

UC Berkeley

Other Recent Work

Title

Post-Colonial Cultures and Globalization in France

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8j15f28g>

Author

Hargreaves, Alec G.

Publication Date

2005-05-01

Post-Colonial Cultures and Globalization in France

Alec G. Hargreaves

Florida State University

Most of the papers in this colloquium relate to the territories which the European powers built up overseas during a period of several centuries, part of a process which some theorists of globalization have referred to as a kind of globalization *avant la lettre*. During the colonial period, the main direction of population flows was from Europe to the overseas empires in America, Africa, Asia and Oceania plus forced migrations from Africa to the Americas. One of the unexpected consequences of European empires and their dissolution has been a reversal of those original North to South migratory flows. Since the end of empire, there have been significant population flows from South to North, i.e. from formerly colonized territories to Europe, leading to the rise of post-colonial minorities within the heartland of the former colonial powers. Post-colonial migrants and their descendants constitute new minorities in Europe not only in a demographic sense but also in their social, political and cultural status. Unlike the United States, which from 1965 onwards gave priority to skills-based criteria in selecting migrants, in Europe during the same period the majority of immigrants from former colonies were unskilled and often illiterate. Not surprisingly, the languages they brought with them have generally remained highly marginalized in relation to the national languages of the countries in which they have settled.

Among these culturally hybrid minorities, especially second- and third-generation members born in Europe, the languages of migrants have been steadily displaced by those

dominant in their adopted countries. Yet although these minorities have in many ways acculturated to the lands in which they have settled, in majority ethnic eyes they are often perceived as outsiders. In France, writers originating in former colonies are generally classified scholars and other cultural actors as “Francophone” rather than “French”, even when they are born in France and have French citizenship. As “Francophone” is generally applied to authors who write in French but are perceived as standing outside the national community of France, this label serves in many ways to position minority ethnic writers outside the society in which they live (Hargreaves 1996). Among English-speaking scholars, it is more common to categorize these writers as “post-colonial”, thereby highlighting the political dynamic within which their cultural hybridity is imbricated. What both the “Francophone” and the “post-colonial” approaches have in common is the framing of the cultural production of these minorities within an essentially bilateral center-periphery model, positioning them between the cultural heritage of formerly colonized spaces on the one hand and between the national language and dominant culture of the former colonial power on the other. This bilateral model misses out a whole gamut of other cultural forces rooted in spaces which are neither European on the one hand nor African or Asian on the other. The most important of these additional cultural forces are located primarily within what may be broadly called the dynamic of globalization.

Globalization is itself a highly contested term. Broadly speaking, we may distinguish two main views of it. As Alistair Pennycook notes in his paper, some see it as heterogeneous in nature, spreading, for example, different varieties of world Englishes, while others equate globalization with homogenization and more specifically with the

global hegemony of the United States, mediated through American English. In France, it is the second view of globalization which predominates, certainly among French elites, who in effect see globalization as a new form of imperialism, replacing that of the old European colonial empires. In this new historical phase the old colonial powers in Europe, certainly in countries such as France, now see themselves as the victims of a new imperial power, namely the United States. Other speakers have described some of the efforts which are being made by French political elites working through the Francophonie movement in tandem with similar movements in Lusophone, Hispanophone and Neerlandophone regions to resist the global domination of English. Those elites have been far less concerned with promoting cultural – and more specifically linguistic – diversity within France. Where language policy within France is concerned, their main preoccupation has been to keep English out rather than to promote internal diversity in the form of immigrant or for that matter regional languages.

These official language policies have not prevented large parts of the population in France from embracing very enthusiastically many aspects of Anglophone and more specifically American popular culture. This is true not only of the majority ethnic population but also of the minority ethnic groups originating in former French colonies, the largest of which originate in former French North Africa, i.e. Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. It is on the relationship between language policies, minority cultural practices and globalization that the present paper focuses with specific reference to North African minorities in France. My analysis is divided into two parts. The first of these examines language policies in France and their implications for post-colonial minorities. The second part of the paper looks at the role Anglophone influences among these minorities.

Language policies in France

The mid-twentieth century was marked by what, in a memorable phrase, Toynbee (1948) called the dwarfing of Europe. There were two main strands in this process: the loss of Europe's overseas empires and the rise of a new world order dominated by the United States and the Soviet Union. A new term, "superpower", was coined to reflect this quantum leap in the global status of the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., superseding an international system long dominated by European states which had been accustomed to thinking of themselves as great powers. Nowhere were these trends resisted more fiercely than in France. While Britain divested herself more or less voluntarily of her empire, beginning with the jewel in the crown, India, in 1947, France engaged in a series of bloody and ultimately futile military campaigns, most notably in Indochina and then in Algeria, in unsuccessful attempts to resist decolonization. Returning to power amid the political turmoil provoked by the Algerian imbroglio, de Gaulle resolved to cut France's losses and liquidate the overseas empire so as to better reassert the national independence and international standing of France in the face of American hegemony. While the nomenclature of empire disappeared, behind the new vocabulary which replaced it – *coopération, francophonie*, etc. – lay a neo-colonial project through which France was to retain considerable visibility and power in formerly colonized regions. At the same time, France pursued a range of policies designed to limit American power. The two strands in this strategy, offensive and defensive, overlapped in the field of language policy.

While the language policies adopted by successive French governments have addressed a number of other matters, including the languages of regional and immigrant minorities, these have always been a secondary consideration compared with the protection of French from American linguistic hegemony and the global promotion of French. These twin imperatives have often been thinly disguised in official discourses, the latest versions of which champion the notion of “diversité culturelle” [cultural diversity]. In February 2003, for example, President Jacques Chirac announced that he would press for the adoption through UNESCO of “une convention mondiale sur la diversité culturelle” [a world convention on cultural diversity] (Chirac 2003). At first sight, it might appear that such a convention would bring benefits to linguistic and other minorities which are currently marginalized or repressed in many countries. Yet far from weakening the power of the state over such minorities, the central feature of Chirac’s proposal was the strengthening of the state in the field of culture, above all by permitting national governments to retain protective measures over the circulation of cultural goods and services while liberalizing international trade in other respects. Although the United States was not explicitly mentioned by Chirac, it was abundantly clear in this and other official pronouncements that “la diversité culturelle” was essentially a coded way of referring to the perceived need to resist American cultural hegemony and protect the national culture of France.

Since the establishment of the Haut Comité pour la Défense et l’Expansion de la Langue Française in 1968, there have been countless government initiatives in pursuit of those twin objectives. Framed initially in the context of France and her former colonies, these measures have increasingly included a European dimension, with France pressing

her EU partners to back protective trade measures in the field of culture, notably through a system of quotas designed to limit American audio-visual imports. Chirac's proposal for a UNESCO-backed world convention was simply an extension of this policy.

France has been far less active in promoting the languages of regional and immigrant minorities. It was not until 1999 that France signed the Council of Europe Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, which had been drawn up seven years earlier. France's signature was hedged around with important conditions guaranteeing the primacy of the French language and implementation was to be limited to only selected parts of the Charter. Even this was considered to be a bridge too far by France's Constitutional Council, which ruled that the Charter could not be ratified without a constitutional amendment, which Chirac refused to facilitate. While some of the Charter provisions have been implemented without a constitutional amendment, and the main official body responsible for coordinating language policy, the D el egation G en erale   la Langue Fran aise [General Delegation for the French Language], has been renamed as the D el egation G en erale   la Langue Fran aise et aux Langues de France [General Delegation for the French Language and the Languages of France], regional languages in France continue to receive very little state support. According to official statistics, in 1997 less than 3 per cent of the nation's children were learning regional languages at school (Bronner 1999). In the same year, France 3, the principal public channel responsible for regional television broadcasting, aired a total of only 324 hours of programs (less than one hour a day) in regional languages; the rest were in French or foreign (mainly English-language) programs sub-titled in French (*Journal officiel* 2001). There is no evidence of any improvement since then.

At first sight, the languages of immigrants may appear less marginalized. In 1998, almost a fifth of children eligible for lessons in immigrant languages under a program known as Enseignement des langues et cultures d'origine (ELCO) were receiving them. But the numbers were falling. In 2002/03, only 70,000 schoolchildren were enrolled, compared with 140,000 twenty years earlier. The number of teachers supporting the program had also been halved. (Petek 2004: 49). Moreover, the French state did not contribute a cent to the cost of these lessons. The ELCO program is paid for entirely by the governments of countries from which migrants come. An important consequence of this is that the languages in the ELCO program are often other than the mother tongues of the children to whom they are taught. This is because the governments concerned are prepared to fund only their official national languages, whereas many migrants and their children speak regional dialects or completely different languages. Thus many children of North African origin learn Berber from their parents, rather than the official language of their home country, Arabic. For them, the ELCO program is in effect an encounter with a foreign language rather than support for their mother tongue. And as the program provides only a few hours of tuition each week, often for only a year or two, the competence acquired by pupils is very limited.

Not surprisingly, French has generally displaced their mother tongue as the principal language of most young people of immigrant origin (Tribalat 1996: 188-213). Very few are able to read and write in Arabic or Berber, making French the only practical option for those with literary aspirations. Most retain at least fragmentary oral competence in the parental language, which is therefore in principle available to them in cultural forms such as music and film which are less centrally dependent than literature

on the written word. A smattering of Arabic and/or Berber is certainly present in the films, songs and indeed novels produced by second- and third-generation North Africans, popularly known as “Beurs”, but except for performers of raï (a popular musical form originating in Algeria) it is rare for them to write and/or perform entire pieces of work in a language other than French. Moreover, borrowings from English are at least as much in evidence as Arabic or Berber and not uncommonly these outweigh the mother tongue. It is to these Anglophone borrowings that I now turn.

Anglophone influences

Since their earliest cultural stirrings thirty years ago, second-generation members of North African and other post-colonial minorities have borrowed liberally from Anglophone models, often in very visible or audible ways and sometimes more subtly. In the late 1970s, one of the first rock bands formed in France by second-generation members of minority ethnic groups performed under the English-language label “Rock Against Police”, which was adapted from “Rock Against Racism”, a name used at that time in England for anti-racist shows given by minority ethnic musicians. In the 1980s, rap music imported from the United States quickly spawned imitations and increasingly distinctive variants produced by groups of mainly minority ethnic youths who, while singing mainly in French, littered their lyrics and stage names with numerous Anglicisms. Today they and their successors, combined with burgeoning cross-over audiences extending deep into the majority ethnic youth market, have helped to make France the largest producer and consumer of rap outside the United States.

One of the first novels by a second-generation North African, Farida Belghoul's *Georgette!*, was inspired by the author's reading of *Invisible Man*, in which the African American novelist Ralph Ellison described the alienating experiences of American Blacks in their dealings with majority ethnic Whites. For her semi-autobiographical account of the experiences of young second-generation North African women in France, Ferrudja Kessas chose the English-language title *Beur's Story*, alluding to two American movies: the multi-ethnic "West Side Story" and the romantic "Love Story". American references are equally present in "Beur" cinema. In "Bâton Rouge" (1985), one of the first movies directed by a second-generation Algerian, Rachid Bouchareb, the "Beur" protagonists seek to escape their dead-end lives in France by traveling to the United States in the hope of finding better fortune there. Bouchareb would later direct "Poussières de vie" (1995), about abandoned Eurasian children fathered by American soldiers during the Vietnam War and "Little Senegal" (2001), exploring the experiences of French-speaking Africans living in New York City.

Bearing in mind that most North Africans in France have no ancestral connections with English-speaking world, their fascination with America is striking. This fascination has two main variants. The first arises from an identification with what Paul Gilroy (1993) called The Black Atlantic. The other lies in the attractions of what may be broadly called the American Dream. The Black Atlantic symbolizes in part resistance to white domination and stigmatization. The American Dream is more usually associated with majority ethnic, "white" norms. It represents success – most obviously economic success. Where an identification with the Black Atlantic may often stand for subversive, oppositional thinking among young North Africans in France, the American Dream

represents a kind of escape hatch from the stigmatized status of post-colonial minorities in France to a land of individual opportunity on the other side of the Atlantic. Yet the distinction between these two dimensions of the American experience is less watertight than it may appear at first sight. In their reappropriation of Anglophone cultural spaces, the “Beurs” adapt them to the specificities of their own situation in France. If they identify with African Americans this is not simply because of a shared stigmatized status but above all because African Americans are seen as models of success in countering racism and successfully pressing for inclusion in mainstream society. It should not be forgotten that one of the most eloquent statements of the American Dream was made by an African American, Martin Luther King, who in a famous speech in Washington declared: “I have a dream”. That dream was of the inclusion of previously stigmatized minorities within mainstream society on an equal footing with the majority ethnic population. While some Beur activists have identified with the separatist spirit incarnated in the 1960s by the Black Panthers or more recently by the Nation of Islam, most second-generation North Africans aspire to inclusion within French society rather than separation from it. An American route to incorporation within French society may seem a paradoxical notion. Yet while U.S. global power has engendered deep distrust and resentment among French elites, at a popular level America has long been regarded by many Frenchmen and women as the global trend-setter in cultural fashions and the pinnacle of socio-economic success. In identifying with American models, young North Africans in France have in many ways been sharing in the kinds of aspirations felt by many members of the majority ethnic population. More than anything else, Anglophone

popular culture represents for post-colonial minorities in France today the hope of an end to the stigmatization inherited from the colonial period.

References

- Bronner, Luc (1999) "Moins de 3% des élèves pratiqueraient, selon l'éducation nationale", in *Le Monde*, 21 July.
- Chirac, Jacques (2003) "Eriger la diversité en principe du droit international", in *Le Monde*, 4 February.
- Gilroy, Paul (1993) *The Black Atlantic : Modernity and Double Consciousness*. London : Verso.
- Hargreaves, Alec G. (1996) "French, Francophone or Maghrebian? Maghrebian Writers in France", in Nicki Hitchcott and Laïla Ibnlfassi (eds), *African Francophone Writing: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford/Washington, D.C.: Berg, 1996), pp. 33-43.
- Journal officiel* (2001) Parliamentary statement in Assemblée Nationale, no. 56876, January, p. 1528.
- Petek, Gaye (2004) "Les Elco, entre reconnaissance et marginalisation", in *Hommes et migrations*, no 1252, November-December, pp. 45-55.
- Toynbee, Arnold J. (1948) "The Dwarfing of Europe", in *Civilization on trial* (Oxford University Press), pp. 97-125.
- Tribalat, Michèle (1996) *De l'immigration à l'assimilation: enquête sur les populations d'origine étrangère en France* (Paris: La Découverte), pp. 188-213