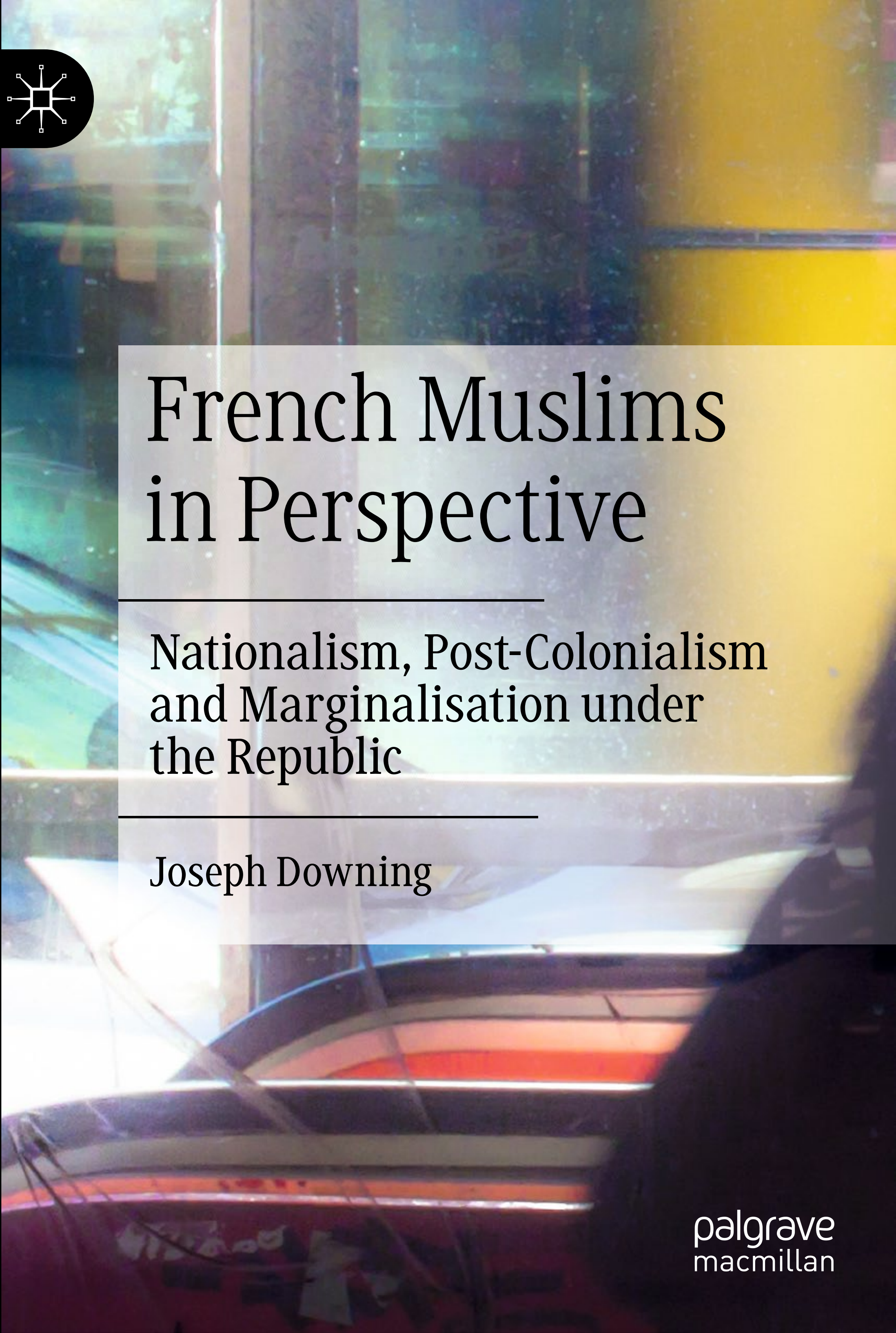

French Muslims in Perspective

Nationalism, Post-Colonialism and Marginalisation under the Republic

Joseph Downing

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For my partner, Gina

Acknowledgements

I was a relative latecomer to France. My first trip to the hexagon started with a missed flight from Fez in Morocco in 2007, where I remember standing in front of the departure board with two options to get me closer to home in London—Paris or Marseille. This is one of the few times where Paris won, and resulted in a very expensive royal air maroc flight to the city of light. After a daunting RER B ride from Charles de Gaulle airport through high-rise estates into the intimidating Gare du Nord, I was in Place de Clichy—and slightly bemused by the prospect of four days in the French capital without a travel guide, map or a working knowledge of the language. Little did I know that through interesting twists of fate I would spend most of that summer in Marseille in a 'hotel meublé' in Belsunce, 'hotel triomphe', and eating mostly in the 'la Goulette' Tunisian restaurant a few streets away. My fascination and passion for the streets of Belsunce and Noailles would actually get me fired from my job that summer due to absenteeism. This would be the beginning of a love affair with the Mediterranean port city that would change the course of my life and lead me to PhD study and the academic career that I now treasure.

The journey from that abrupt introduction to Paris to this book has involved living and writing in many cafés in many places—Leipzig station's breathtaking Starbucks in Germany, café clock in Fez, Morocco, and even the illustrious 'Les Deux Magots' in Paris. All in all, not a bad run for a working-class, council-estate kid from Northolt who left the UK for the first time at the age of 20. In fact, it was my relative and enduring fascination with all things suburban and deprived stemming from my own early life that would first pique my interest in France when the riots broke out in 2005. The dress of the rioters, their demands and the grinding poverty and geographical isolation of suburban estates was all too familiar to me having spent countless cold mornings trudging to Northolt High School through the racecourse estate, and later in life, spending hours on the N7 bus getting home from nights out in London. Northolt is still the last stop on this night bus route—and indeed like many deprived and neglected places the world over is also the last stop for many peoples hopes, dreams and their lives. The stories emerging from Clichy-sous-Bois in 2005 reminded me of those of friends and family. However, both the architecture and the ferocity of the unrest shocked me—but it was nearly a decade later that I would first visit Clichy to conduct fieldwork and experience first-hand the shocking state of the housing in those infamous concrete blocks. The estates of Northolt are by no means a social housing utopia, but I never witnessed such total degradation of high-rise housing stock like I have seen in France. Indeed, the private sector unfortunately fares little better—many times I have mused in Marseille that the state of the buildings reminded me of Havana in Cuba. This observation was eerily bought to life with the collapse of a government-owned building that I frequently walked past, at 63 rue d'Aubagne, that claimed eight lives and brought to light just how bad private housing in France can be if you are poor and/or working-class.

In thinking about the acknowledgements for a book like this the names of people, institutions and places that have contributed to my intellectual and physical journey are long and diverse: Peter Giles and the basketball gyms of West London that would teach me mental and physical toughness and how even when exhausted you have keep pushing; Northolt High School for paradoxically teaching me the undervalued skill of ignoring those in authority when they tell you what you can and can't do. More positively, in particular the chemistry teacher Roger Moore was so instrumental in getting many of us to university when he stepped into the chaos and incompetence left by a colleague to get us through the

A-level chemistry syllabus in only one year; Kings College London, which accepted an unpolished, hoody-wearing teenager into its historic hallways and set me on the path to social mobility. Here, Dr Peter Moore of the life sciences division often welcomed me into his fascinating, sun-drenched and memento-adorned office in waterloo just for a chat and a catch up—something that made me feel at ease in a world I knew nothing about; SOAS, which took a natural scientist and turned him into a critical social scientist. In particular, Charles Tripp and Laleh Khalili were instrumental in providing the instruction and inspiration to pursue a field of study that inspires me to this day; the London School of Economics for a 'baptism of fire' of graduate study, with opportunities to teach and learn beyond my wildest dreams. Here special mention needs to be made to the wonderful Jennifer Jackson-Preece who has encouraged me and taught me to think about security, minorities and politics in new, imaginative and incisive ways. The late Maurice Fraser also contributed hugely with his encyclopaedic knowledge of French politics and culture.

A greater list of colleagues have also been hugely helpful at LSE: To name but a few Esra Özyürek, John Breuilly, John Hutchinson, Claire Gordan, Sue Haines, Manmit Bhambra, Jessica Templeton, Steen Mangan, Spyro Samonas, Michael Farquhar, Joseph Lane, Antonia Dawes, Sarah Zouheir and countless others would all do their bit in providing emotional support, obscure references and sometimes work opportunities in my hours of need. Outside of the LSE I have been very lucky to meet some amazing scholars who have proved to be extremely influential in the work contained within these pages in their own ways—Wasim Ahmed, Richard Dron, Sylvie Mazella, Salman Sayyid and Fiona Adamson to name only a few. Also, my many students have been truly inspiring over the years with their questions, comments and anecdotes that have widened my view of the world in so many ways, in particular, Jacqueline Ménoret who has been a real help with my recent research.

I am also very lucky to have a supportive cast of friends and family who have been there with financial support, encouragement and good times when the going has been tough—Deborah, Tony, Jason, Shahid, Faz, Heleno, Sam, Charles, Lydia and many others have been invaluable. Most of all, my partner Gina has been a rock through sickness and health,

and through moments when I didn’t think I could go on, whether it was through financial and physical difficulties or the rather more privileged problem of jetlag.

Academia is no joke, and quite often I have felt like I would not be able to go on. However, I could not, and would not, give up nor choose to do anything else with my life. Education has given me literally everything and it has been an honour, a pleasure and a blessing to be able to contribute back to a system that continues to provide transformative experiences to so many. One of my chief inspirations Jalal ad-Deen Rumi, whose work was my point of entry to a spiritual life many years ago, is quoted as saying “Let yourself be silently drawn by the stronger pull of what you really love” which to me sums it up nicely. To further quote his work, which fundamentally changed my life, I endeavour to remain committed to the mantra of “sell your cleverness and buy bewilderment” in the face of a world which continues to be fascinating, bewildering and enchanting.

London, 2019
Joseph Downing

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1

'French Muslims' and Banality: Beyond Essentialism, Exceptionalism and Salaciousness

1.1 Introducing Banality, Essentialism and French Muslims

On 7 January 2015, two masked men entered the offices of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* and, after killing 12 people, declared that they had avenged the prophet Mohamed in the name of Al-Qaida in the Yemen. It transpired that these two men, the Kouachi brothers, were French citizens born in Paris to Algerian parents. One of them had indeed travelled to Yemen to study Arabic and to train with Al-Qaida affiliated militants. However, this event did more than simply illustrate the international nature of Islamist inspired terror attacks, it also placed France's Muslim population even more firmly in the spotlight that it had been subjected to repeatedly over recent decades.

Here, the symbolic importance of an attack on a satirical magazine by two French citizens claiming to defend the legacy of a holy man over 1300 years dead, on behalf of a fundamentalist religious organisation based in the Arabian Peninsula, is hard to overstate. Indeed, while *Charlie Hebdo* had hardly been popular in France up to this point, having nearly folded several times, it suddenly became the symbol of all that was right

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about liberal values. On the flip side, the attack then became epitomic of all that is wrong with fundamentalist religion. Such an attack on a satirical magazine only in existence to test the boundaries of free speech was too neat a fit with the 'clash of civilisations' paradigm not to add fuel to the already raging fire of anti-Islam rhetoric both in France and in Europe more widely. By the time this attack happened, the so-called 'failure of multiculturalism' was already old news (Kimlicka, 2010), and bordered on being a political and intellectual tenet of unquestionable truth. However, it would be wrong to think that the focus created by this incident draws on debates that discuss 'religion' and 'cultural' problems in Europe in abstract and universal terms. Rather, it has become clear that Muslims are the focus of constructions of the securitised 'other' within this discourse (Cesari, 2013). Here, Muslims are constructed as presenting European states with 'communities of fear', portrayed as outside the remit of European values that require integration and regulation (Kaya, 2009). Thus, Muslims have become the threatening internal other par excellence, who present not only an existential threat to physical security through terror attacks, but also a far wider and diffuse threat to the liberal democratic order of things in a Europe that still struggles with homegrown, nativist fascism.

However, what has been obscured by the horrific violence and bloodshed of recent terror attacks in France has been how exceptional individuals such as the Kouachi brothers actually are. It is hard to comprehend, given the disproportionate space dedicated to Muslims as threats to security and liberal values in discursive realms such as the mass media (Brown, 2006), just how fringe such individuals and acts are to the daily Muslim experience. The number of French Muslims is estimated to be nearly 6 million, with violent extremists estimated to be only in the few thousands at most (Dell'Oro, 2015). At 11:30 that morning, while gunshots rang out in the Charlie Hebdo offices, the rest of this community of 6 million individuals from a diverse set of ethnic, racial, cultural and doctrinal backgrounds would have been getting on with far less exceptional, but sociologically important, daily lives. Whether working in banks, or in the case of Ahmed Marabet, who was killed outside the offices by the gunmen, patrolling the streets of Paris as a French policeman, defending with his life the values of freedom, democracy and security so dear to European democracies. On a more banal level, the staff in the many excellent couscous restaurants of my adopted home city of Marseille would have been frantically preparing for the lunchtime rush, where they would warmly serve French customers of all religious, political and cultural backgrounds the tasty, simple meal of grain, vegetables and slow cooked meat that has become a French favourite. In many of these establishments in Marseille and across France an extensive wine list is offered, with the Muslim waiting staff refilling the glasses of their customers as they clear away the dirty plates. Indeed, many other French Muslims would be in the process of fulfilling a large variety of social roles explicitly condemned by the religious extremists bringing a premature end to the lives of satirists in Paris. No doubt some French Muslims would have been making rap music, selling drugs in the open air drug markets of the large French housing estates, and even playing roles in the production of the adult movies openly and enthusiastically advertised and sold in the kiosks dotted around French streets. Magazines that would have carried erotic depictions of French Muslims, interviews with French rappers of Muslim origin and exposés about the state of the suburbs would have jostled for shelf space alongside the very issue of *Charlie Hebdo* which contained cartoons depicting the prophet Mohamed that triggered the hostility. The paradoxes, nuances and diversity of the French Muslims' experience highlighted by this 'rogues gallery' of magazine publications should not be dismissed lightly as polemic. Rather, they set the tone for the basis of this book's attempts to draw a broad narrative arc across a diverse panorama of the multitude of ways in which French Muslims exist in French society.

Thus, these opening paragraphs are not simply an idle wander through my musings on more than a decade of living, working and holidaying in various parts of the hexagon, and indeed eating a lot of couscous. Rather, they make a fundamentally important, yet in these times of dramatic events, neglected, sociological point—that the presence of Muslims in France has been, and remains to be, marked by overwhelmingly banal forms of existence across all social domains and functions of French society. Banal here should not be interpreted as 'boring' or unimportant, as there are indeed many important sociological insights to be made by taking this banal approach, if indeed this book does justice to them.

Paradoxically, adopting this problematic and mis-deployed socio-political category of 'Muslim' and connecting it to a thorough investigation of the numerous and often banal ways that it interacts with French politics, norms, culture and social relations is actually an important and contrary stance to take. This is because of the plethora of voices across all shades of politics, and indeed even within the academy, that seem to be convinced that the terms 'French' and 'Muslim' are somehow destined to never be reconciled. Here, they are juxtaposed like two English neighbours that have fallen out over a boundary fence or ill executed loft extension. However, while Nicolas Sarkozy was preoccupied with creating the ministry of national identity to formalise what Frenchness actually means, Marine Le Pen was lambasting praying in the streets as akin to Nazi occupation and Andrew Hussey was busy writing about a 'long war between France and its Arabs' (Hussey, 2014), the lived experience on the streets of Paris, Lyon, Marseille and across towns, cities and villages across France tells a very different story.

This brief and woefully incomplete sketch of the daily lives of French Muslims and the importance of narratives of banality within it is not simply included to entice readers to dip further into this book, which I hope it does, but to make a very serious sociological point that will be one key thread that will weave through what will be an interdisciplinary and mixed methods account of a social grouping. This is the all too often neglected empirical reality that French Muslims and their historical, cultural and social realities are extremely diverse and require a nuanced treatment. This approach enables both understanding from a scholarly perspective and also for this understanding to be disseminated into the public realm, where in France and overseas this realm often gets to peak only into the dark, exceptional and salacious aspects of the French Muslim experience. Within this, it is important to look beyond the overtly and obviously 'Muslim' issues such as the regulation of religious symbols or women's dress. While these are undoubtedly important facets of understanding the French Muslim experience, and extremely worthy of scholarship, they can only illuminate small parts of a much bigger story. Reuters made a very valid journalistic point during the 2005 riots where, regardless of pressure from some of their readership to label the riots as 'Muslim' riots, the lack of any overtly 'Muslim' claims from the Muslims who participated in the unrest meant that they did not feel justified in labelling them 'Muslim rioters', but simply rioters (Heneghan, 2007). Journalistically, this argument undoubtedly has merit and is commendable for its commitment to truth and rejection of salaciousness. However, the sociological logic of this book seeks to take a countervailing logic in that it makes the argument that one can only begin to understand the experiences and lives of Muslims anywhere in the world by looking beyond the obviously 'Islamic' facets of their lives and into the much broader social contexts in which they exist. The Reuters article makes the important argument that Muslims are also men, women, music fans and football supporters (Heneghan, 2007), and should be examined at times by putting these identifications in front of any conception of being Muslim. This may sound obvious, but these are facets of Muslim experiences across the globe which are unfortunately neglected in favour of the more dramatic, and perhaps within the political economies of the news media, policy circles and perhaps even academic funding bodies, more profitable aspects of the Muslim experience such as security, terrorism and radicalisation. Recent attention lavished on French Muslims is no exception. However, this book seeks to make important points by putting these secular categories into an analysis of French Muslims to demonstrate the diversity of their social roles and functions. Thus, rather than inaccurately labelling rioters as Muslims and further securitising a minority population, this books demonstrates that Muslims are also police officers, musicians and indeed porn stars.

However, not all journalists and public intellectuals have taken this path in trying to be nuanced and empirically grounded when discussing French Muslims. The anti-Islam rhetoric of the far-right leader Marine Le Pen of the 'Reassemblement National', the former 'Front National', is well documented. Indeed, a wide range of sentiments that view French Muslims and Islam more generally with suspicion exist across French society. There even exists a political youth movement, 'Génération Identitaire', which overtly claims to battle against mass migration and the 'Islamisation' of France. Looking deeper into how Islam and Muslims are constructed in France it is important to argue that these sentiments are not limited to the fringes, but rather have become rather mainstream pillars of intellectual life. An example of a public intellectual who has pushed such an agenda is Eric Zemmour, who has written numerous books in the reactionary right-wing tradition, and has criticised Muslims in France numerous times. His works include books which address the existential anxiety about the 'self-destruction' of France (Zemmour, 2009, 2014, 2018). Zemmour sets this argument against a far broader context than simply the presence of Muslims in the hexagon, following in the typical right-wing trajectory of mixing post-colonial nostalgia with anti-globalisation and even viewing feminism as a key force destroying the fabric of French society. A sense of an 'impotence' in the face of the Muslim threat has become a common trope in this French intellectual vein, as it has across much of Europe, where arguments are made that a form of cultural insecurity is being caused by immigration, globalisation, Islam and the 'elites' (Bouvet, 2015). This is also argued as extending as far as 'Islamaphobia' being a lie (Bruckner, 2006, 2018), and the resulting guilt being an important means by which Muslims are manipulating the West into its own destruction.

Other authors in this intellectual vein have gone on to make several kinds of arguments that seek to depict a France, and indeed a 'West' or a 'Europe', as under attack from a wide range of Muslim aggressions (Caldwell, 2014). These include those who discuss the lost territories of the republic that situate the suburbs as Islamised places, vectors of threat, which exist outside of French control and where anti-semitism and sexist acts run rife (Brenner & Bensoussan, 2015). What is important here is not denying that the suburbs have security problems, but rather than seeing them constructed as banal, structural problems of a lack of policing or municipal neglect (as correctly highlighted in works such as Wacquant, 2007), it is the religion of Islam, and French Muslims, who are to blame for creating a kind of ideologically driven insecurity. However, the truth about the nature of xenophobia is much more nuanced in France—in the case of anti-semitism the roots are long, and include such abhorrent events as the Dreyfus affair and the deportation of French Jews to the death camps of the Second World War by French collaborators. Indeed, in 2018 the number of anti-semitic events in France was said to have risen by 74%. This increase was due to a wide range of issues—including Islamist inspired incidents, but also due to the French nationalist far right, and also even as a product of action by some of those involved in the yellow vest (gilets jaunes) protest movement (Couvelaire, 2019). This demonstrates the necessity of being empirically grounded when discussing anti-semitism in France or in any other context, and not simplifying Jewish–Muslim relations due to the recent history of the Israel-Palestine conflict. In Belsunce, an immigrant-rich area of central Marseille, Jewish and Muslim merchants have shops side by side and sell similar items, including the famous 'bleu de chine' garments, which are worn in Marseille or exported to North Africa for resale. An Algerian Muslim Oranaise baker in Noallies, the city's central market, bakes Sabbath bread for Jewish customers. These examples are not meant to deny that some French Muslims are xenophobes and anti-semites, just like their French-Christian or French-atheist co-citizens. The point being made is that discussing these issues as specifically Muslim is both empirically incorrect and dangerous in terms of constructing French Muslims as having specifically anti-semitic tendencies. Indeed, the French comedian Dieudonné M'bala M'bala (who is not a French Muslim) was given a jail sentence for anti-semitism in 2015, due to comments made at a show in Belgium—demonstrating that the issue runs across race, class and religious lines in France as it does in other European contexts.

This dovetails with other empirically unfounded notions that situate perceived contemporary problems in France as specifically the result of French Muslims. This includes proclamations made about the 'end of assimilation', caused by Muslims making claims against the central state (Tribalat, 2017), which make little reference to other groups, such as Bretons, the Provençals or the Basques as also making claims for kinds of cultural and linguistic rights. Rather, again it is Islam and Muslims which are singled out as somehow being specific, ideologically driven, threats to the French order. Thus, the perfect storm of a decadent and out of touch elite has left France abandoned to an Islamic encroachment, where a connection is made between women wearing the veil and halal meat and somehow the loss of a national identity (Mamou, 2018). These kinds of voices are not limited to lofty debates in the latest provocative monograph, but also filter down into public policy. The municipality of Marseille, seemingly disinterested in the state of housing to the point where a municipally owned building collapsed on 5 November 2018, managed to be concerned with lowering the number of kebab shops, telephone boutiques and 'bazars' in the same city streets, where their neglect of 63 Rue d'Aubagne claimed eight lives. The municipal resources that went into the so-called 'plan anti-kebab' Max A (2017) would have been much better spent on making day-to-day life safer for the inhabitants of the city. This is a sentiment which could be applied to many of the works above, where public intellectuals make grandiose sweeping statements about the 'out of touch elites' that they themselves are part of, while their work neglects the more complex, far less marketable and less sound-bite worthy banal social concerns that confront France.

However, these sentiments have not only found their expression in books which directly address 'real world' politics and society. They have even spilled over into works of fiction set against a France which has become 'Islamised'. One example is the novel *Submission*, which depicts France as being taken over by Muslims and the republic having a Muslim president (Houellebecq, 2017). Houellebecq does not see this book as simply using such a possible future as a literary tool, but rather as depicting something which he sees as possible, due to the perceived changes he has seen in France in the past 20 years (Bourmeau, 2015). In this book, an unholy alliance between the Socialist Party and a new French 'Muslim brotherhood' party means that non-Muslims are banned from teaching at the Sorbonne and women are banned from working. While a work of fiction, it remains important to highlight how Houellebecq conflates Islam with a dangerous, totalitarian political ideology that forbids women working and non-Muslims teaching at universities. There is a clear way that this fiction builds on the recent reactionary intellectual tradition that juxtaposes the existence of France on one side, and Islam and French Muslims on the other, and never shall the two be compatible. One of the key aims of this book is to demonstrate that not only are the two compatible in the abstract but also already are living happily alongside, and within, each other. The banal reality of French Muslim daily life demonstrates this.

However, this book needs to acknowledge that it takes a huge conceptual gamble in using this term 'French Muslim'. Indeed, out of the more than 90,000 words which make up this book, these are the two words over which the most sleep was lost. Academics are prisoners of terminology because we need to make definitions that are inherently overly simplistic, even when at their most nuanced and complex. Whether we discuss class, gender, sexuality or any other category that involves the possibility of lassoing a diverse group of people and corralling them into a fixed and cramped terminological pen. There is an argument to be made here for the use of the designation 'Muslims in France' as possibly less limiting than 'French Muslims'. This is because 'Muslims in France' would perhaps enable the capture of the discrepancy in citizenship status between those who have been born in France and those who have arrived more recently, and indeed those who are in France illegally and are 'sans papiers' (without papers). However, 'Muslims in France' also contains within it a connotation which is inaccurate. Going back to the analogy of the English neighbours falling out over the boundary fence, saying 'Muslims in France' risks depicting what is a very settled and very French community as wrongly being unsettled and somehow existing in France but not being 'of France'. This would not only be erroneous and also misleading, but would also echo the rhetoric of far-right politicians such as Marine Le Pen, who seek to peddle the agenda that somehow French Muslims not only live apart from society but have no interest in becoming part of it. This is paradoxical, because anyone that has spent even a weekend city break in Paris would have, perhaps even unconsciously, witnessed the integration of French Muslims into a range of social, economic and political functions in France that demonstrates that they are an integral part of the fabric of contemporary France. This is neither a recent nor impermanent development, and French Muslims will likely be French for generations to come, like their French-Italian, French-Jewish and French-Portuguese co-nationals who arrived several generations prior. It is little understood, and yet essential to understand, that French Jews, and even Catholic French Italians, were recipients of very similar marginalising rhetoric in France in the past. There is much to be gained from seeking to understand the current discourse around French Muslims in comparative perspective with the similarity of language used around the 'Italian invasion' of Marseille in the nineteenth century. This is because doing so would enable a greater understanding of the fact that not only are French Muslims unremarkable in many of their social functions, their discursive marginalisation is also not unique. As the Marseille rapper Akhenaton says in his song 'Métèque et mat', when referencing his Neapolitan origins, ‘I am one of those that Hitler called the niggers of Europe’.

Even using the term ‘French Muslim’ still carries with it an entire set of baggage which requires unpacking. This is because it could easily degenerate into the ontological ‘cardinal sin’ that any book on this subject must avoid—what social scientists and philosophers call ‘essentialism’. This is the belief that social categories have ‘an underlying reality or true nature … that gives an object its identity’ (Gelman, 2003). Here, there is no one central reality or nature that is the key that unlocks the truth about French Muslims. Paradoxically, if there is one ‘essential’ nature or truth about French Muslims it is their diversity, dynamism and complexity; and rather than one central truth, there are currently somewhere around 5.7 million ‘truths’ that sum up the French Muslim experience. Telling all those stories is clearly beyond the scope of this book, and as in all social science studies, generalisations have to be made and categories have to be created that enable the analysis of a large and diverse social group in a way that enables transferable points to be made. It is the hope of this book that these generalisations are made in conscious and intelligent ways and that categories of analysis are created in ways that do justice to the complex social realities of a diverse social group. As mentioned already, it is in the appropriation of this category, as highly securitised and stigmatised, that enables the telling of a very different set of stories and experiences. Thus, it is the purpose of this book to broaden this discussion and for this to be a starting point for those who are interested in France and its Muslims to begin to understand the nuanced and multifaceted nature of their experiences. It must be added at this point that no single humble book can do this in its entirety, and I sincerely hope that it inspires and acts as a launching point for other scholars in the field to shine a light on the many aspects of French Muslims’ social experiences that had to be neglected here.

It is not just the ‘Muslim’ part of the ‘French Muslim’ construction that we have to be careful about essentialising. Essentialism can occur against any group, not just those of non-European origin and at the thin end of a power differential. Rather, it is possible to essentialise white populations, European countries and European identities in the same way it is to essentialise the Muslim world, Arabs or black people. France, especially in the anglophone world, can sometimes seem to occupy a sacred position at the pinnacle of European achievement—a refuge for artists, and a country with the best food in the world. Thus, there exists a current in French studies obsessed with certain essential understandings of what constitutes French culture, and a subsection of France experts obsessed with the elite chatter of the 'grand salons de la capital'. France is an extremely diverse country and Frenchness a construct which includes both the chic parts of central Paris and the classic works of Molière, but also the rural Catalan-speaking areas of the South West and the literature of the French-Spanish-Italian Marseillais crime writer Jean-Claude Izzo. On a pejorative note, it can also be constructed as innately racist, anti-Muslim, backwards and stuck in its out-of-date and quaint ways. Again, any of these statements make either positive or negative generalisations that can be unhelpful—yes, there is racism and marginalisation of Muslims in France, as there is in the UK or indeed in Saudi Arabia or Pakistan. Rather, in investigating such phenomena we need to be specific in which contexts we are seeking to understand any given process and also avoid the all too easy and tempting, lazy generalisations. Perhaps the best quote I have come across that sums up these paradoxes of either negative or positive constructions of difference was a meme on nationalism from a French rap Facebook group—which gave the definition of nationalism as 'the belief that your rubbish country is better than someone else's rubbish country'. Thus, when examining questions of French Muslims, it is both France and being French as well as Islam and being Muslim that we must avoid essentialising.

1.2 How to Investigate French Muslims? The Centrality of the Symbolic and the Discursive in This Book: Methodological Approach and Statement

An important starting point of any piece of academic enquiry is a discussion of the methodological and conceptual approach employed. Whether we like it or not, we are engaging in a discussion about the philosophy of science and the very nature of knowledge production. However, as this is absent from many works of scholarship, it is important to ask, as Gorski (2013) does, why should we care? This could be double emphasised here as I am predominantly an empirically orientated social scientist and not a theorist. As an empirical researcher this is something that I have mused over for quite some time. An important starting point is the observation that scholars don't often outline their epistemological or ontological positions, they have to be guessed at. Also, the biographies and positionalities of authors is only often explored in ethnography. This does not mean that expertise has to be experiential—that only a working-class person can be an expert on the working classes or only someone with African ancestry can be a professor of African studies, while acknowledging the importance that these perspectives can bring to the studies of these areas. The reason I am including a discussion of this here is partly out of admiration for the frank honesty of the anthropologist who gives a biographical statement about positionality in the outset of their detailed works. However, it is unescapable that my intellectual and social influences do play a role in defining this piece of scholarship, and if it was not for my grounding in Middle Eastern studies as an MSc student, I would not have the tools to approach the discussion of French Muslims from the comparative social studies of Muslim societies, the knowledge about theories of colonialism and post-colonialism and indeed an understanding of the traps offered by orientalist scholarship and perspectives.

Additionally, with the pitched battles that continue to rage around approaches in the social sciences, it is important for a work to situate itself in these debates and be clear about where it stands. These battles have, in large part, been driven by the somewhat unfortunate obsession with those who rank universities and departments with publication metrics and impact factors, where the highest impact factor journals are largely based on the positivist approaches to understanding the social world borrowed from the natural sciences. This rationale centres on the need to 'prove' relationships with recourse to statistical tests that rely on complex models and the 5% confidence level. It is doubtless that this approach has massively furthered social knowledge and provides valuable and valid methodological tools in the hands of social scientists to undertake the investigation of pressing social problems. However, it is my observation that the privileging of these methods over others is also generated by the inevitable insecurity of the adopter rather than the creator of methodological approaches. As the social sciences took these methods from the natural sciences, the social sciences can be seen as somewhat the zealous converts, seeking to constantly and overtly assert their pious scientific credentials often, with disdain for the backwards 'folk' religion of the qualitative researcher. As someone with a natural science background, I can attest that in my experience those in the natural sciences do not have such a need to assert their scientific credentials, and being 'scientific' is something that is done intuitively and securely. There is something to be said for the methodological distinctiveness of the human sciences that require greater degrees of nuance to understanding the complexities and peculiarities of the human condition (Moon, 1975).

This is especially pertinent for a book of this nature. In seeking to understanding the diverse experiences, compositions and lived experiences of a group in French society, one single methodological approach, be it humanist or inductivist, would be neither sufficient nor advisable. That is why each chapter, with its specific focus, will use different tools from the social toolbox to examine the phenomena to be interrogated. They are, however, united in their focus on the discursive and symbolic, and the means by which meaning is rendered through social construction, whether this is to be found in the discussion of war memorials as a means to explore the various ways in which the French colonial legacy has been handled symbolically at home, or through the examination of popular culture forms such as rap music and pornography to understand how the various, often orientalist, essentialist and indeed securitised, gender roles for French Muslims are socially constructed by these cultural artefacts.

It is also important to briefly pause here and be more specific about what kind of social constructivism is to be employed and to acknowledge some of the conceptual baggage which it carries. Social constructivism has a long and storied history in the social sciences since it was coined by Berger and Luckman (1966). The conceptual underpinning of this school of thought contests that reality is socially situated and that knowledge is constructed through interaction with social stimuli in works such as the invention of tradition (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1984). This is a conceptual tradition that is strongly rooted in the relational nature of social experience, where the meaning that we render to the social world and its wide and diverse range of actors and artefacts comes from our social experience of how meaning should be interpreted. This is not to say that social constructivism does not come without critique, and it has been critiqued in its more extreme forms as promoting the idea that constructions take place instrumentally by those with an interest in reality being shaped in a particular way (Hacking, 2000). This has clear Marxist overtones of a 'ruling class' perpetuating consciously a 'false consciousness' for nefarious ends. It is also true that a vulgarisation of social constructivism insists that social constructivists do not believe in any 'objective' facts, and is thus an unrealistic and 'floppy' postmodern thought that holds that everything is a construct. This is an erroneous, and unfortunate, caricature of a theoretical position that has underpinned massive advances in the social sciences, including the opening up of gender roles to criticism and interrogation (Beauvoir, 2011).

This book cautiously adopts a more 'realist' view of social constructivism advanced by scholars such as Elder-Vass (2013) and Gorski (2013). This seeks to combine the beneficial aspects of social constructivism with the realist work of scholars such as Bhaskar (2008), to bring the role of social reality and social structures back into the work of social constructivism. Thus, as advanced by this book, employing a socially constructivist stance does not mean that 'everything is a construct', nor does it argue that 'nothing is real', but rather it is concerned with understanding the relationship between object occurrences and the subjective meanings ascribed to them that is the essence of social constructionism. A masterful example of such scholarship can be found in the discussion of how the stories and myths around the Zulu king Shaka were embroidered and enhanced through the retelling of these stories by individuals who did not consciously engage in the processes of social construction but were rather simply telling stories (Hamilton, 1998). This is a pertinent point to make in that actors in any given situation constructing and reconstructing reality are diverse, as are their interests, indeed if they have any, in constructing reality in particular ways. This is a ready observation applicable with the direct empirical concerns of this book that two examples highlight very well. Flags exist in the physical world and people die in acts of mass violence, but it is our rendering of meanings that tells us that this is our national flag that has this meaning, and also that an act of mass violence like the Charlie Hebdo shooting is an act of terrorism. This is where advances in critical realism also become highly useful and extremely complementary to social constructivism, in that critical realism seeks to highlight that the nature of the social world may be very different from the way that humans perceive it (Gorski, 2013). Thus, here it is about looking beyond the observable and into the processes which go on behind the scenes to understand why an act of violence is constructed as terrorism in the same way as an arrangement of rectangles of colour are reified as the national flag.

1.3 Who Are They? French Muslims, Names, Numbers and Confusion

Defining the entirety of 'French Muslims' will clearly present some analytical and conceptual challenges to overcome the obvious pitfalls of essentialising an extremely diverse group of approximately 6 million individuals. The use of 'approximately' here highlights the first and perhaps most obvious 'pitfall' we face, specifically in the French context—namely that we have no reliable statistics on exactly how many French Muslims there are, nor what their ethnic or religious statuses are. However, even in contexts with reliable numbers, such as the UK, discussing a Muslim whole, or specific Muslim sub-groups runs up against the issues of homogenisation and essentialisation of groups into monolithic wholes who think, act, practice and believe in the same ways. Clearly, this runs completely counter to the rationale for this book and to aid in overcoming these issues it is necessary to consult the existing literature on Muslim identities. This should be the case for those not just in the French context but in the broader contexts of Muslim migrant communities in non-Muslim societies, and also on the diverse social, political, religious and cultural variations in Muslim identities in the Islamic world.

In terms of numbers, the French state defines the collection of statistics on racial, ethnic and religious origins of its citizens as unconstitutional under article 1 of the French constitution of 4 October 1958, which states that the republic will 'ensure the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of origin, race or religion. It shall respect all beliefs' (Assemblé Nationale, 2018). Clearly, the development and deployment of this principle requires greater unpacking, which will occur later in Chap. 2, when this book turns to the discussion of identity categories under the republic and how they are formally operationalised by the various levels of the French state. However, here the observation that this clause has been interpreted as incompatible with the collection of any statistics that would give us a clear idea of how many Muslims actually lived in France opens up a big enough can of empirical worms to keep us occupied. Therefore, in the absence of statistics we are forced to rely on estimates. The Pew Research Centre estimated the French Muslim population to be 5.72 million in 2016, 8.8% of the population (Hackett, 2017). As mentioned, this cannot be proven or disproven by any official source, so the number is open to all kinds of contestation and uncertainty from those both on the left and right of French politics. The salacious and attention-seeking world of aspiring to elected office unfortunately rarely has time for sober and reasoned estimates that do little to grab headlines. In this vein, in past decade both Azouz Begag, researcher at the CNRS (French National Centre for Scientific Research), and the far-right political party the Front National both argued that a more accurate estimate of the Muslim population in France was between 15 and 20 million, or between 22% and 30% of the French population of 66.9 million (Begag, 2011; Jacob, 2016). While they have clearly very different political agendas to their large estimates of the numbers of Muslims in France, the situation of uncertainty means that it is not possible to prove or disprove these estimates either way. Additionally, this situation of confusion around numbers is not something that simply sits in the academic or political spheres of discussion, and this uncertainty is not lost on the generally French population. A poll has shown a tendency to overestimate the Muslim population at around 31% of the population, so around 20.74 million Muslims (Jacob, 2016). This confusion and contestation over numbers does not stop at the more general level of estimating the size of the 'Muslim' population of France. Even estimating the numbers of the far smaller and more specific subset of radicals, terrorists or ultra-conservative Muslims throws up similar confusion between various estimates. However, these difficulties do not stop politicians and scholars making estimates about the numbers in France. Manual Vals, when he was prime minister, estimated that there were 15,000 individuals being monitored in France for radicalisation, yet only 1400 are currently under judicial prosecution for terror offences (France 24, 2016). However, as the issues with the terminology are numerous, and Vals also does not give further details on these numbers, they mean very little. Samir Amghar, researcher at the University Libre de Bruxelles estimates that there are between 20,000 and 30,000 'ultra-orthodox' Muslims in France—less than 1% of the practising Muslim population of France (Dell'Oro, 2015). This figure of ultra-orthodox does not in any way suggest that these French Muslims are violent or likely to commit acts of jihad. Thus, the number of jihadists in France, even if it was as Vals states at 15,000, is less than 1% of the French Muslim population. Thus, this corroborates with Khosrokhavar's (2014) findings that radicalisation is an 'ultra-minority' phenomenon that remains at the fringes. This ties strongly to the observations made at the start of this chapter that the discussion of French Muslims requires significant banalisation and nuancing, given the disproportionate attention that this small, unrepresentative fringe is subject to from the media, politicians and scholars alike.

Beyond the statistics, and somewhat complicating them, is indeed the differential nature of the citizenship status of Muslims in France. This presents quite a problem in regards to claims here made about taking an analysis from the angle of 'French Muslims' because many of those caught in the conceptual net of 'Muslim' deployed by politicians, the far right and indeed scholars, on a de jure level are not French in the sense of having official French nationality. Indeed, when this book turns to examining the role of French Muslims in the French security services from the colonial era onwards, this is further complicated by the hierarchies of colonialism that grant differential citizenship statuses to those under colonial rule, dependent on their ethnic and religious characteristics. Indeed, it was argued by some theorists of the colonial enterprise that Muslim 'Arab' North Africans could never fully 'evolve' into Frenchmen like those black Africans from Senegal could (Camiscioli, 2009). Like many questions to do with migrants and minorities there is no simple answer to this conundrum (Jackson-Preece, 2005; Roe, 2004). This is