Children of the Revolution?
Unity and difference in the national identity of French children
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During a series of qualitative interviews conducted in 2007 with French children about their national identity, it was observed that a number of children demonstrated a profound ambivalence between the notions of difference and sameness, and the importance attributed to them – to the point where the recognition of difference was in one case equated with racism. This article draws on these observations, and attempts to understand why these elements might have emerged in our discussions of French national identity. We offer the hypothesis that this aspect of the children’s comments reflects a particular element of French republican ideology, specifically the tendency to refuse the expression of difference in the public sphere, but also the complexity of national identity itself.¹

If the French Revolution of 1789 left many legacies to modern day France, among the most important are the twin visions of France as unified and universal. According to this tradition, France is seen as a unified and homogenous entity, the source of popular sovereignty and equality, and also as founded on an idea of universal values and humanity that is potentially “libratory” for the rest of the world². Both of these two images of France are essential to the republican doctrine that laid the ideological foundations for the French Republic, yet their co-existence is somewhat paradoxical. It is this idea of France as both singular and universal, as both exclusive and inclusive, that we wish to explore in this paper. Moreover, this enigmatic combination of elements at the heart of French republican identity is no less poignant and pertinent today, for all the attention it has attracted in the past.

The idea of unity, of France as “une et indivisible”, has its origins in the dual traditions that lie at the foundation of modern France. For authors such as Pierre Birnbaum, there was an unintentional common ground between the Catholic and republican currents which meant that the revolutionary

¹ Thanks to Geraldine Bozec and Sophie Duchesne for their comments on previous versions of this article.
drive to define national sovereignty and the nation that incarnates it as “one and indivisible” was more in keeping with tradition than it first appeared. Although the origins of the idea of unity are clearly visible in the Catholic tradition of the Ancient Regime, this article will focus on the republican discourse rather than on its Catholic cousin. This is fundamentally because it has become, of the two, far more dominant and thus is more likely to have influenced the perspectives of the children that we spoke to.

However, for some time now, theorists have suggested that the French republican model is fading, that it is in decline, weakened, threatened, or necessarily evolving towards a perspective more in keeping with the reality of France’s cultural diversity. Much of this literature is centered around the problems of compatibility that apparently exist between the traditional French republican model and the social reality of multiculturalism. It has also been suggested that in addition to multiculturalism, the advancing waves of globalization and international finance pose major problems to the fundamental notion of state sovereignty, forcing the ‘evolution’ of the French model of the nation in the direction of pluralism.

In light of challenges such as these, this article aims to focus on two elements of the republican image of France – unity and universalism – by observing the way in which the children in our study talked about difference. We hypothesize that there is a parallel between the ambivalence around the notion of difference that was demonstrated by some of these children, and the curious co-existence of unity and universalism in French republicanism. We will explore this question through an analysis of a series of semi-directive interviews that were conducted with French school children (aged 7–9) in 2007. These interviews aimed to explore the notion of French national identity but were not specifically designed to provoke comments on the two elements we will be focusing on here. Details of the methodology are provided in the appendix.

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The study of any national identity is extremely complex due to the fact that people often have difficulty articulating what it means to belong to “our” nation. National identity commonly appears to be both fundamental and completely irrelevant, omnipresent and yet intangible. Many authors have attributed the power and ubiquity of this phenomenon to its elusiveness – its “chimerical nature”. Michael Billig famously coined the term “banal nationalism” to describe just this; a form of attachment to the nation that is utterly taken for granted but constantly reinforced in the daily “flaggings” that go unnoticed by the individual but which constitute a strong and – for Billig at least – potentially violent bond. However, the potential for extreme reaction is at least partly due to the fact that, for the most part, this attachment is banal, invisible. Its power comes from the fact that when one seeks to interrogate this sense of attachment directly, it appears to vanish, like the man upon the stair in the children’s rhyme. National identity is so deeply ingrained into our idea of who we are that it is extremely complicated to analyze or even verbalize.

This is even more true for the aspects of national identity that are deeply connected to particular ideologies, as is potentially the case for the “republican” aspect of French national identity. Ideologies typically provide “prêt-à-penser” positions that save individuals the trouble of investigating the tensions and conflicts that they commonly take for granted in their identification with a nation or a national group. The question of whether national identity is necessarily ideological is one that we won’t address here, because we are simply looking at the potential connections between an ideology and children’s comments about their nation – and not at all hypothesizing that French national identity can be reduced to these elements. We are simply hoping that a better understanding of these connections might help us understand the complexities of the way French national identity functions today.

When dealing with something that is so intangible and that has such potential to slip into ready-made answers, such as national identity, focusing on children can be extremely advantageous. Adults are likely to struggle with the fact that their national identity is buried under a lifetime of “forgetting”, which as Renan says is essential to its remembering. In contrast, children are still learning to forget, and thus are less likely to take their beliefs for granted, making it easier to examine national identity from a sociological perspective with children. In addition to this, children

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11 As the saying goes : *I met a man upon the stair but when I looked he was not there*....
12 Renan E, *Qu’est-ce qu’une nation ?* Conférence à la Sorbonne. 11 March 1882.
often offer remarkably fresh and surprising perspectives, particularly on things that adults are used to thinking about in a certain way, such as national identity. Robert Connell, in his work with Australian children on political socialization, observed that young children “not only show evidence of socialization but of surprisingly blunt, outspoken, idiosyncratic and imaginative political opinions”\(^\text{13}\). However, he suggested that once they learn to take things for granted this imaginative approach stops, and they start relying on the “right” answers. Thus, the aim of working with young children, here as young as seven years of age, is to better observe the tension between the “right” learned responses, and those that are more spontaneous and based on personal observation and reflection.

This tension is particularly difficult to see when working with adults, as they will often identify inconsistencies in their comments and seek to remedy them – by either eliminating one of the conflicting elements or redefining them in such a way as to minimize the conflict. Children generally do not do this, which makes their “ready-made” answers more visible. It is, of course, this kind of answer that is interesting for us here, and we will be drawing on formulations in the children’s comments that seem to evoke the republican ideas mentioned above – to see the extent to which there might be an element of ideological transmission at work here.

Thus, working from an inductive perspective, we will begin with our observations, before attempting to interpret them theoretically.

**Observations**

As mentioned above, this article originated from observations that were made during the analysis of material collected for a study on the national identity of French children. It appeared that some of the children interviewed demonstrated a deep ambivalence regarding the notion of difference, in that they supported and liked it, but simultaneously rejected it so strongly that in at least one case difference was equated with racism. This was something that appeared in a little less than half the children (six of the fifteen demonstrated it to some degree) and yet it seemed peculiar enough to warrant further analysis. In this section we analyze the comments of the three children who expressed this ambivalence most clearly. However, before looking at their comments in detail, it is useful to briefly describe the general findings of this study.

Broadly speaking, the fifteen children who participated can be divided into three roughly equal groups, based on the way they understand how one comes to “be French”. It is important to stress that these are very schematic divisions because their comments are complex. Children in “Group One” see national identity as being inherited, they link it principally or exclusively to the nationality of one’s parents and family. Children in “Group Two” see it as being linked both to the nationality of one’s parents and where one was born. Children in “Group Three” see it as being primarily or exclusively linked to where you are born, or where you live or want to live. Although this schema may seem to evoke the classic “civic/ethnic” division, we must be wary of over simplification and emphasize that the children’s responses involve many different elements that are not always concordant, these groups being used purely for the purposes of helping the reader in the negotiation of the three cases discussed here.

The three most important findings of this study were the prevalence of national identity, its association with the political, and its frequent ethnic connotations. The first was what we initially set out to establish, verification that French national identity was well developed in children of this age. It was observed that all of the children demonstrated some form of national identity (French in all cases but one – where the child had consciously excluded herself from the French group for reasons of skin color), and that this identity, although not necessarily salient, was important to them and deemed to be worth protecting. Secondly, the national identity that these children mobilized was very political, with strong emphasis on the importance of voting as a means of general legitimization. This was partly surprising because of their age, but it is in keeping with studies on French national identity in adults that have demonstrated the importance of membership to the political community (civic identity is apparently more than just ideology) and in particular the symbolism of the vote. Finally, being French was linked to exclusive ethnic characteristics for many of these children. This observation was very surprising given what we might expect from a country that claims to uphold the defense of universal human rights. It is also antithetical to the idea of civic belonging and the principle of universal citizenship that by definition applies without distinction of “origin, race or religion”. Yet the idea that France was associated with particular ethnic characteristics and

14 To my knowledge no work has been done on the development of national identity in children in France, prior to this study. There is certainly nothing dealing with children under ten years old, although there is a certain amount of research done on the child as a citizen in the school system, which is evidently related to national identity. See for example, Raveaud M. *De l’enfant au citoyen : la construction de la citoyenneté à l’école en France et en Angleterre*. Paris : Presse Universitaire Française, 2006.


specifically with “being white” was common. As might be expected, this position tended to be more expressed by the children in Group Three, although it also occurred in the comments of many Group Two children.

The methodology used here relied on many projective items to keep the interviews interesting for the children and many of the most revealing comments concerning the notion of difference occurred in response to one of the storybooks we read, called *Vive la France*[^17]. This is a story about a little boy called Lucien who doesn’t want to play with a little girl called Khelifa because, as he says, she “isn’t French”. Having said that she can’t be in his group, he then proceeds to exclude all his friends either because they come from families where not everyone speaks French, or because they want to be friends with Khelifa. Evidently Lucien ends up all by himself. This book provided the opportunity to talk about what makes people French, why it seems to be so important for Lucien, whether his idea of being French is the right one and so on. It is worth noting that the terms “difference” and “racism” were not directly used in the book itself.

![Racism is « saying we’re all different »[^18]](image)

The above quotation comes from Ulrich (who is eight and a half) who, as we can see, defined racism as the recognition of difference. This comment arose during our discussion of Lucien, whom he had spontaneously described as racist. In order to understand where this comment comes from, and the ambivalence it incarnates, it is necessary to consider other comments made by this child.

The first thing to note is that Ulrich is a very intelligent boy, a class ahead of his age group, highly articulate and generally well informed about the topics we were discussing. He tells me, for example, about the difference between *jus soli* and *jus sanguinis* (a distinction he learnt from his best friend) and explains that France falls into the latter category, which means that being French is linked to where you were born rather than the nationality of your parents. Evidently, Ulrich is in Group Three.

His responses are generally very thoughtful and he avoids making unqualified statements. For example when we are discussing what life might be like in China he begins by saying that it would be more “sophisticated”[^19] than France, that the children would probably have lots of the latest electronic toys – because his are often marked “Made in China”. However, after some discussion he

[^18]: “[le racisme] c’est dire qu’on est tous différents”
[^19]: “un pays plus sophistiqué”
comes back to this idea and qualifies it by saying that perhaps this would not be the case because even though they make the toys, people in China are also very poor. More generally, he is careful to avoid generalisations, he makes pains to emphasize that he has only been to one part of Germany and so can’t generalize about what Germany might be like. When I ask him to choose a photo of a child from a selection, to be his hypothetical pen pal\textsuperscript{20}, he says he can’t because he “doesn’t know anything about them… don’t know what they like, what they know”\textsuperscript{21}. In the end he chooses the one he thinks will be the most different from him, so that he will learn a lot\textsuperscript{22}. Not only does this imply an appreciation of difference that appears to belie his association of it with racism, but it reveals a general tendency to see the person, rather than a cultural category as important. In other words, he is happy to say where he thinks each of the children might come from but is reluctant to pick one over the others based on that assumption.

However, in our discussion about Lucien and the storybook, Ulrich reveals another, much more negative idea of difference, when he describes racism as being the recognition of difference. Indeed, his understanding of racism seems to depend on the context of the interview. His first definition, the one mentioned above, was given in the first session in the context of Lucien and Vive la France. However in the second interview, when he is talking about having participated in a competition with SOS Racisme, France’s leading anti-racism organization, he gives a different one. This second definition is based on the idea that being racist is not liking those who are different, a more typical depiction of racism as the making of value judgments based on ascribed group belonging. This discussion about SOS Racisme may have re-evoked for him definitions learnt in class and may explain why this was not the definition that he initially used.

That Ulrich is objecting to the recognition rather than the stigmatizing of difference can also been seen in the fact that associates being the “most mean” with the accusation of being the “most different”. When asked, during the first session, who Lucien is the most mean to, his answer is “Lâo, the Chinese boy” (Lâo is excluded from Lucien’s group because his father speaks Chinese). When asked to explain this, Ulrich says that Lucien finds Lâo “the most different from France [sic]”\textsuperscript{23}. This idea of “most different” doesn’t come through the storybook at all and it is something that appears to be pure interpretation on the part of Ulrich. This confirms his initial statement about racism being

\textsuperscript{20} See the methodology appendix
\textsuperscript{21} "je ne sais pas, parce que là je les connais pas du tout, je connais pas ce qu’ils aiment, ce qu’ils connaissent…
\textsuperscript{22} "[je choisis] le plus différent que [sic] moi, pour qu’il m’apprenne plein de choses
\textsuperscript{23} "avec Lâo… le chinois… bah… parce qu’il trouve que c’est lui le plus différent de la France [sic]"
the recognition of difference, to which he has logically extended into the idea that the more different he says someone is, the more racist or mean he is. Moreover, when asked whether he would agree with Lucien that Chinese people are the “most different from France”, he initially says no, and then changes his mind and says “he is kind of right”. Not only does this comment reveal a very negative connotation of the idea of difference, it is made in reference to an entirely personified (and unified) idea of France. The idea of being “most like” or “most different” to France rather than to the French seems to refer to a certain idea of what France is, a unified idea that although unspecified in content, is clearly not compatible with something about “the Chinese boy”. This personified vision of France is very common in nationalist writings about France and some writers, such as Suzanne Citron, see it as being inexorably – although rarely overtly – connected to the nation and the Republic.

Thus, we can see that there is a strong ambivalence here between a positive notion of “difference” that refers to other countries and people with different cultures, and a negative notion that appears in reference to France, and in particular to this very singular personified idea of France.

“he is mean… because he says that she is not the same…”

This quote comes from Ariane, who is eight years old, and is in many ways quite like Ulrich in her comments, although she appears to be more emotively attached to France. Her comments are very affective and she says that it is important to protect (although not necessarily to fight for) France. In addition to this attachment, she expresses the idea of a universal humanity that renders national differences irrelevant. For most of the two interviews she was open, interested and curious about other countries, cultures and peoples. Although she distinguished between countries that are “like us” and “not like us”, she appeared to be more positive and curious about the latter than the former, associating it with the “exotic”. This is interesting because it suggests that in and of itself the idea of difference holds no intrinsic aversion for her, but can be positive, as we saw for Ulrich. When asked to choose her hypothetical pen pal, Ariane says she would prefer to be pen pals with a little girl who she describes as “Chinese” rather than a girl who she says probably comes from a “country like...

24 « oui, il a un peu raison »
25 It appears that this incompatibility stems from the difference between Chinese and “latin languages” – although this explanation is somewhat confused.
27 Il est méchant … parce qu’il dit qu’elle n’est pas pareille"
France—again indicating a preference for difference. However, when she describes what she thinks the Chinese girl would be like, she describes a girl who is essentially like herself, liking horses, and having the same number of brothers and sisters. When asked about any differences there might be between them she says the Chinese girl might be more shy than her, although she admits that she is also quite shy. Ariane doesn’t project the cultural connotations she had earlier described about China (she mentions the cartoon Puca, and that they eat noodles) on to this girl, but rather sees her as a little girl just like herself.

This is in keeping with her vision that nationality is not important because people can live anywhere and it doesn’t change who they are. Unlike several of the other children who happily list the different nationalities in their class, she doesn’t know, or care, where her friends come from; she says “I don’t really know [if the children in my class are French], I’m not really interested in where they were born.” She seems to focus on the person rather than where they come from. Although Ariane has great difficulty generalizing about people—she cannot think of anything to say about “the French”—she happily talks about the difference between countries. Her perspective seems to be quite universalistic in the sense that her comments all come back to an idea of a common humanity that transcends national differences. She sees herself as French because she was born here, but she could become American if she lived there, just as people who come to live in France can become French. Like Ulrich, Ariane is in Group Three.

To come back to the question of sameness and difference, Ariane describes Lucien as racist and criticizes him for his meanness. Moreover, she specifically relates his being mean to the fact that he says that Khelifa isn’t the same as the others. For her “it isn’t good to think like that, because everyone is … well… everyone is the same.” The importance of sameness and the idea of meanness as the recognition of difference, echoes the comments made by Ulrich that we have already seen. It is also important to notice that this affirmation of sameness is made against a negative notion of difference which seems to belie the impression she has hitherto given of difference as something positive.

This idea of sameness that is presented by Ariane is complicated by her comments in the second interview, where she makes a parallel between the story of Lucien (seen in the first interview) and

28 “un pays qui ressemble un peu à la France”.
29 « je ne sais pas vraiment, je ne m’intéresse pas vraiment à où ils sont nés »
30 « c’est pas bien de penser ça parce que tout le monde est..bah… tout le monde est pareil »
another story of a conquering general (seen in the second interview). She says that that the general and his army think “that their country is unique, a bit like Lucien”. She thus makes a direct parallel between wanting to make other countries like one’s own and discriminating against those who are not like oneself. However, she goes on to say that it is impossible to make people like oneself because “everyone is unique, everyone is not the same as someone else…” This refusal of sameness seems to go directly against her earlier statement that in fact everyone is the same.

Thus we can see that in Ariane’s comments there is a fundamental ambivalence between sameness and difference. It seems important for her to say both that everyone is unique and that everyone is the same – perhaps because “being unique” is not seen as the same as “being different”. We might hypothesize that the former is an individualistic vision, where uniqueness is built on the foundation of shared characteristics, whereas the latter refers to difference expressed in contravention of this fundamental sameness which must then be defended. In any case we can see that the notion of difference is once more seen in a positive light when it concerns other cultures and peoples, but that when it comes to France, it is sameness that is emphasized, even if sameness passes through a universal potential for individuality.

**He rejects them **because he thinks they’re different from him**

Martin, who is nine, makes the same connection as Ulrich and Ariane, between meanness and the recognition of difference, but unlike them, he doesn’t explicitly link this to racism. What is interesting about Martin’s position is that he makes what are essentially the same comments as the other two, regarding the tension between difference and sameness, but unlike the other two he does it from a position that sees France and the French as an ethnic category. Whereas Ulrich and Ariane both seem to refer more to the idea of universal humanity and suggest that the idea that personhood primes over national or ethnic categorization, this is much less true for Martin.

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31 McKee D. *Les Conquérants*, Kaléidoscope, 2004. This is another children’s storybook used in the interviews. It tells the story of a general that sets out to conquer all the other countries to “make them like us – for their own good”. It was the opportunity for discussions about war, us and them, etc.

32 « ils pensaient que leur pays était unique, un peu comme Lucien »

33 « [ce n’est] pas possible de rendre les gens comme nous, parce que tout le monde est unique. Tout le monde n’est pas pareil que quelqu’un »

34 « c’est un enfant qui trouve qu’une petite fille arabe est différente de lui, et bah… parce qu’on est tous différents les uns des autres, et bah il les rejette tous de sa bande… [il les rejette] parce qu’il trouve qu’ils sont différents de lui. »
He sees national belonging as being essentially inherited from one’s parents – if you are born in France but don’t have French parents, then you aren’t French. However, this ethicized image of France coexists with the knowledge that some people do “become” French; he takes the example of a boy in his class who was born in France, but who is “African” because that is where his parents were born. He says that “after a certain amount of time, apparently he’ll become French … five years I think, if he stays in France for five years”\(^35\). This is quite curious because Martin is simultaneously adamant that it is impossible to change one’s nationality, and yet he recognizes the eventuality of his classmate becoming French. Despite its apparent contradictions however, this statement does demonstrate just how important the familial link is for Martin. He is in fact applying regulations regarding the naturalization of immigrants (the 5 year waiting period) to those who were born here to foreign parents – as though both of these groups are not French to the same extent. His rather hesitant formulation, “apparently”, may well indicate a lack of conviction with this idea. He is much less sure of this, than of the idea that one inherits one’s parents’ nationality. True to this perspective, Martin is the only child who agrees with Lucien’s criteria of being French – having to have a French or French-speaking family. He is undeterred by the fact that Lucien is such an unsympathetic character and just simply says that he agrees with his definition. He is of course in Group One – where the emphasis on family connection is pre-eminent.

In addition to his emphasis on the role of heredity, Martin also seems to have a clear idea of what a French person is like, in terms of ethnic characteristics. When asked in the first interview to talk about French people, he didn’t hesitate to describe them as, “compared to Africans it’s not the same skin color”\(^36\). When pressed to explain this further, he said that people in France are “mostly beige or white”\(^37\). He comes back to this idea in his discussion of the pen pals in the second interview, saying that the little girl with blond hair is probably French because “she looks like people you see every day”\(^38\) and he goes on to say that “they don’t have the same skin color, their skin is more matt [sic], and Chinese and Japanese [people] generally have eyes that are kind of pointy [sic], like her”\(^39\). This is not to say that these characteristics are his only associations for the different countries and peoples that are discussed, but simply that these connotations appear in his comments much more readily than they do in the comments of the two other children we have seen.

\(^35\) “\(\text{au bout d'un certain temps il parait qu'il devient français...5 ans je crois, si on habite 5 ans en France}\)"

\(^36\) “\(\text{par rapport aux Africains, c'est pas la même couleur de peau}\)"

\(^37\) “\(\text{plutôt beige ou blanche}\)"

\(^38\) “\(\text{elle ressemble à les gens de tous les jours}\)"

\(^39\) “\(\text{ils ont pas la même couleur de peau, ils ont la peau un peu plus matte [sic], et puis généralement les chinois et les japonais ils ont les yeux un peu hérissés [sic], et elle aussi...}\)"
It is important to emphasize here that his ethnic categorization of France, and other countries doesn’t by any means imply ethnocentric preference. On the contrary, Martin is highly critical of France, and indeed one of the least nationalistic children we spoke to. He criticizes France on several occasions for being unwelcoming to African people who come here. He doesn’t understand why France would be like this given that French people are – in his experience of holidaying in Morocco – welcomed very well in Africa. Moreover, although he defines himself as French, he doesn’t see this as being a particularly important part of himself – at least when it is directly addressed, its latent importance comes through in other ways.

Despite the fact that he apparently sees France as being implicitly ethnically homogenous – as a national category if not as social reality – he criticizes Lucien for saying that his classmates are different because, as he sees it, “we are all the same.” However, he goes on to qualify this, saying “we’re not all exactly the same, we don’t have the same personalities, but we’re still the same because we are from the human race.” Here we see the same appreciation of the idea of sameness as we did in Ariane and Ulrich’s comments, although from a perspective that is otherwise quite different. He explicitly emphasizes the importance of a universal humanity in the same way that they do, but unlike them he combines it with an otherwise ethnic vision of France. His emphasis on ethnicity is perhaps why he stresses that being from the human race doesn’t make us exactly the same; that, in fact, although we are all the same “we are in part a bit different from each other.” His formulation is ambiguous here, it is unclear whether he means “part of us is different” or “we all come from different parts”. In any case he seems to be caught between a need to say that we are all the same and that we are all different.

The emergence of this tendency to combine a positive idea of difference in the context of other countries and a negative one in the context of France, and in particular the similarity of the ways in which this latter was formulated by the children – relying on the expressions of “sameness”, “being all the same”, or linking meanness to saying someone is different – led us to the hypothesis that there is something more behind this tension than a child’s difficulty in articulating his or her opinions. If it were merely that, we might have seen it in more of the children. On the contrary, this tension

40 « elle est pas accueillante par exemple parce qu’il y a certains Africains qui se font rejeter…c’est pas bien… elle devrait les accueillir, parce que nous, on nous accueille très bien en Afrique, et nous on les accueille pas forcément très bien. »

41 « parce qu’on est tous pareils »

42 « on n’est pas tous exactement pareils, on n’a pas les mêmes caractères, mais on est quand même pareils, on est tous de la race humaine »

43 « parce qu’on est tous … d’une partie différent des uns des autres »
between difference and sameness, although articulated by a minority, seems to be potentially linked to a broader theme in French national identity.

**Discussion**

These three children seem have one vision of difference that applies to other countries and peoples and another that applies in reference to France. It might be argued that this is because Lucien’s reaction to the diversity of his classmates is negative and destructive and it is to this that the children are responding negatively, rather than to the notion of difference itself. However, it appears on closer examination that this is not the case. In these three examples it is the recognition, rather than the refusal of difference that is objected to, which is why they resort to the defense of being “the same”. If it were the case that they were responding to the rejection of difference as such, we might expect to see statements like, “we’re different but that’s no reason to exclude someone” or “being different doesn’t stop us being friends”. The discussion of Lucien’s behavior never evoked these kinds of “difference friendly” articulations – although this seems to be the fundamental message of the book. All of the six children who evoked the idea of difference in description of Lucien’s behavior did so to criticize him for going against the principle of sameness, rather than for discriminating.

The possible link between the children’s tendency to refuse the recognition of difference and the importance of unity in republican ideology, lies in the idea of the neutral public sphere, the republican notion of citizenship and laïcité. Before we come to the question of whether it is reasonable to suppose continuity between an ideology and the comments of children, we will first look more carefully at those elements of republican ideology that are of interest to us here.

What is essential for us in the republican idea of unity is its fundamental link to citizenship and national sovereignty. According to republican philosophy, it is because the community of citizens is formed from individuals that are equal and undifferentiated that national sovereignty and the general will can be seen as unified. However, in order for the citizen body to attain this state of cohesion, citizens must leave all private affiliations, attachments and identities in the private sphere. They must undergo what Yves Déloye calls an “identity revolution”. Thus, when any individual adopts the role of the citizen – i.e. is outside the private sphere – he or she must leave behind all their particular attributes that might differentiate them from their fellow citizens, in order to engage in a
common civic identity. Thus, the state must require citizens to unite in this identity in order to fight against the perpetual threat of internal divisions that might destabilize it.

This of course does not necessarily mean the eradication of differences, simply their depoliticization. Dominique Schnapper for example sees a clear divide between national identity, which is not based on (and therefore does not need to challenge) pre-existing cultural identities, and ethnicity, which is. Theoretically, the unity necessary for the constitution of a nation – a community of citizens, all individual, all alike in their membership – can be achieved by moving beyond (rather than wiping away) individual identities linked to ethnicity, religion etc. However, her position on this is somewhat ambiguous because she argues that membership of the political community means “replacing the membership of individuals to their pre-existing ethnicities, with their objective and symbolic participation in another collective”. Indeed, according to Schapper, this replacement tends to take the same roads as the ethnic identity that proceeded it and especially in creating affective and emotional ties via socialization in the family. There is some ambiguity here as to how much sacrifice is required for the inclusion into the national group. Must one replace, move past, repress or erase particular identities? One thing is clear, however, whatever happens to these personal affiliations, they must not appear in, nor impinge in any way upon, the public sphere. This is the essential point that is embodied in the French concept of laïcité, too often crudely assimilated to secularism and the simple division of church and state. This concept is essential for the creation of the “neutral public space” that is the basis for equality in a community of citizens. It thus implies the evacuation of not only religious but also ethnic, territorial and other group identities.

In conjunction with this requirement for unity is a “desire for universalism” that is based on the idea of universal reason and thus, at least historically, on the exportability of the French model. Universalism can be seen as the direct product of France’s political project in the sense that the creation of a political community that transcends ethnic and particularistic identities aims to draw on that which is universal in humanity. Because it is based on the idea of common and fundamental human dignity, it must therefore be applicable to all those who want to belong. Exclusion or discrimination against potential members on the grounds of a particularistic identity would mean rendering those identities political and thus disturbing the neutrality of the political community. The

46 Schnapper D, p 194.
nation as a political community must thus be inclusive to all because of its foundation in the universal principles of human rights.\(^47\)

The work of Sophie Duchesne has done much to illustrate the tension between these two elements of unity and universalism. In *Citoyenneté à la Française*, she outlined two major approaches to French citizenship, one based on the idea of inheritance and the other on universalist scruples. According to those who represent the second form of this identity, being a citizen is much more inclusive than it is exclusive and revolves around belonging to the human race and having access to certain universal rights and abilities. It is thus much more to do with chance than birthright (more represented in the idea of inheritance).\(^48\) Duchesne’s work is one of the few to address this question from the perspective of the members of the national community, rather from that of political philosophy. She thus demonstrates that the discourse on universalism and humanism is present in the discourses of a large part of her interviewees and, above all, that for them it is strongly connected (although clearly paradoxically) to France and French citizenship.

Duchesne also suggests that the tension that is present between the two models she constructs, is reminiscent of the tension between “a desire for universalism and a need for a distinctive identity” and that this tension leads to people feeling uneasy about fulfilling contradictory requirements. She goes further and suggests that this is linked to “a significant difficulty in understanding pluralism, a tendency to confuse equality and uniformity.”\(^49\) This is of course the central issue that concerns us here, that the necessity of unity and the difficulty regarding pluralism potentially leads to a reluctance to acknowledge cultural and ethnic differences more generally – just as the requirement “neutrality” has been accused of slipping towards a standard that is implicitly homogenous.\(^50\)

In light of this, we might expect that the idea of unity based on universal values of humanity implies a certain amount of antipathy towards the expression of difference in the public sphere and, perhaps as a consequence, an implicit appreciation of the idea of sameness. Indeed, in this context, the refusal of difference that is demonstrated by these three children, combined with their appreciation of


\(^{50}\) Both of these arguments are defended by Patrick Simon and Sylvia Zappi in the special edition of *Mouvements. La Politique Republican de l’Identité*, no.38, mars–avril, 2005. See also particularly the contribution by Vincent Geisser, “Ethnicité Républicaine versus République ethnique?” pp 19–15.
difference when applied to other countries and the idea of universal human “sameness” seem less surprising.

However, what is unclear is the extent to which we can expect the republican ideology to have an effect on the way French children see France today. Not only are these children growing up in a world of global culture and postmodern identity construction, but the “republican model” has undergone severe criticism in recent years. It is widely considered by all but the most tenacious of its defenders to not be functioning in its “pure” form but rather in an attenuated version that incorporates notions of cultural pluralism to some extent.  

Jean Baudouin and Philippe Portier, for example, detail at some length the reasons they see as being behind the “obsolescence” of the republican model. A combination of demographic changes resulting from evolutions in immigration patterns since the 1980s, the expansion of moral relativism, postmodern individualism, and the pervasive but divisive values of capitalism, all contribute to the “loss of plausibility” of this model of civic integration. However, these authors also claim that in the wake of a weakened republican model a new French model has risen that increasingly recognizes ethnic pluralism, and is even progressively blurring the traditionally crystal clear boundaries between the church and the state.  

William Safran suggests that the weakening of the French republican model dates back to the 1950s and the introduction of legislation permitting the teaching of regional languages (1951) and the full liberty of parents to choose names for their children regardless of how those names would affect the child’s integration into the national community (1981 and 1984). He also underlines the importance of a change in the dominant discourse that occurred in the 1970s and 1980s, which emphasized the “right to be different”, and leaned towards multiculturalism and proposals for the introduction of ethnic-language publications, museums, and the promotion of ethnic cultural activities. However, there are factors which indicate that the republican model is not yet ready to be buried, including the refusal of France to sign the European charter on the protection of minority languages and the final decision of the Stasi commission in

51 Safran, op cit. p 443.
53 Safran, op cit. p 444.
2003 on the wearing of religious signs at school, that overturned the more pluralist findings of its predecessors\textsuperscript{54}.

It is evidently difficult to ascertain the extent to which an ideology remains influential and our role here is not to attempt to analyze public or political discourses on this matter. Given that we are concerned with children, the logical place to look for the perpetuation of republican ideology is the school. The public school system, which educates the vast majority of French pupils, is still heavily influenced by the republican tradition, and still required to be faithful to its traditional mission of transmitting republican values, especially *laïcité*, to the next generation. However, in the late 1970s and 1980s, movements were made in the direction of “intercultural education” that would facilitate the integration of the children of immigrants, by encouraging “intercultural understanding” in the curriculum\textsuperscript{55}. This movement coincided with a brief period during which the political left adopted a discourse on the value of difference and the refusal of ethnocentrism, which tended towards a much more multicultural perspective than was traditional\textsuperscript{56}. However, the tentative steps made in this direction were careful not to contradict the republican foundation of *laïcité*\textsuperscript{57}. Moreover, these claims for cultural tolerance and diversity were subsequently drowned in the clamor surrounding the first “headscarf affair” of 1989 and its later successive eruptions. Whilst the extreme right monopolized the previously leftist vocabulary of the “right to be different” (which they conceived in ethnocentric and exclusive terms)\textsuperscript{58}, the dominant discourse became once again that of the defense of republican values, the neutrality of the public sphere and especially the school.

It must of course be emphasized that the school environment is the keystone of the republican system and its values, which is why the protection of this space as neutral has been such a source of controversy. The principle role of the school system as the place of integration is clearly underlined in the 2002 primary school curriculum which reads “primary education must be faithful to the great

\textsuperscript{54}In contrast with the previous findings of the Constitutional Council, that had deemed expulsion from school because of religious dress (in most cases the wearing of Islamic headscarves) to be against the principle of laïcité, the Stasi Commission that was set up to investigate this question found that “ostentatious” signs of religious belonging were against the principle of neutrality and should be forbidden from school. It also suggested that the principle of laïcité should be re-affirmed in the classroom and in teacher training.

\textsuperscript{55}Baudouin and Portier, *op cit*, p. 33.


\textsuperscript{57}Lorcerie uses texts from the high school curriculum to show that there is a discourse of acceptance of diverse cultures, but only within the bounds of a “common culture” that is taken for granted. Lorcerie, *“Education interculturelle”*, *op cit* p 183-184.

inspiration of the republican school: offering children equal opportunity and successful integration in French Society.” The implication is that the opportunity for equality and integration comes through a reluctance to differentiate among the students\(^59\). However, this curriculum does emphasize to a certain extent the “respect and acceptance of difference”\(^60\), even cultural difference, something that undoubtedly reflects the changing discourse regarding pluralism. However, current research conducted by Geraldine Bozec suggests that today’s teachers do still emphasize the need to evacuate racial ethnic or religious differences from the classroom – regardless of the curriculum. She reminds us that although the “respect of differences” is mentioned in the official documents, it is posed in such a way as to immediately be limited by the recognition of universal humanity and rights – the unity of the group as citizens. She argues that students are above all encouraged to learn that they belong to the same “human group” whatever their particular differences, but that this discourse of inclusion often occurs through the attenuation of difference and the valorization of equivalence\(^61\).

Although barely modified in the revisions of 2007, the curriculum has been radically changed for the beginning of the school year in September 2008. Although this curriculum is still under discussion, and subject to some polemic, all reference to the “respect and acceptance of difference” has been removed and the “importance of shared values” is emphasized in its place\(^62\) – perhaps another indication that the more things change the more they stay the same.

The confusion between the appreciation of difference on an international level and the importance of belonging to the human race combined with the importance of rejecting or attenuating difference when it is expressed in the public – or the school space – may indeed have its source in the classroom. However, as the work of Bozec also demonstrates, teachers have very different ways of responding to the curriculum and emphasize different things in their classes. This variation between the practices of different teachers is one of the potential explanations for the fact that these ideas only appeared in the comments of some children and were not more widespread. Another potential


explanation is that other socializing actors, such as family and the media have different effects on different children, which may have mitigated republican messages conveyed by the school system.

On one hand we have seen a certain transmission of an aspect of French republican ideology that sees difference as being potentially detrimental to the maintenance of national unity, but on the other we have also seen that this co-exists with another, cosmopolitan element of the children’s comments that was more appreciative of difference. It is possible that what is being transmitted to these children, via various socializing agents such as the school, parents and the media, is not republican universalism in its mythic and monolith form but an expression of this ideology that is rooted in the tensions and contradictions that we have seen here.

For Renan, as we saw earlier, a large part of national identity is based on forgetting through which an accepted vision of the nation and the national community is established and perpetuated. However, that which is forgotten must implicitly be remembered or its role in the construction of national identity would be negligible rather than fundamental – it is because it functions in a dialectic with the act of remembering that forgetting is so important (Billig 1995: 37. We might go further and suggest that this forgetting does not only apply to the past but to certain elements of national identity itself – specifically to the tensions and contradictions that underlie it. It may be that the two visions of difference that we have observed in the comments of these children, are both elements of French national identity as it operates in adults. Perhaps with age however, this ambivalence becomes a tension that is more readily ‘forgotten’ than analyzed or openly articulated, which is why it is less immediately visible in the comments of adults on these questions (Duchesne 1997).

This brings us back once again to the importance of studying national identity through its development in childhood. As we have seen here, national identity as a way of perceiving both the self and the world, appears to be established well before the end of primary school – and perhaps even earlier. Moreover, children at this age do not yet take the elements of their national identity completely for granted – they are still questioning things that in a few years will have become completely self-evident and banal. They still voice things that they will soon ‘forget’ are important and which the adults around them leave unsaid. Social taboos are also forms of perpetual forgetting. These children voice things that many adults would not, particularly regarding ethnicity and color, taboo subjects that are no less poignant because they are denied articulation, and which through their ‘forgetting’ contribute to the way France is remembered and perpetuated.

However, we have also seen that in spite of its tensions and complications (or perhaps because of them) national identity is being perpetuated through the socialization of young children. This is by
no means without significance at a time when the various forces of globalization, regionalism, localism and tribalism are allegedly sounding the death knell of the nation. These are the children of post-modernity and global culture and yet they are clearly also vested with an identity that links them to a nation, and which informs the way they see themselves, their place in the world and the world itself. This of course is not to say that national identities are immutable or that there is no evolution in the way they function or interact with other identities, but it does suggest a certain continuity of content, which in turn suggests that these identities – for all their banality – are maintained and perpetuated through their transmission to children.
Appendix – Methodology

The interviews that will be analyzed here come from a qualitative study on French national identity in children that was conducted in the autumn of 2007 – coincidentally during the French presidential election campaign. It was designed to allow the children to express their views on topics relating to France, being French, other countries, other nationalities, Europe, war and national politics. It aimed to gain an insight into the precocity with which national identity develops and what its implications are for how young children view, and learn to view, the world. For this purpose it was necessary to develop a methodology which was fixed enough to be comparative, whilst being flexible enough to follow the different children in their associations and be able to explore the reasoning behind their often unpredictable comments.

Based on a semi-directive structure, the interviews were conducted over two sessions (roughly a week apart depending on the availability of the participants), which enabled us to gauge the consistency of the child’s comments and also to explore further certain ideas that were touched on in the initial session. Incorporated in these interviews were a number of projective materials used to make the session more engaging, less formal and less monotonous for the child. Two children’s story books touching on themes of nationality, belonging, inclusion and group conflict were used for this purpose.63 We also incorporated games and drawings to facilitate non-verbal expression. Children were asked, for example, to draw France and add three things they thought would “make someone recognize right away that it is France”. In another exercise the child was asked to consider photographs of four children, and say where they thought each child came from and then choose the one that they would most like to have as a pen pal. This exercise was aimed to see how the children categorized people (whether they used countries, continents or ethnic groups for example), what they saw as being the signifiers of the categories they used, and whether these groupings were associated with any kind of preference or value judgments.64

In addition to this, a card exercise was devised that involved placing a number of cards with pictures of different things (food, landscapes, political symbols, flags, national figures, pop culture figures) on a piece of paper, around a drawing of the child. The child was asked to place these cards in order of most liked (around him/herself) to least liked (as far away as possible). This exercise aimed to gain an

64 For examples of this kind of technique to examine the way children use stereotypes, cf. Barret M. Children’s knowledge, beliefs and feelings about nations and national groups, Psychology Press, Hove, 2007.
understanding both of how the child responded to and organized some of the different symbolic elements in his/her environment, and also of how affect was expressed for these different items. The child was asked to comment on the placements as they were made and these comments were essential to understanding the distribution of these symbols and their meaning for the individual child.

The interviews with the children lasted roughly one hour and were conducted in the family home. On the occasion of the first session, an informative interview was also conducted with one or both of the child's parents. The parent's interview aimed to contextualize the responses of the child and focused on family background and circumstance, as well as parent's political affiliations and attitudes towards France and being French.

The families were contacted either by intermediary contacts or through schools and associations. The children were all born in France, with several having parents who were not. The group of participants was made up of 8 boys and 7 girls, aged between seven and ten years. Among them were two pairs of siblings. The families all lived in or around Paris and particular efforts were made to maintain a diversity of socio-economic and political backgrounds within the group.
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