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“France has never been and never will be a multicultural country” (Super)-diversity in Macron’s France

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Emmanuel Macron has openly claimed that he does not believe in ‘multiculturalism’ but is a fervent supporter of ‘diversity’, that he defines through the narrow and contradictory scope of neoliberal economy and meritocracy. In the French context, the concepts of ‘diversity’ and its derivatives such as ‘superdiversity’ are not strictly related to ethnic discrimination but also to ‘parité’ and cultural pluralism. Due to its ‘semantic plasticity’ (Doytcheva, 2018), ‘diversity’ and ‘superdiversity’ have become trendy terms used in different contexts – school, business and politics – without much theoretical rigor. While being blamed by the French ‘reinfosphere’ as the promoter of the dreaded ‘diversity’ threatening the national unity, Macron’s discourse against ‘communitarianism’ actually refers more to the anti-immigration discourse of the Right and even the Far-Right. His surprising decision to include immigration quotas in the Great National Debate in the midst of the Yellow Vests crisis brings further confusion to his vision of what ‘diversity’ is in the French society – leading to the increased risk of the praise of diversity becoming “the praise of the good diversity”.

Emmanuel Macron claims: “France has never been and never will be a multicultural country” but surprisingly he believes in ‘diversity’, one of the catchwords of his presidential campaign. But what kind of diversity is he

referring to? Ethnic, cultural, gender or sexual diversity? Macron’s definition of diversity can be considered as quite narrow and understood through the seemingly contradictory scope of neoliberal economy and meritocracy. Promoting diversity is not about fighting against inequalities but about supporting those who perform well, what Macron calls *premiers de cordées* – literally the lead climbers in mountaineering, a reference to his belief in a trickle-down economy where the ‘leading’ individuals pull up the ‘disadvantaged’ ones.

After being elected Macron vowed – “There will be faces, those of the real France [...] France of all the faces, of all colors” – however his promise of a new political class more representative of diversity was not fulfilled. *Le Monde* (2017) showed that after all Macron’s government is as ‘diverse’, some would say as little diverse, as Chirac’s or Sarkozy’s, with around 9% of representatives from ethnic minorities. While, as French sociologist Eric Macé (2017) states, around 20% of the French population can be considered as ‘non-white’.

The semantic challenges of ‘(super)-diversité’

The concept of diversity and its derivatives such as superdiversity have been the object of

much consideration in the French academia these past 5 years, especially its use in the political discourse. Diversity has become much more than an issue strictly related to ethnic discrimination. In the French public debate, diversity is also related to the notion of *parité* (parity) between men and women, as well as to cultural pluralism.

Now, diversity and superdiversity are buzzwords used in school, business and politics – with Macron as its fervent advocate – that ring rather hollow and refer to disparate issues such as technological innovation, academic excellence or urban development (with the delicate issue of the *banlieues*, the French suburbs). Its “semantic plasticity” (Doytcheva, 2018) has rendered the concept of diversity consensual and diluted, usable by everyone and anyone. Diversity refers nowadays more to individuals as “enterprising selves” (Roze, 1992) rather than groups, which responds well to the Macronian ideal of France as a ‘startup nation’.

‘(Super-)diversité’, target of the reinfosphere

As an outspoken supporter of diversity in all its forms – but especially ethnic in this case – Macron has naturally become a target for the reinfosphere – “the proactive, politically inspired, ideological, online community-driven” right-wing information outlets (Pyrhönen, Bauvois, 2019).

Macron is accused of promoting diversity for ‘the children of immigration’ over the interest of French citizens. One of main French reinformation outlets, *Salon Beige*, blames the multicultural model proposed by Macron leading to a “deconstruction of our heritage and a true danger for the future, as unity in diversity is becoming impossible”. For *Boulevard Voltaire*, Macron’s wish to “give a roof to migrants will bring us more diversity (...) and encourage laziness and enrichment through uncontrollable drug trafficking”. Diversity is depicted as the evil leading to the dreaded ‘communitarianism’ – in the French context a negatively connotated catchall term used especially by the Right and Far-Right politicians, referring to the threat towards French ‘national identity’ and often related to the Muslim communities.

This accusation of promoting communitarianism is quite ironic as Macron himself has openly been pointing it as a threat to the French Republic. Often, he confuses multiculturalism and communitarianism when he talks of «communitarian multiculturalism» or defines multiculturalism as the «superposition of hermetic communities», a sheer

nonsense according to sociologist Michel Wieviorka (2017).

“The praise of the good diversity”?

Macron’s approach on diversity is in many ways problematic as he sends contradictory messages. On one hand, his democratic approach to cultural, racial and religious differences refers to a more left wing discourse that attracted many former Socialist voters. On the other hand, his attacks against communitarianism as a danger to *laïcité* and national unity remind more of the anti-immigration discourse of the likes of *Les Républicains*, even the far-right end of the political spectrum. Paradoxically, while Macron is not acting concretely and proactively in favor of diversity in society at large – in the political, academic and media fields – his diversity talk is nonetheless regularly attacked by the reinfosphere. In the context of the Yellow Vests crisis, Macron seems to actually question diversity itself instead of promoting it. In the Great National Debate held this spring – an attempt to hear citizens’ grievances through public forums – Macron puts immigration quotas up for debate, while this idea was previously advocated by politicians such as François Fillon or Marine Le Pen. This unexpected turn makes his vision of diversity even more perplexing, creating some confusion even within his own party *La République en Marche*.

Recent research is showing that not only this neoliberal take on diversity is questionable in different ways – morally, ethically and politically (Warikoo 2016). But it also represents a danger of further marginalization of the populations that are supposed to be protected. As Doytcheva (2018) states, there is a big risk in the French context that the praise of diversity becomes “the praise of the good diversity” which excludes those who do not fit the profile. Thus Macron’s France risks reducing diversity to a truncated diversity comprising of the ‘good’ minorities: the more assimilable ones and the less visible ones.

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