book, the book you talked about, about this idea of legitimate white citizens being threatened by your desire coming from minorities to take over, resonates definitely with the current debate in France. Actually, a couple of days ago, Eric Zemmour gave a mass meeting in France. And also although we want to take with a pinch of salt, the idea that it was a huge massive meeting as though the guy is the new, you know, new kid on the block. So, so, there's a lot of things to, to mitigate here. But during his, one of the many mantras he articulated, he talked about the fact that French people felt dispossessed. And I had kind of had a aha moment as though the guy had actually read my book, and took from my book, this idea of white folks feeling a sense of dispossession.

What's interesting with dispossession is the fact that it's not something only that you lost, right? So the idea of lost paradise or lost greatness, or the idea that it was better before, is a trope of any right wing populists. The idea of a form of nostalgia. It harks back to the colonial here. But dispossession rings, a rather different tune. Dispossession entails that someone took something away from you, right, that you've been given a raw deal that you've been unfairly treated. And I think we could, we could draw connections between the narrative put forth by Trump supporters or, or the Trump team and beyond Trump, the Republican Party for the past 30 years, along the lines of white people becoming the new minority, and the great replacement theory. That, that Zemmour is pushing forth. So there are ethos undeniably, between the two, the two narratives, and the main common ground is the idea that

undeserving minorities are taking over things that legitimately belong to the dominant and the dominant majorities.

JOE SULLIVAN 3:56

Professor, is that something that you think Zemmour took directly from Trump as a playbook? Or do you think both men have kind of taken that political weaponization of whiteness from a more larger theoretical basis?

SYLVIE LAURENT 4:15

Well, that's interesting. Um... Journalists are currently trying to pull out the different genesis of the Zemmour discourse. But I would argue that this guy is pretty much a one of a kind. You have this Jewish, not African immigrant, channeling the anti-semitic, anti-Islamic party in France. Equating the goal with ... [*unelidable*]. So it's really a mixed bag of crazy ideas, which I think has no equivalent. These being said, the guy is probably probably smart. So he read is is Trumpism book, he witnessed the degree of success and the performances of Donald Trump. He probably also picked up on Bolsonaro on Polish, and, and Scandinavian far right populists, and so trying to emulate the best of them. And to some degree, the idea of a victimhood is probably what, what manifests with the most saliency, the idea that we are under threat, that those who are allegedly the victims, women, gay, people of color, are actually the oppressors. This kind of flipside is interesting, because we've seen it through the discourses of all these populists, although I don't really like that term, the, let's say, the right wing ideologues that have taken power over the last 10 or 15 years.

MARIE-ALICE LEGRAND 6:14

And in a recent interview last April, Macron, continued to emphasize that was really stressed the importance of distinguishing French history and US history. And could you explain maybe where this French fear of an important problem and Americanization of the French political debate stems from?

SYLVIE LAURENT 6:39

I think it's as French as as I don't know, what would be the French Apple Pie? That would be as branch as *clafoutis*, I could I could try that one. You know, that's funny. The same people who are constantly claiming that we should be fearful of Americanization are the same ones who vilified a supposedly essentialization of minorities like me. Let me explain what I mean. The history of French culture, since the days of the French Revolution, is deeply entangle to that of the American history. Right? It's a constant story of exchange, voyages, mutual conversation, mirroring each other. I'll give you my Lafayette and you give me your Ben Franklin, and we're going to try to be both the kind of beacon of the hill ... on a hill, we're going to be both a perfect exemplar of universalism based on rights of men, and so on and so forth. To greatest example of this is the 60s with the role played by the so called French theory of independence on American Campus.

You cannot hear or listen to France culture without being fed with American culture, American writers, American movie directors, I mean, that's part of this constant transatlantic

conversation. But all of a sudden, there is such a thing as the Americanization of French culture as though there was an essence. There was something so immune to foreign influence, that should be insulated from the bad guy from the other side of the Atlantic. And what's interesting is that these ideas being brought up each time we're dealing with minority recognition. Right? So we're using the Americanization narrative to counteract multiculturalism, minority rights, feminism, gay rights, these are supposedly the evils coming along with American culture. We're fine with Amazon, we're fine with Starbucks, we're fine with Netflix, give us more Netflix, right? But as so long as it doesn't come with some, you know, recognition of the reality of Islamophobia, so long as Me too don't comes up inside one of these packages that we're importing, we are fine. And so there's something deeply disingenuous here.

The country that is probably the most American culture consuming is the one that has the pretense to resist such culture with French Republic, French republicanism, French universalism and French identity, right. So everything is is deeply weaponized. So that a form of right wing policy, although although there's a lot of things to say about leftist, non leftist, let's say, left of center politicians with that regard. So that's part of the I love you I hate you kind of narrative that has been deeply politicized over the recent period.

JOE SULLIVAN 10:29

So in the same way that the critical race theory phenomenon kind of mirrors that in the US, is there also an importation maybe of the way that each country is fighting against critical race theory? Is there a mirroring of the backlash against critical race theory between France and the US?

SYLVIE LAURENT 10:48

Oh, definitely, definitely. Nothing captures more the dual phenomenon than the usage of the word woke or wokness, or in France wokism, which is, which is you know, here again, it's a perfect example of the French obnoxiousness. So it's not enough to import the woke or wokeness silliness. But we want to franchise to franchise it. So to franchise it implies inventing an English speaking or an English sounding, neologism, which is wokism, which I assume you've never heard about, except in a French context, because it simply doesn't exist. So what's annoying, we will have to confess, is that very little do people know what they're talking about. They don't even know what work is. They don't even know what critical race theory is, for that matter. But it's a shorthand for anything progressive. It's a shorthand for anything that Americans do to atone for the deeply Americanness of racism, sexism, hetero-patriarchy, all of the things that France don't know about that we've never, we've never had anything to do with that.

But these evil concepts are sneaking through we are told, on American campuses. And what's interesting, I have to come full disclosure here is that in one of the ... the right wing newspaper in France, in one of their articles, claiming that something as wokism was gaining momentum, and nefarious momentum on French campuses. They named the American Campus of Science Po as the hotbed of workism, which happens to be where I teach. So I was, I was kind of hoping that my name would pop up, but I'm not famous enough, although the power right knows my

name, and don't really like me. But just to tell you that that there is this idea of an underground ideology that is sapping the mind of our youth. Instigating in their mind the idea that they should be guilty of being white, that they should be guilty of being man, that they should be guilty for colonialism, slavery, sexism, and that is the kind of, of negative ideology used to be the case that McCarthy, McCarthyism or anti-communism would, would basically develop such kind of tropes, but now, the nefarious ideology come from American campuses were supposedly leftist and students of color and gay people would would, would instill such such debilitating ideas. And that would be highly popular. So we could see many ethos.

But what, once again, baffling is that those in France, the conservatives, who argue such things have absolutely no basis, no empirical evidence of what they're saying, except what they read, under the pen of the John McWhorthers or under the pen of the – *indistinguishable* - . So they are fed by American conservatism and they simply translates to the French situation. Although there are the same warning, to say that France and the United States are two different beasts, that they're, that they have nothing in common, except that they're a parroting what they're what they hear Tucker, Carlson, pretending all day long. So that's the kind of annoying thing once again.

MARIE-ALICE LEGRAND 15:21

And as a historian, we are wondering whether this backlash against critical race theory in France is a recent phenomenon, or if something similar already happened in the past?

SYLVIE LAURENT 15:35

Well as I as I chronicle in my book, the very notion of the white backlash is baked into African American history. Each time there has been a significant form of progress minority, that is an improvement in the in the living condition of black Americans, there have been an attempt to roll back the progresses to roll back the achievements, we've we've seen that after Reconstruction, we've seen that with the election of Richard Nixon, in the wake of the civil rights movement, undeniably the anti politically correct, which is an interesting precedent we want to pay attention to in the 90s, probably in the aftermath of Bill Clinton's election, although he is very much responsible for the spreading of this ideology. And now, undeniably, there is no way we can analyze Donald Trump's election except with a deep analysis of the reaction that Obama's election unleashed among some conservative white Americans, right.

So the entire construction of American heartland, American middle class, American working men, all these are signifiers of a form of white self-righteousness that had been encroached by activist, civil rights advocates. And the first veterans of the idea of reverse discrimination occurred, really during Reconstruction, where whereas white southerners claimed that the distributions of land were tantamount to reverse discrimination. And this term, as you know, as legal students, or legal Rudolph's the idea of reverse discrimination also has a legal history, right, it could be claimed, on the ground that there's a prejudice attached to the idea that, for instance, if you don't get into college, it's because perhaps, Abigail Fisher versus University of Texas, you've been unfairly discriminated against by virtue of you being white.

So, all of this participate to the idea that a form of self-righteous white entitlement is being questioned. And this is very much problematic, because had we been in a time of perfect racial equality, we could make the case that in some instances, lower class whites might be discriminated against, say, against an upper middle class black. That we could hear. We could hear that. There might be some ground to this. But given the reality, the empirical reality of the discrepancy of opportunities and achievements depending on the color of your skin, it's simply nothing else than ideology. And I was listening this morning to John McWhorter, which I mentioned, he just published a piece called Woke Racism, is black, as you know, is a black conservative, and any really belongs to the school of thoughts, the Clarence Thomas, and all that jazz, all these black conservatives who argue that there is a fetishization of black victimhood that is highly problematic, because it fails black Americans.

And so they oppose CRT, they oppose so called wokeness on the grounds that it deeper ingrained the notion of being a victim in the minds of black kids. As though there was no such thing as white supremacy or institutional racism or all the things that hearts so documented, that it's even, you know, excruciating to have to say to those people, well open a book, structural racism exists. Those who are discriminated happen to be women and people of color. End of story. There's no denying that. So I don't know whether I answer your question, but I tried to substantiate the many instances in which critical race theory just as the woke ideology became a trope in the conservative narrative.

JOE SULLIVAN 20:30

I want to switch gears a little bit and just talk about education as a battleground for critical race theory. In the US, just, I think it was yesterday, there's a state senator in Texas who put out a list of 850 books, talking about race, talking about critical gender, in his view, that he believes should be banned from all public schools in the state of Texas. I guess this is a two part question. First, is education kind of emerging as a battleground in France for critical race theory? And then to what extent are you concerned? Or have you seen an attempt to censor things in the educational field, as a result of this critical race debate?

SYLVIE LAURENT 21:17

Well, I think, undeniably, arguably, American schools are really the site, the battlefield, as far as critical race theory is concerned. For many reasons, the underfunding of public education in the US, the fact that the American school system lacks a federal oversight, so each state's depending on the color of the governor and the local Senate, has a different curriculum, the fact that school members are elected, so everything is highly politicized. And last but not least, the fact that most American schools suffered from 18 months of schools being closed due to COVID exacerbated parents who had to become teachers themselves. So had to have a say into how and what their kids were learning. And a final note to just contextualize the American premium on school is the indecent, amazingly high cost of college education in the US. So having a good high school education is quite oftentimes a matter of life and death, depending on where your kids are being taught.

So undeniably critical race theory to the very, the battle against critical race theory was weaponized to the point where it met the very long-standing anti-intellectualism tradition in the United States, as though a book could be that powerful. I think it's somehow, it's an homage to the books, books could be so dangerous, right? That you want to you want to stay clear from some of them. There's, there's a podcast that I love about, that's an African American anchor representing blank books. And he opens with the slide from one of the characters of *The Wire*. And the character says, Do you know what is the most dangerous thing in America, a black man with a library card. And I would say that, that the idea that you should simply ban some books speaks to two things.

The first thing is the anti-intellectualism that both France and the US are sharing although France as a lot of potential, as far as being the country of the Enlightenment, the country of culture of the country of les intellectuels rights, and they love to to claim that there is no such thing as a public intellectual in the United States, which is highly incorrect, but that's how the thing is framed. And the second thing I think is very important, is the control of knowledge production. If you look at those books, you'll notice that a lot of these theories, assertion, analysis that are deemed unpatriotic or dangerous for kids are being produced by people of color. Female scholars, indigenous people, or anti-racist white leftist scholars, and there's an attempt here to regain control of the question of knowledge production. Critical race theory is a perfect epitome of this. This is it a theory produced by a scholar of color in the context of African American dealing with the legal system. And it was aimed at addressing at least some of the legal studies or to highlight legal scholars on the shortcomings of the Constitution or the legal process.

And so the same thing, the same thing goes with the ban for instance, of Toni Morrison's novels, or of some of what the 1619 project produced, led by Hannah Nikole Jones, each turn, we're dealing with works that are the brainchild of people of color, women of color. And so the the idea of knowledge production as a state of power, endures the battle against that. And you could feel it, could see the same thing going on in France, each time you have an authoritative black woman speaking. It doesn't occur often, as you might imagine. There's immediately this kind of assumption that she because she comes from a place of activism, right? Each time you have an African American, not African American, black, female intellectual in France, she's deemed biased, right? She supposedly speaks on behalf, she aims at representing someone and therefore, she's not academically relevance. So the the idea of knowledge production is very much at the center, I think of the backlash.

As far as France is concerned, anti CRT or anti-woke ideology is mostly focused on universities and the equivalent of colleges, right. What's going on, what's unfolding in high school education, pertains to Islamism, Islamophobia. The caricature, the Republic, and the - - - , which is our craziness, which is our kind offight that we are so tightly, that we we cling so tightly, on the notion that our --- is being under attacked, that our universalism is being imperiled, that it is hard not to hear echoes of what's going on in the United States. And likewise, you have plenty of scholars who worked on Islamophobia in France, but the very term Islamophobia is

being banned by mainstream journalists and commentators as though it speaks ideology, it speaks wokism, it speaks Americanness. See how how sick that is?

MARIE-ALICE LEGRAND 28:10

And to end this wonderful conversation with you, how do you see the French society evolving insofar as coming to terms with race? And do you think these Republican ideals that we speak so often about together territorialism and freedom and fraternity. Do you think they will change when they come to life in order to create a truly equal society?

SYLVIE LAURENT 28:36

There is a line from an activist which I stole, because I think this is so powerful, shares, an African American activist for racial justice, and she says, hope is a discipline. So I would totally go with that line. And I'll end with that line. Hope is not a matter of being a realist. It's a matter of discipline. And if you want to do politics, you have to be disciplined.