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Bell, Dorian

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Dorian Bell

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## White Atlantic: Counterfeiting Race in France

Dorian Bell

### ABSTRACT

This article proposes that a new white racial consciousness is emerging in France. Camouflaged as the default universal, unraced and unmarked, against which racial difference is measured, whiteness turns racelessness into power. We know as much from the critical race and whiteness studies that have dissected the normative apparatus at work in white pretensions to color-blindness. But if such a critique remains relevant in France—where color-blindness is the legally mandated norm—it also isn't enough. Examining recent polemics against *le racism anti-blanc*, or anti-white racism, I document how white color-consciousness is taking hold in the French mainstream. The new white identity revolves around a central premise: the victimization of white people by the forces of antiracism. Advancing a diasporic vision of beleaguered whiteness, French architects of what I call the white Atlantic issue dark warnings about the “genocidal” consequences for white people of Black Lives Matter and related social movements. In so doing, I argue, they counterfeit the collective historical experience that gives race meaning—in particular the experience of Black people, whose history of transatlantic suffering the new white identity simulates and exploits.

**KEYWORDS** Race; anti-white racism; white identity; antiracism; color-blind racism

The Jamaican-born cultural theorist Stuart Hall understood W. E. B. Du Bois ultimately to have concluded that, if race meant anything at all, it was as what Du Bois called a “badge” signifying the “common history” of Black people from both sides of the Atlantic who “have suffered a common disaster and have one long memory” (Hall 38–39).<sup>1</sup> White people possess no such memory, no such common history. In this sense, the white race does not exist.

None of which prevents *whiteness* from functioning. Far from it: Camouflaged as the default universal, unraced and unmarked, against which racial difference is measured, whiteness turns racelessness into power. Dissecting “the power of this plainness” (Benjamin 4), to cite Ruha Benjamin, critical race and whiteness studies have exposed the normative apparatus at work behind every white claim not to see race.<sup>2</sup> But what happens when white people try to see race, in particular their own?

And what do they see if, following Hall and Du Bois, there is nothing *to see*, because no history binds white people together in any way that would warrant the name race?

Those who see something will make the white “race” cohere under some governing fiction or another. The most potent such fiction tells a historical story: that white people, wherever they are, share a common experience. The story comes in two flavors. The triumphalist variant describes how white people “invented” civilization in Europe then exported it to the world. This version reeks enough of supremacism that most embracing it publicly substitute “national” or “European” pride for the white racial pride they actually have in mind.

But there is a lachrymose version of the story as well. In it, white people share the more recent historical bond of a group beset by antiracist efforts. So zealous are those efforts, so supposedly extreme, that they have subjected white people to the kind of treatment once reserved for minorities. We know the results: indignant claims of “anti-white racism” leveled at those who point out racial inequalities still structuring the present. Antiracists, goes the reasoning, are the ones obsessed with race; and so they become the “real racists,” the ones intent on making race a *thing* it does not need to be.

This victimology intersects with the “color-blind racism” described by American sociologist of race Eduardo Bonilla-Silva. Secure in the belief that they do not see race, even as they continue benefiting from structures that reproduce racial disparity, many white people wash their hands of racism altogether. Yet when, by extension, they end up displacing responsibility for racism onto antiracists themselves, color-blindness shades into a strange color-consciousness. The same people who claim not to see race suddenly view themselves in racial terms, as members of a group ostensibly targeted by discrimination.

The consequences are especially significant in France. So hegemonic is color-blindness there that any slide from color-blindness into white color-consciousness risks implicating an entire polity. When in October 2020 French President Emmanuel Macron and his Minister of Education Jean-Michel Blanquer blamed “woke” American culture for sowing division in France, they were understood to be “courting the right” (Onishi) after a summer during which homegrown Black Lives Matter protests had sparked considerable controversy.<sup>3</sup> But by French standards, at least, Macron and Blanquer’s tacit rebuke of Black Lives Matter was already in the mainstream. Their characterization of French racial unrest as an American import—rather than as a response to structural racism in France—corroborates Ann Laura Stoler’s observation that what passes for “common sense” in French political culture (in this instance color-

blindness) creates larger constituencies for right-wing reaction than the French have historically been willing to admit (Stoler 302).

Those constituencies are inflamed again, and the mutation of color-blindness into white color-consciousness is proving an accelerant. Macron and Blanquer did not themselves mention the *racisme anti-blanc*, or anti-white racism, around whose denunciation the new color-consciousness organizes itself. They were, however, reinforcing a premise dear to those using the term: that Black and brown demands for justice had crossed the Atlantic to threaten the Republic.

The transatlantic context is key. In fact, the new white racial consciousness cannot be understood apart from it. That is because white racial identity—and here is my larger wager—*increasingly patterns itself after and parasitizes the Black experience*. Blackness was born of transatlantic suffering. So its imitators have, perforce, become oceanic in the scope of the white tribulations they imagine.

This is not just the case in France. But the French are particularly amenable to the Atlantic turn in an evolving story of white grievance. French color-blindness is already and profoundly Atlantic, fashioning itself in perpetual relation to the multiculturalism of France's American and British rivals. Those in France inclined, then, to worry about the plight of white people can express their concern in conveniently normative ways. They need not run afoul of postwar norms by defending the white race's claim to France or Europe (though of course some will happily do so). They have only to exploit two uncontroversial frames. One is the existing Atlantic orientation to French self-fashioning around questions of race. The other is Black suffering's historically Atlantic dimension—on whose authenticity, like a forgery, white color-consciousness now capitalizes and depends.

### Co-opting antiracism

The white color-consciousness that I am describing amounts to more than just transparent rhetorical inversion. But it got its start as such. In France, where the far-right National Front began condemning a *racisme anti-blanc* in the late 1970s, the notion of anti-white racism responded to an obvious political problem. Encumbered with antisemitic tendencies discredited since the war, Jean-Marie Le Pen's party labored to deflect accusations of racism. Thus began a long process of *dédiabolisation* or “de-demonization” undertaken by the National Front to smooth away the more visible bigotries hampering the party's mainstream acceptance. This is how Le Pen's daughter Marine, guiding a twenty-first century rebrand of the National Front into what is now known as the National Rally,

came to denounce antisemitism so forcefully—especially when displayed by her party’s preferred Muslim targets. So too, earlier on, did her father’s National Front promote the idea of anti-white racism, a bit of rhetorical jiu-jitsu likewise designed to turn the stigma of racism back against the party’s enemies.

In a country where color-blindness is the legally mandated norm, complaints about anti-white racism risked alienating French voters wary of racial categories. Recognizing this, Marine Le Pen and her father have often spoken instead of *racisme anti-Français* or “anti-French racism.” The verbal sleight of hand works with impressive economy, avoiding any reference to whiteness while implicitly equating that whiteness with Frenchness. But it has also become increasingly necessary. In a successful 2012 bid to lead the center-right UMP party, politician Jean-François Copé sparked a national debate by calling on French conservatives to discuss *le racisme anti-blanc* more frankly (Copé). Commentators were alarmed to see the party of French presidents Jacques Chirac and Nicolas Sarkozy embrace language popularized by the far right. In case there was any doubt, Marine Le Pen herself accused Copé of “plagiarizing” the National Front.<sup>4</sup>

Le Pen’s objection notwithstanding, the debate surrounding Copé’s denunciation of a *racisme anti-blanc* helped to normalize the expression.<sup>5</sup> The Le Pens and their lieutenants had co-opted the *racisme anti-blanc* formula from an antiracist lexicon developed on the left. Yet even they probably did not expect parts of the left itself to be taken in by the subterfuge. Earlier in 2012, the long-standing French antiracist organization Movement Against Racism and for Friendship Between Peoples (MRAP) had already included “le racisme anti-blanc” (“Projet d’orientation” 3) among the racisms it officially combats. When the rapper Nick Conrad’s satirical 2018 song “Pendez les Blancs,” or “Hang White People,” launched another media frenzy about anti-white racism, MRAP condemned the musician’s “odious opinions,” reiterating its opposition to “all forms of racism” (“Odieux propos;” my emphasis). And when retired World Cup winner and antiracist activist Lilian Thuram suggested in 2019 that anti-Black incidents at professional soccer matches were indicative of a problem in “white culture,” MRAP’s counterpart the International League Against Racism and Anti-Semitism (LICRA) publicly scolded him for “essentializing” white people (“Les blancs pensent être supérieurs”).

Other antiracist organizations defended Thuram against accusations of anti-white racism, notably SOS-Racisme, whose president Dominique Sopo published an editorial in *Le Monde* reminding readers of the term’s right-wing history (Sopo). Such genealogical clarifications remain important. In retracing the chain of rhetorical inversions and substitutions that

have led to this point, though, we must take care not to miss the narrative forest for the semantic trees. Because white people have not just co-opted the antiracist lexicon; increasingly, they are also co-opting whole histories.

### ***The white Atlantic***

Here again France proves instructive. The French example may seem idiosyncratic, given French republicanism's visceral attachment to color-blindness. That attachment explains why republican antiracist organizations like MRAP and LICRA bristle instinctively at any deployment of racial categories, struggling to distinguish between a structural racism aimed at minorities and individual acts of prejudice aimed occasionally at whites. But against a backdrop of republican color-blind consensus—a consensus so easily enlisted in the crusade against “anti-white racism”—the broadness of white color-consciousness' appeal comes into disconcerting focus. The pitch goes like this: Antiracism was, for a time, an understandable postwar corrective to the Nazi nightmare. Then it overreached. No longer content with the republican goal of equal treatment, antiracism moved on to score-settling over the bygone wrongs of colonialism and slavery. And it is white people who are paying the price.

So goes the tale, at least. Of late it has exploded back onto the French public scene. The worldwide protests touched off by George Floyd's 2020 murder in Minneapolis reinvigorated a nascent French movement against police brutality, begun in 2016 after Adama Traoré died while in police custody north of Paris. Demonstrations organized by Traoré's older sister Assa in June 2020 attracted tens of thousands in Paris, where Black Lives Matter placards intermingled with signs demanding “justice for Adama.” In a churlish little book published a few months later, *L'imposture décoloniale*, or *The Decolonial Fraud*, the well-known historian and political scientist Pierre-André Taguieff seizes on this transatlantic dimension to the recent unrest as evidence that American importations are contaminating French minds with fantasies about *racisme d'État* or state racism. Amalgamating a host of formations—the Black Lives Matter movement, decolonial and postcolonial studies, Black studies, gender studies, etc.—he rails against the implantation in France of American-style notions about race.<sup>6</sup>

Taguieff's book is the latest sally in a perennial offensive by French champions of republican color-blindness against the Anglo-Saxon specter of multiculturalism. But more than the tedious usual contrast drawn by Taguieff between French and American contexts, what interests me is the *commonality* between Taguieff and like-minded contemporaries in the United States. Reminding readers of Adama Traoré's previous run-ins

with law enforcement, Taguieff employs a tactic familiar to anyone who has watched American right-wing media smear George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, and any number of Black Americans understood somehow to have deserved or invited extrajudicial execution (20–21). Taguieff echoes more liberal American critics as well by deeming what he calls “the new antiracism” a quasi-religion predicated on the unfalsifiable doctrine of an original racist sin at the heart of Western civilization (23–24).<sup>7</sup>

Cited widely for his scholarly work on racism, antisemitism, and populism, Taguieff still enjoys influence in France. His contemptuous dismissal of how the new international civil rights movement has erected “delinquents” like Adama Traoré into “martyrs” opposes the discourse of reason to those forces of religious obscurantism—Islamists, of course, but now Black Lives Matter protesters too—ostensibly massing against the Republic (20). The gesture partakes of a longtime republican tradition, one that harks back to colonial-era consternations about Muslim and animist “fanaticism” imperiling French designs in Africa. Yet there is a newer panic afoot. Upping the ante, Taguieff describes an “anti-white antiracism” or *antiracisme anti-Blancs* so virulent, in its hatred of white people, that it verges on a “black supremacism à la française” (16, 55). During media rounds to promote his book, he likewise spoke of an anti-white “genocidal streak” animating the “political correctness” embraced by French protesters and activists.

Taguieff’s language flirts with the white genocide conspiracy theory, as popularized in France by more explicit nativists like Renaud Camus (the literary pariah who inspired the anti-immigrant *You will not replace us!* chants during 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia) and Éric Zemmour (the essayist and television host who at times outpolled rival candidate Marine Le Pen in the run-up to the 2022 presidential election). In their telling, capital and antiracism joined forces in the 1970s to drown white, republican France under a flood of immigrants. Big business, interested to secure cheap imported labor, allied with the exponents of antiracism to brand as xenophobes and bigots anyone opposed to unfettered immigration. Zemmour calls the results *le suicide français* or the “French suicide;” Camus, *le Grand Remplacement* or “the Great Replacement.” Whatever moniker under which the story goes, antiracists always feature as the patsies who helped throw open the country to invading hordes.

Taguieff strikes a similar note when he excoriates “useful idiots” on the French antiracist left for abetting a rising tide of Islamism and Black activism (Taguieff 26). He considers himself merely to be reiterating what he argued in his 1987 book *La Force du préjugé* or *The Force of Prejudice*:



that antiracist efforts, overdetermined by the racisms they oppose, are doomed to reproduce the racial categories and logics they decry. Taguieff has long blamed the alleged clumsiness of French antiracists for the political rise of the National Front.<sup>8</sup> Yet in warning darkly of the Black Lives Matter movement's "genocidal" bent, Taguieff is clearly joining—not just diagnosing—the defense of white people against the specter of *le politique-mement correct*. To defend whiteness, he must define it. And because of his own putative antiracism, accounts of superior "white" achievement will not do. So he defines whiteness according to a more acceptable, if no less imagined, historical experience: the transatlantic victimization of white people by a Black supremacism on the march.

The move counterfeits the Duboisian "long memory" of a transatlantic Black experience—the only force ever to have constituted race in any meaningful way, as something more than a fiction or construct. This memory grew from the "common disaster" of slavery, which in time gave rise to what Du Bois understood by Blackness.<sup>9</sup> Critics like Taguieff think such memory has become pathological. But their conception of whiteness borrows from it anyway, that whiteness might simulate an historical and ethical heft it does not otherwise possess.

This whiteness is not outwardly supremacist. Neither is it content, like the whiteness anatomized by critical race and whiteness studies, to disappear into a spuriously neutral universal. It is—instead or in addition—an opportunistic identification with Blackness by white people. Call it the white Atlantic. From a Black Atlantic experience that, in Paul Gilroy's famous account, gave rise to Black consciousness, today's white Atlantic pirates scale and scope.

We have seen such a politics of inversion before. When Camus denounces the "contemporary colonization" of Europe by Africa, inverting colonizer and colonized, he echoes what Alain de Benoist and the Nouvelle Droite or French New Right did nearly fifty years ago in calling for a "reciprocal decolonization" (Camus 82; Benoist 23). When Taguieff fulminates against "anti-white racism," he reads from a script flipped for a half century now by the National Front.

Something has changed, however, since the advent of these semantic inversions. That is because the intervening decades have gradually produced a pseudo-history of white victimization by the forces of antiracism. It is no accident that Zemmour organizes *Le Suicide français* as a year-by-year chronology of French history since 1970, each chapter detailing a new betrayal of the nation by antiracists and their politically well-placed confederates. Similarly telling is Camus, in a flattered response to his Charlottesville admirers, opining that Barack Obama's embassy in France funded grantees "almost exclusively of African descent" in anticipation

that they would become “the most likely leaders of France to-morrow” (Camus 174). A solidary Blackness has conspired across New and Old worlds to assert control, Camus tells his American audience. Ought not white people answer in kind? Or consider Gilles-William Goldnadel—the bomb-throwing commentator, lawyer, and author of a 2011 book on anti-white racism—who marvels that it should be acceptable for a Black Antillean to make common racial cause “with an Ivorian or a South African,” but taboo for white people to claim racial belonging of their own (Goldnadel 169). The intimation is clear: Should not white people embrace the same Atlantic cohesion, if only to protect themselves?

After all, to believe observers like these, nothing less is at stake than survival itself. In his 2020 book on the “construction of the white scapegoat,” the novelist and polemicist Pascal Bruckner describes an *antiracisme exterminateur* or “exterminationist antiracism” aimed squarely at white people. “To choose a scapegoat,” he announces, “is always to call for purificatory murder,” concluding that whites must get wise or suffer a fate once reserved for Blacks: “White self-flagellation and the systematic idealization of Blacks could well furnish the prelude to one of those reversals of which History is fond” (*Un coupable* 25, 201).

History may or may not relish such “reversals,” but Bruckner certainly relishes predicting them. In his 1983 book *Le Sanglot de l’homme blanc* or *The White Man’s Tears*—among the earliest and still most notorious entries in the genre—Bruckner argued that white Western “self-hatred” over colonialism and slavery had opened the door to a Third-Worldist “crusade against the white man.” “When will the UN,” he demanded to know, “include anti-Westernism and anti-white racism on the list of crimes against humanity?” (*Le Sanglot* 276). The supposed anti-white crusade did not yet seem to have reached European soil, except via a “paternalistic” European left that Bruckner accused of shedding crocodile tears over misery in the global South. But by 2020, Bruckner was sounding a more strident alarm about France’s “stunning contamination” (*Un coupable* 14) by American racial unrest. If the usual inversions remain—perpetrators become victims, whites become “Black”—Bruckner has shifted his attention from the North-South axis to a Euro-American axis of Black intolerance and white capitulation. Cue the new vulgate about a white Atlantic gradually subjugated, since the 1970s, by Black militancy and its imprudent white allies.

To the old play of inversions, the white Atlantic adds a storytelling dense with memory, history, and other simulacra of collective experience. A Bruckner or Taguieff do not only look westward to perform their distaste for American multiculturalism. They are also constructing a diasporic vision of beleaguered whiteness. The more chaotic Black Lives Matter protests offer tempting exhibits, of course, for anyone interested to

paint nightmare scenes of American antiracist violence. But just as alluring, I think, is the United States' centrality to the diasporic Blackness from which the very *idea* of a diasporic whiteness now derives. Narratives about anti-white racism leech their influence from antiracism's postwar moral authority. In the story they tell, though, they plagiarize a longer, oceanic history of Black suffering and endurance. And because part of that history is American, French critics of the new civil rights movement remain more indebted to the American example than they realize. In the *guerres de mémoire* or "memory wars" raging in France since the 1990s, many have contested the germaneness of slavery and empire to the political present. Yet even as they make an ostentatious show of closing the historical book, they seem still to peek inside, transposing what they find into sprawling fictions about a white race reduced to the condition of those it once conquered and enslaved.

## Notes

1. Hall's citations here are all from Du Bois' *Dusk of Dawn* (1940).
2. See, for instance, George Lipsitz' influential formulation: "As the unmarked category against which difference is constructed, whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations" (Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*, Temple UP, 1998, p. 1).
3. In a speech defending *la laïcité* (the principle of religious and racial neutrality from which official French color-blindness emanates), Macron made a charged reference to "certain social science theories entirely imported from the United States" (Macron). Blanquer, for his part, accused American "intersectional theory" of "infecting a non-negligible segment of the French social sciences" (Blanquer). He has since launched a think tank designed expressly to combat *le wokisme* ("Blanquer lance son 'Laboratoire de la République,' ciblant notamment 'le wokisme'." *L'Obs*, 13 Oct. 2021, [www.nouvelobs.com/politique/20211013.AFP3582/blanquer-lance-son-laboratoire-de-la-republique-ciblant-notamment-le-wokisme.html](http://www.nouvelobs.com/politique/20211013.AFP3582/blanquer-lance-son-laboratoire-de-la-republique-ciblant-notamment-le-wokisme.html). Accessed 20 Jan. 2022).
4. See Abel Mestre, "Racisme anti-Blancs: Marine Le Pen dénonce le 'cynisme' de Copé," *Le Monde*, Paris, Louis Dreyfus, 26 Sept. 2012, [http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2012/09/26/racisme-anti-blancs-marine-le-pen-denonce-le-cynisme-de-cope\\_1765743\\_823448.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2012/09/26/racisme-anti-blancs-marine-le-pen-denonce-le-cynisme-de-cope_1765743_823448.html). Accessed 20 Jan. 2022.
5. On the history of French disputes about *le racisme anti-blanc*, see Katelyn E. Knox, *Race on Display in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century France*, Liverpool UP, 2016, pp. 145–150, and Damien Charrieras, "Racisme(s)? Retour sur la polémique du 'racisme anti-Blancs' en France," *De quelle couleur sont les blancs?: Des 'petits Blancs' des colonies au racisme anti-Blancs*, Paris, La Découverte, 2013, pp. 244–252.
6. Unless otherwise indicated, quotations from Taguieff refer to *L'Imposture décoloniale*.
7. To cite but one example, take Andrew Sullivan, who writes in *New York Magazine* about "the cult of social justice on the left, a religion whose

followers show the same zeal as any born-again Christian” (“America’s New Religions,” 7 Dec. 2018, [www.nymag.com/intelligencer/2018/12/andrew-sullivan-americas-new-religions.html](http://www.nymag.com/intelligencer/2018/12/andrew-sullivan-americas-new-religions.html). Accessed 20 Jan. 2022).

8. See Taguieff’s *Les Fins de l’antiracisme* (Paris, Éditions Michalon, 1995).
9. See note 1.

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### Notes on Contributor

**Dorian Bell** is an Associate Professor of Literature and Jewish Studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz. His first book, *Globalizing Race: Antisemitism and Empire in French and European Culture* (2018), traces intersections between antisemitism and imperialism that shaped the emergence of European racial thought. His current book project investigates how shifting notions about whiteness are driving political and cultural change on both sides of the Atlantic.