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*References to the “republican model” within ordinary discussions about the racial issue in France :  
Another dimension of the “crisis of national model of integration” ?*

- ***Introduction and context***

This paper, inspired from my current doctoral research, aims at presenting and describing how French ordinary people use the notion of "national model" and especially the "republican model" within everyday discussions. Then, more than analyze this idea of "national model of integration" through its macro social, political or juridical implications, my reflexion is more dealing with the pragmatic functions, the contents and the boundaries of the references to this concept within ordinary controversies in the French context. In order to present and discuss this dimension of the analysis, I have to briefly summarize the main goal of my doctoral reflexion. Focusing on the idea of ordinary anti-racism, I try to identify how individuals, participating in a social situation concerned, on way or another, by the racial issue, express their opposition to racism. More broadly, I'm focusing on interactions and discussions in such situations and I try to unpack the structure of legitimacy and justification that organize such situations and then to understand the formation and dynamic processes of ordinary categories used to interpret "racism" and "anti-racism". In terms of theoretical background, I mostly mobilize reflexion of the pragmatic sociology or phenomenology around models of justification, notably Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thevenot or Alfred Schutz works, the notion of moral boundaries shaped by Michèle Lamont and also methodological tools developed by the interactionism and ethnomethodology. Since I confront this problematic of “ordinary anti-racism” to the fieldwork, one of my orientation consists in understanding the frequency and importance of the recovery to the national model made by individuals in such discussions around the racial issue. Deepen, observing and identifying these frequent uses of the "republican model" in ordinary discourses allow to think about the social function of such references in everyday discussions but also such an approach of the national model could enlighten some aspects of the conflictual dimension about the racial issue in France and therefore what we called the "crisis of the national integration model".

Concerning the empirical dimension, as in my doctoral research, the present paper will

focus on the observation and analysis of discussions of internet users' comments on French Press websites. In order to clarify and illustrate as possible my presentation, my argumentation will be based on a specific case, an article published on the website of the French Newspaper Le Monde in October 2009. Briefly, this article appears as a testimony of a French journalist, Mustapha Kessous, originated from Maghreb, and enlighten a large range of ordinary situations where he experienced or perceived, implicitly or not, a form of racial prejudice. In a short time, this article became famous on Internet and received more than 400 comments in less than 40 hours. As I conducted my previous cases on this particular fieldwork, my works consisted in two steps. First, it consists in observing and identifying the mains constructions used by internet users to express their interpretations and/or opposition to racial prejudice. After that, I'm taking advantage of the conflictual aspect specific to the exchange on Internet to focus my work on the cleavages and controversies that appears between participants. Regarding the previous similar cases that I observed, the arguments and controversies produced by the comments on this article seems to me strongly representative of ordinary discussions concerning the racial issue in France. More over, on the uses of the “national model” within such discussions, the present commentators express a large range of ordinary definitions and interpretations of the “republican model”.

My presentation will be organized in two parts : first, through a static analysis, I will focus on **the different manners participants express the idea of “national model” and the diverse interpretations of a such concept in the discussion**. The second part will focus on a dynamic way in **presenting and explaining the confrontations between participants regarding these polysemous interpretations**.

- **Expressions & interpretations of the “republican model” within internet users' comments**

As I explained before, the article on internet received a large amount of comments, more than 400, in a couple of days. Considering the volatility and constraints in term of identity and argumentation on such a social space, I made a selection of the exploitable comments. As I made in previous cases, I started the selection in only keeping the comments that are clearly expose arguments linked to the article, either the testimony of the journalist or larger issues like racism, integration or immigration. After that, taking advantage of information given by the website (you can access to the previous comments of a user posted on different articles), I chose to dismiss comments from participants that wrote less than ten posts on the website. Note that this last tool allow to focus on participants that manage, on way or another, a virtual identity on the community

and then ensure a certain continuity between the comments of an user. Conversely, in focusing on participants that post less than 10 messages, I often observed an important heterogeneity between comments of a same user and sometimes a clear contradiction. Then, in focusing on comments that clearly give an opinion about the article and avoiding “free rider” comments, my corpus represents near than 250 comments.

To come back on the idea of the uses of the national model made by participants, I also made a selection of the comments that express, one way or another, a particular references to the national model. From the most explicit side, a lot of comments use the term “republican” in different manners : the republican system, the republic, the republican integration, the republican principles and/or values,etc..The term “laïcité” is also present in a variety of comments and it's often use in a grammatical form that ensure its French and national character. (the French laïcité, our laïcité, Laic nation or country,..). After that, I also take in account the uses of the term “France” itself through all expression in which the term is understood within a historical and particular representation. Then we get a large rang of comments that contain the expression “The humanistic France”, “France, the historical host nation”, “France of the Enlightenment” “France country of the human rights”. As last, I also analysed comments that express the idea of liberty, equality or fraternity as a “national” characteristic, namely through the French Motto. Considering these different expressions, that implicitly and collectively refers to the idea of a “particular national model”, I notice that more than 120 comments overs the 250 exploitable use at least one of these constructions. Nevertheless, as we are going to examine, the collective reference to this “national system” do not mean that the arguments that contain these elements are homogeneous and that the discussion is consensual and stable.

In studying these comments through our problematic concerning the “ordinary anti-racism”, I divided the different comments in three group that I named the “surprised”, the “pragmatic” & the “opponent”. Each group have a specific point of view on the testimony made by the journalist and a specific interpretation of the issue of racial prejudice through its relation with the French national model.

The first group, focused on the unfair and the scandal of a such experience in contemporary France. The racial prejudice experienced by the author is perceived as “pathological” (Durkheim) in a country that concretely ensure and reproduce the principle of equality through the republican process. In other words, in this camps, the republican process is strongly understood through the idea of equality and also accepted as a modern and active process. In other words, the story written by the journalist is interpreted as a particular and relatively rare case of dysfunction of the republican model. In the same way, we can notice that in that group, the different situations where

racial prejudice were present are largely explained by the racist character of its interlocutors. Moreover, the phenomenon of “racism” is here connected with the idea of “archaïsm” and/or “non evolved” and in opposition, the national model, based on the republican idea of equality, is interpreted as a modern and contemporaneous process.

The second group, named the “pragmatic”, is most present in the comments. Even if these comments express a strong opposition to the racial prejudice, conversely to the first group, the story is understood as “normal”, in the durkheimian sense, regarding the manners that elite or politicians are currently mistreating the republican ideal. Here the republican model is more understood as a French heritage and also as a process that elite and politicians have to maintained and applied. In this way, we found a lot of critics targeting the current government and that insists on its responsibility regarding the current climate around discrimination. Then the experience of the journalist is understood as a consequence of a lack of republicanism in the contemporaneous French society. Following the idea of “normality” of the prejudice through this acceptance of the republican model, we could also point out the fact that a lot of comments pertaining to this group insist on the generalization of injustice in the French society (indistinctly through race, class and gender). Then they use this idea of a global injustice to frame their interpretations of this case. This overlapping between injustice and the bending of the republican model enlighten the specific interpretation of this second group that define the “ French national model” as a kind of defense against the current worst tendencies of the globalized world. Note that within this arguments, a lot of comments invoke the neo-liberal processes as the main producer of such injustice and then the principal enemy of the republican model.

At last, the final group named “the opponents” is very different of the precedents as comments pertaining to this third group are strongly critic against the testimony given by the journalist. In fact, this last group denounce the article in charging the author of “victimization”, “racism” or “instrumentation”. Note that a part of the comments are clearly mobilize some arguments pertaining to a specific kind of racist ideology, a “cultural racism”, to explain and minimize the racial prejudice experiences by the journalist. Nevertheless, once more, a particular acceptance of the republican model is supporting the arguments developed by this group. First, this model is strongly understood through a national cultural and historical dimension. As the second group, the republican ideal is also perceived as threatened, or even lost, but as the consequence of the multicultural aspect of the current French society. Then, in using ideological arguments such as the “cultural incompatibility”, the “communautarism” or “the denying of integration” of the immigrants, commentators understand the issue of racial prejudice as “normal” because of the non-respect of republican model by the minorities. Moreover, discussing the specific case of the article,

most of the comments denounce the fact that the journalist is presenting himself through its “cultural membership” and then he didn't respect the republican normative frame. Then, using the inversion of the argument, a majority of comments charge the journalist and more broadly the minorities of racism against national or white people.

After having briefly summarize these different argumentative camp that organize the discussion, we could make some remarks about the different interpretation of the national model in such discussions. First of all, regarding the different types of argumentation, we can note that in each group, the reference to the national model appears as a legitimate and logical process in order to interpret and explain the issue of racial prejudice related by the article. After that, the three groups are similar in the fact that they agree to the role of the republican model against racism. In other words, all the comments would agree to the following proposition : racism or racial prejudice are occurring because the republican model is non-respected. However, if this general assumption is common to the different groups, the manners that each camp define “the republican model”, “its non respect” and even more the crisis of the national model clearly differs. This divergence among the ways individuals interpret the notion of national model become clearly apparent in observing the confrontation between comments.

- **Controversies and critics in the discussion**

Still considering these three camps present in the whole discussion, we could now focus on the dynamic of the exchange, notably through some critics and conflicts that occurred between the different postures.

**(All camps → Multiculturalism)** First of all, I would like to point out the global and collective opposition to the idea of “multiculturalism”. Indeed, several comments emphasize this concept of multiculturalism, sometimes while criticizing the republican model and its perverse effects. Even if I didn't take in account these comments because of their little representativity, the critics adressed to this argument by the others group reveal an important and interesting tendency. Globaly, the argumentations built by opposant to this notion were organized on the same elements that defined, in each group, the representation of the republican model. Therefore, the concept of “mutliculturalism”is understood through its political acceptation as a producer of injustice by the second group. Using the idea of “differentiation” and more “discrimination” to represent this model, the commentators insist on the unfair aspect of a such model and some of them assert the

strong relation between multiculturalism and racism. From the third camp, the “critic”, the denunciation of the “multiculturalism”, understood indistinctly as a social and political phenomenon, is built through the idea of “communautarism”. In other words, the multiculturalist project is perceived as unrealizable without establishing a closure and then a whole conflict between communities. These different critics to multiculturalism, clearly formulated as the opposite of the republican ideal and process, are also supported by the evocation of different national context, mainly United States and the Balkans, where, according to commentators, this project leads to an important fragmented and conflictual situation. As last, note that a certain amount of critic, mainly produced by the third group of comment, is also criticize the idea of “multiculturalism” but in its demographic acceptance, I mean the multicultural composition of the current society.

**(Prismatic → Surprised)** In a second time, I would like to focus on the critics and conflict that occurred between each camps. Particularly, I will take in account the critics formulated by the second group, who understand the racial prejudice as “normal” regarding the current mistreatment of the republican model by elites and governments. In fact, this group, which was in majority in the discussion, is also the main producer of critic addressed to the two others camps. First, targeting the first group, “the surprised”, the group of critic is insisting on the color-blindness of a such group, and more specifically on its ignorance regarding the importance of racism in the current French society. Deepen, these critics are also focusing on the social origin of a such point of views. Then, the criticized group is understood as composed by individuals pertaining to the upper-class and then without any connection with the social reality. Moreover, its interpretation of the “republican model” is also described as naive and disconnected. Then, this argument leads the commentator to charge this camp of a specific form of racism, that we can link to the concept of “laissez-faire racism” of Lawrence Bobo (it means a color-blind and “unconscious” racism). In the same time, following the idea of injustice developed by this group of “pragmatic”, this kind of argument become a space for a larger juxtaposition between racial and economical oppression. In other words, racism is understood as a complementary process of a broader economical domination.

**(Pragmatics → Opponents)** At the same time, this second camp also address important critics to the third camp, the one which interpret racial discrimination as a consequence of immigrant's behaviors. Refuting the arguments of “victimization” or “non-adaptation” expressed by this third group, the comments clearly denounce the racist component of a such point of view. Mobilizing traditional anti-racist elements, such as the “closure”, the “backwarded” and “dangerous” charater of such a position, the critics also focus on the social origin of this argumentation. Mobilizing different expressions to characterize, often in a pejorative way, the working class (mainly Le “beauf”), the critic formulate a strong relation between the “classical” racism and the lower class,

notably through some arguments asserting the “lack of education”, “the fear” or “the closure” as a typical character of this group. Concerning the conception of the “national model” expressed by this group, notably through a national and traditional component, the critics are strongly refuting a such conception in asserting its racial and nationalist dimension.

- **CCL : Functions, signification and consequences of resorting to the national model in ordinary discussions**

First of all, I would like to come back on the main paradox of these references to the national model : the fact that everyone express the efficiency of the French model to solve racial prejudice and to deal with the racial issue and at the other side the very disparate definitions given to this notion of “national model”.

In order to formulate hypothesis on these two aspects of the object, I would like to insist again on the specificity of the virtual space. As I said before, the main characteristic of internet discussions consists in a strong tendency to conflictualization because, among many other elements, the anonymity and the virtuality that characterize the social interactions within this space. Drawing upon this specificity, I postulate that the process of justification is more important and developed through this kind of discussion. However, concerning the first idea of the collective adhesion to the republican ideal, it is also easy to identify it in everyday “classic” (or “real”) discussion about the racial issue. Mobilizing the idea of common-sense and the pragmatic sens of the actor, I postulate that this social thought is largely inherited from the contemporaneous context. Indeed, as the political and mediatic agenda is more and more focusing on the issues of immigration, integration and/or cultural differences, ordinary people are facing a lot of situation where they have to express opinion and interpretation of any of such events. Nevertheless, such discussions about the racial issue are strictly controlled and hazardous considering the highly rejection and sanction represented by the “racism” in our societies. In this way, it seems to me that in an initial dimension, the references to the national model in public discourses act as à collective and legitimate frame to express opinions and thoughts about the racial issue. In other words, using concept of ethnomethodology and phenomenology, references to the national model made by an individual in this kind of discussion represent an efficient and conventional social performance to avoid, as possible, the risk of being considered or accused of racism. Note that In the political or mediatic discourses, this process is often used, particularly in the recent time. (I think of the French minister of interior who was charged of racism and the Prime minister protect him in only asserting, I quote, “I don't consider Brice Hoerterfeux as a racist because he is a minister of the republic, I mean a republican”.

Following our hypotheses between the self-evidence of the republican model, this example clearly illustrates the interpretation of the French model as the opposite of racism, in other words, racism and republican is clearly and definitely understood as an anti-thesis. As last, the violent reaction to the argument of “multiculturalism”, especially the charge of racism targeting this argumentation, also illustrates the importance and rigidity of this social norm.

Concerning the process of justification that could occur in these uses, the fact that sometimes people have to explain what they mean by “republican model” and then the consensus becomes clearly less evident, even more disappeared. Note that this aspect is more important in ordinary dimension than in political or media where the conditions of expression rarely request justifications. As we saw within the analysis of internet discussions, when interlocutors go far than just expressing their agreement to the republican model, a large and frequent distinction appears. The fact is the notion of “republican model” used in common arguments is strongly polysemous and unstable. Initially, the notion itself seems to be interpreted indistinctly as a political, historical, philosophical and social system. Moreover, I also observe a frequent overlapping between the notion and other elements or phenomenon. Then the republican model is also used to define the “French nation itself”, the Enlightenment, the tradition of hosting nation,...In front of these diverse acceptations, the process of justification and definitions produce an important conflictual dimension when actors have to deeper express their opinions. As the conflict with the argument of multiculturalism, these oppositions between different “republican” postures are also translated in multiple accusation of racism (as we observe between the different camps). More over, I argue that this lack of definition of such a model contributes to a real competition among the different ordinary signification given by actors and also leads to the uses of several ideological material. As I shown in the paper, the accusation of racism targeting the labor class or the upper-class results partially from an opposition between the signification given to the “national model”. In other words, I postulate that in the absence of a “stable” or “collective” definition of this “republican model”, the ideologization of the criterias used to define whether or not a particular definition is legitimate will increase.

To conclude this paper, I would like to insist on the importance and interest of studying the “national model” through its uses by ordinary people. Regarding the “republican model”, while the political and medias ( and sometimes academic) sphere are often mobilizing this concept without questioning the real definition of a such model, this lack of definition have important effects on the ordinary discourses that deals with the contemporaneous issues like integration, immigration and/or citizenship. Moreover, his approach leads to understand that the notion of “national” model “ is not

only an abstract, analytic or ideal concept but it also represent a strong and concrete system of reference for citizens, especially in the current period concerned by the issue of cultural differences and its integration (Example: Strikes against the reform of retirement : Workers Union “the reform is against the republican ideal as it's unfair” Nsarkozy “Regarding some violence during the movement, my role is to maintain the republican order”) More over, I think that this kind of gap among such a topic could have clear consequences in term of the legitimation of ideological arguments. At last, I think this problematic have to be taken in account in order to understand a major current french paradox :the more the republican model is avoided or kept aside to introduce policies or legislation about integration or diversity, the more it appears in all discourses concerning these same issues.