

# French Public Schools Try to Remain Secular

## *Century-old tradition under pressure*

Book Review by Gerda Bikales

The lament for the lost territories in the title of this chilling book is not for the erstwhile colonies of the French Empire, but for the school system charged with educating French children today. The “Republic” implies more than France’s post-monarchical form of government – it includes the celebration of its eighteenth century Enlightenment tradition and its hard-won secularism, most especially in its public schools.

This is a very anguished book that chronicles in detail the rapid transformation of the schools, from academies of learning and fellowship to places of chaos ruled by bullies in the throes of Islamic radicalism. In the prevailing atmosphere of intimidation, teachers and administrators look the other way as Jewish students and faculty members are attacked and humiliated, and female students and staff are routinely harassed and insulted.

At the heart of the book is a series of reports on incidents in particular schools, mostly those known as ZEP, an acronym denoting troubled establishments in “priority educational zones.” The reports are pulled together by several essays on current social trends in France and how these are playing out in the school environment. It took considerable courage for the

editor and the contributing teachers to go public, putting their careers and possibly their personal safety are on the line. Wisely, no doubt, many (including the editor, “Emmanuel Brenner”) have chosen to write under a pseudonym and to avoid naming their schools, identifying them only in general terms such as “a high school in a suburb north of Paris.”

Violent antisemitic acts have been escalating in France, reaching 405<sup>1</sup> in 2001, while anti-Muslim incidents, never numerous, have been going down steadily, to 12 in 2001. The response from government and the media has been to make light of the situation, characterizing the antisemitic violence as merely the outbursts of young Arab hooligans angered by hostilities in the Middle East. Politicians of the opposition left as well as the ruling center-right try to squeeze further advantage from the attacks on Jewish institutions by blaming it all on the National Front and its extreme-right confederates.

The permissiveness of the authorities in the face of rampant lawlessness and terror has been felt most keenly in the schools. Several suburbs in the larger cities (Paris, Lyon) are home to subsidized apartment projects inhabited by disadvantaged families from North Africa, both Muslim and Jewish, where schools have experienced an educational meltdown. Jewish students, a small minority, are insulted, mocked, spat upon, kicked and robbed, without any interference from those in charge. Even among themselves, teachers dare not discuss what they observe every day, for fear of being accused of such crimes as racism, populism, or giving credence to Samuel Huntington’s thesis on the “clash of civilizations.” Better to go with the flow than fight risky uphill battles. As one teacher puts it, “the spirit of Munich” is alive in the teachers’

**Les Territoires  
Perdus de la  
République:  
Antisemitisme,  
Racisme et Sexisme en Milieu  
Scolaire (The Lost Territories  
of the Republic: Antisemitism,  
Racism and Sexism in the  
Schools)**

by Emmanuel Brenner, editor  
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238 pages (paperback), 11.40 Euros




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lounge.

To the extent that the problems are noted, the *a priori* politically correct stance is to grant the troublemakers their claimed status as victims. Offered the privilege of a paid-for French education, these students reject it wholesale because they feel themselves victimized by 130 years of French colonial exploitation, by job discrimination, poverty, a disordered family life, and Ariel Sharon's politics. Of course, victims too can be dangerous bullies in need of disciplining, but French society and its teachers seem willing enough to tolerate a *modus vivendi* whereby the Jewish students alone are called upon to take the punishment for all these sins. As reported by one of the writers, irrational anti-Jewish bias in her school

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emerged in the controversies surrounding the serving of pork in the school's cafeteria. Though "respect for differences" is now dogma, when Jews refuse to eat pork, it's a vile mannerism. When Muslims refuse it, it becomes a valuable cultural lesson. The same holds for religious holidays, disparaged when they cause Jewish students to miss school but applauded as a family-strengthening custom when their Muslim classmates do the same!

It has become impossible in many schools to teach certain topics of French history. The Dreyfus case, which engaged the passions of French men and women in the late nineteenth century and led to the definitive separation of church-and-state in 1905, can't be discussed because it deals with the antisemitically inspired false accusation and conviction for treason of a Jewish military officer, imprisoned for years but eventually exonerated. Woe to the teacher trying to get the lesson across - it will be greeted with shouts, whistles, foot-stomping and covered ears.

Even noisier disturbances await a history unit on

the Holocaust. Incorporated quite recently into the curriculum, after nearly fifty years of denial that France had any role in the deportation and murder of some eighty thousand French Jews, its teaching was made a mandatory part of World War II history. Carrying out that requirement is proving impossible in schools with sizeable Arab student bodies, among whom Holocaust denial is an article of faith.

The changes that have overtaken the schools are traced in some detail in an essay by "Elyse Jacquard." In the seventies, her establishment was a respected technical high school known for its quality teaching of the social sciences, economics and accounting, in addition to the standard academic curriculum of French, mathematics and history-geography. Twenty-five years later it has become dangerous and unmanageable territory, where "the irrational and the arbitrary have become the rule."

The trouble started in the eighties, when students started to enter the school with large language deficits and little capacity for abstract thinking or work organization. Blame for their poor performance was laid on the teachers, whose pedagogy was faulted. As the formerly selective school was opened to masses of students, the ensuing teachers' shortage was plugged by hiring candidates without credentials or university diplomas. The timing corresponded with the introduction of computers into the school curriculum, followed by the rapid promotion of computer savvy personnel over those from traditional academic disciplines. Budget priorities shifted away from cultural subjects to practical ones. "Progressive" educational innovations failed to produce progress, yet there was little questioning because the student body had turned increasingly Arab and Black, and everyone felt uncomfortable raising the issue. Failure is now handled by denying its relevance, through a policy of automatic promotion of all students to the next level. Students can be late or absent at will, but teachers too find ways to avoid school by being sick, stressed out, or on extended leave of absence. Flunking grades are no longer reported, having been replaced by the euphemism "not marked," meaning zero. The students who bother to attend keep themselves busy talking on the telephone, decorating the walls with antisemitic graffiti, chanting Koranic verses, hanging out in halls where they deliberately trip teachers and students trying to use the passageway. There is no limit to the fun that can be had when the unwritten rule is that

there are no rules.

One of the consequences of the unchecked bedlam and fevered judeophobia in the schools has been a growth spurt for Jewish schools. Once reserved for the most devout, these schools (which require costly investments in security equipment and personnel) have become shelters for children subjected to daily abuse in the public schools, under the indifferent gaze of the responsible adults. Meanwhile, the organized Muslim community has been agitating for government subsidized private schools of its own, in which the wearing of head scarves will not be an issue. The first such high school, *Lycée Avroès*,<sup>2</sup> named for the Spanish-born twelfth century Arab philosopher, opened its doors last September in the northern city of Lille. It is located within the *Al-Imane* Mosque, known for its fundamentalist interpretation of Islam.

Thus, a hundred years after the Catholic Church was forced out of the nation's schools, France is experiencing a gradual religious segregation of what had been an effective and assimilative educational system. The vision articulated by Jules Ferry, Minister of Public Education in the 1880s, that "the public schools must be mandatory, free, and secular," still resonates with an older generation of educators – even as their younger colleagues are languishing in schools that are poorly attended, free but an expensive drain on taxpayers, and increasingly sectarian – dreaming of retirement. •

#### NOTES

1. These are major incidents that came to the attention of the police. A much larger number, usually attacks on individuals rather than institutions, went unreported.
2. *The New York Times*, 9 September 2003, A3.