



Philippe Stamenkovic

Jacques Loeb Centre for the History and Philosophy
of the Life Sciences, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel

ORCID: 0000-0003-4747-8821

e-mail: philippe.stamenkovic@icloud.com

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A Philosophical Analysis of the Recent Controversy about “Islamism” in French Academia

1. Introduction and context

There has been a “war” in French academia between proponents and adversaries of controversial new interdisciplinary fields such as Postcolonial, Race, Gender or Intersectionality Studies at least since the 2010s,¹ a war which quickly spilled over into social networks and the general media. In his 02.10.2020 speech against (chiefly Islamic) “separatism”, French president Emmanuel Macron adds grist to the mill of the adversaries of such Studies, by deploring the fact that “we have left the intellectual debate to others, to those who are outside the Republic by ideologising it, but sometimes to other academic traditions” which include “certain theories in the social sciences totally imported from the United States of America”.² This implicit designation of the previously mentioned

¹ Samuel Laurent, “L’université, une guerre de tranchées autour des questions de race, de genre ou d’écriture inclusive”, *Le Monde*, 15.03.2021, access 15.03.2021, https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2021/03/15/a-l-universite-un...estions-de-race-de-genre-ou-d-ecriture-inclusive_6073126_3224.html.

² Emmanuel Macron, “Discours du président de la République sur le thème de la lutte contre les séparatismes”, 02.10.2020, access 31.08.2021, <https://www.>

Studies, inside a speech condemning Islamic separatism, prefigures the controversy to come.

On 22.10.2020, six days after the assassination of teacher Samuel Paty by an Islamist fanatic, Minister of Education Jean-Michel Blanquer mentions “Islamism-leftism” (*islamo-gauchisme*), “an ideology which then, as it gets closer, leads to the worst”.³ He condemns “very powerful Islamism-leftist currents in the higher education sector”, which “lead to certain problems, which you are witnessing”. This violent attack against French higher education, implying that it would be home to the ideologies responsible for the murder of Paty, is then countered by Minister of Higher Education and Research Frédérique Vidal, who at that time vigorously defends French universities:⁴

Universities are not a place of encouragement or expression of fanaticism. They are, on the contrary, the place where doubt and moderation are learned, as well the only one of our institutions capable of enlightening the whole of society [...] by knowledge scientifically established, discussed and collegiately criticised. [...] The French academic tradition, it is also the confrontation of ideas coming from all continents, analysed through the prism of scientific controversy. [...] The freedom of universities, it is also to be free from any ideology or representation of truth which would not be scientifically demonstrated and backed by facts.

However, the controversy is maintained by a “parliamentary information mission” requested by two right-wing members of the French National Assembly on 25.11.2020, “on ideological drifts in academic milieus”, and by several front pages of the conservative newspaper *Le Figaro*, including one entitled “How Islamism-leftism gangrenes universities”, dated 12.02.2021.

Finally, it is worth noting the deteriorated academic context of Vidal’s February 2021 statements: firstly, a defiance of the academic community in the face of several governmental measures seen as attacks on the autonomy of science. Secondly, the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent

elysee.fr/front/pdf/elysee-module-16114-fr.pdf. In this article all translations from the French are mine.

³ Valentine Faure, “Islamism-gauchisme : histoire tortueuse d’une expression devenue une invective”, *Le Monde*, 11.12.2020, access 19.03.2021, https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2020/12/11/islamo-gauchism...ession-devenue-une-invective_6063006_3232.html#xtor=AL-32280270.

⁴ Frédérique Vidal, “L’université n’est pas un lieu d’encouragement ou d’expression du fanatisme”, *L’opinion*, 26.10.2020, access 31.08.2021, <https://www.lopinion.fr/edition/politique/l-universite-n-est-pas-lieu-d-encouragement-d-expression-fanatisme-227464>.

shutdown of universities further deteriorate students’ precarity, from the financial, social and psychological points of view. This situation makes many political commentators and politicians consider Vidal’s statements as a diversion from the real problems, or an exploitation motivated by purely electoral considerations.⁵

The goal of this paper is to:

- give an empirical account of the controversy launched by Vidal’s Feb. 2021 statements about “Islamism-leftism” purportedly corrupting academia, and her ordering an “inquiry” to distinguish, within it, “what falls under academic research and what falls under militancy and opinion”;
- and analyse it in the light of the philosophical literature on autonomy of, and values in science, in order to clarify and criticise the assumptions, arguments and actions of the two main camps of the controversy (*pro* and *contra* Vidal).

In this introduction I have recalled the political and institutional context of the controversy (§ 1). In the following I present Vidal’s interventions (§ 2), and various reactions to it (§ 3). Next, I provide a philosophical analysis of the controversy (§ 4), by recalling the philosophical debates to which it is related. I conclude with the deeper questions raised by this controversy (§ 5).

2. Vidal’s interventions

Asked to comment on *Le Figaro*’s front page about “Islamism-leftism gangren[ing] universities” on TV channel *Cnews* on 14.02.2021, Vidal responds, in a striking contrast to her previous defence of universities:⁶

Me, I think that Islamism-leftism gangrenes the whole of society, and that universities are not impervious and are part of society. [...] What we observe

⁵ “L’affaire des professeurs accusés d’islamophobie ‘est une illustration des pressions politiques et économiques qui s’exercent sur l’université’”, *Le Monde*, 17.03.2021, access 21.03.2021, https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2021/03/17/professeurs-accuses-d-islamophobie-cette-affaire-est-une-illustration-des-pressions-politiques-et-economiques-qui-s-exercent-sur-l-universite_6073388_3232.html. Agence France Presse (AFP), “«Islamism-gauchisme» à la fac : Vidal sommée de revoir ses priorités”, *Le Figaro*, 17.02.2021, access 01.09.2021, https://www.lepoint.fr/societe/islamism-gauchisme-a-la-fac-attal-livre-le-point-de-vue-de-marcron-17-02-2021-2414467_23.php.

⁶ Frédérique Vidal, interview by Jean-Pierre Elkabbach, “Repères” TV show, *Cnews* TV channel, 14.02.2021, 17:00.

in universities, it is that people can use their titles and the aura they have. They are in minority, and some do it to promote radical ideas or militant ideas from Islamo-leftism by always looking at everything through the prism of their will to divide, fracture, designate the enemy, etc. [...] One cannot forbid any critical approach in universities. Me, this is what I am obviously going to defend, and this is why I will turn notably to the CNRS⁷ to lead an inquiry on all of the research trends on these subjects in universities so that one can distinguish what belongs to academic research from what belongs precisely to militancy and opinion.

Two days later, at the National Assembly, Vidal officially confirms her intention to order “what, in sociology, is called an inquiry [*enquête*]”, to be led by the ATHENA⁸ organisation. She only mentions Postcolonial Studies as an example of academic field in need of such assessment. Moreover, she mentions “academics who say themselves that they are hindered in performing their research”, and promotes “contradictory debate” and peer debate, which are allegedly threatened by Islamo-leftism.

On 21.02.2021, in *Journal du dimanche*, and then on 22.02.2021 on RTL radio, Vidal confirms her views. She adds (in a reply to the CNRS statement, see below) that “Islamoc-leftism has no scientific definition, but it corresponds to a perception [*ressenti*] from our fellow citizens, first and [sic] to a certain number of facts”,⁹ namely “the hinderance, in some institutions, of a performance of The Suppliants by Aeschylus,¹⁰ or the reading of a text by Charb”¹¹ (see § 4).

To my knowledge, Vidal has never explained what she means exactly by “Islamoc-leftism”, and seems to have a confused vision of the Studies she incriminates. For example, she states that “in biology, we have known for a long time that there is only one human species and that there is no race and you see to which point I am not worried about this subject”.¹² This statement is supposed to be an answer to the academics of the incriminated Studies, but the latter claim the existence, not of biological human races, but of discriminations linked to socially perceived races. In any case the

⁷ National Centre for Scientific Research.

⁸ National Thematic Alliance of Human and Social Sciences.

⁹ “«Islamoc-gauchisme» : Frédérique Vidal dénonce un «procès d'intention» à son égard”, *Le Monde*, 21.02.2021, access 01.09.2021, <https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2021/02/21/islamoc-gauchisme-frederique-vidal-denonce-un-proces-d-intention-a-son-egard60706883224.html>.

¹⁰ Because of allegedly “black face” representations.

¹¹ A cartoonist of the satirical *Charlie Hebdo* newspaper killed during the Islamist attack against the journal in 2015.

¹² Frédérique Vidal, interview by Jean-Pierre Elkabbach.

controversy gets away from her, to reach not only the rest of academia, but the general media and the social networks.

3. Reactions to Vidal’s interventions

3.1. From politicians

As expected in a democracy, the reactions from politicians vary greatly, from general support in the right wing to general condemnation in the left wing. Several left-wing MPs describe Vidal’s inquiry as a “witch hunt” and “thought police”, and consider it an abuse of power and an anti-constitutional measure (academic freedom being guaranteed by the French Constitutional Council), as well as a diversion from real problems.¹³

Against Vidal, the spokesperson of the government recalls the “absolute engagement” of president Macron for “the independence of researchers”, “a fundamental guarantee of our Republic”,¹⁴ probably careful not to alienate some members of his electorate. In the same vein, members of the (politically centred) parliamentary majority refuse to choose their party in the controversy.¹⁵

3.2. From academic institutions

The ATHENA organisation, originally supposed to perform the inquiry requested by Vidal, quickly refuses to comply, stating that “it does not fall under the Athena alliance to pursue studies which would not rely on the respect of fundamental rules of scientific practice, which would lead to calling into doubt the relevance or the legitimacy of certain research fields, or to calling into doubt the scientific integrity of certain colleagues”.¹⁶

Following this refusal, the CNRS initially seems to accept to perform the inquiry, while at the same time warning against the non-scientific

¹³ Martin Clavey, “À l’Assemblée Nationale, Frédérique Vidal confirme vouloir demander une enquête sur l’«islamogauchisme» à l’université”, *The Sound of Science*, 17.02.2021, access 01.09.2021, <https://www.soundofscience.fr/2671>.

¹⁴ “«Islamogauchisme» : Frédérique Vidal dénonce un «procès d’intention» à son égard”.

¹⁵ “Le retour d’un clivage stérile et délétère”, *Le Monde*, 24.02.2021: 28.

¹⁶ ATHENA, “Communiqué de l’alliance Athéna du 18 février 2021”, 18.02.2021, access 01.09.2021, <http://www.alliance-athena.fr/communiquede-lalliance-athena-du-18-fevrier-2021/>.

character of “‘Islamism’, a slogan used in the public debate”, which “does not correspond to any scientific reality”. It condemns “a polemic [...] emblematic of a regrettable exploitation [*instrumentalisation*] of science”, and “firmly condemns those who attempt to use [this slogan] for blaming academic freedom, indispensable to the scientific endeavour and the advance of knowledge, or stigmatising certain scientific communities”, in particular Postcolonial, Intersectional and Race Studies.¹⁷ It is “only in th[e] spirit” of “deepening research, elucidation of methodologies and providing access to research results” (a rather empty description of scientific methodology) that the CNRS accepts to pursue the “inquiry” asked by Vidal, “aiming at providing a scientific light on the scientific fields in question”. However, as of today the CNRS has not launched the inquiry (no information about it is available on their website), and in fact seems to have definitively refused to do it.¹⁸

Even the Conference of University Presidents (usually in favour of governmental measures) express their “astonishment in the face of a new sterile polemic on the subject of ‘Islamism’ in universities”, a “pseudo-notion” without any “beginning of a scientific definition”, which should be “left [...] to the far right which popularised it”.¹⁹ It regrets the “confusion” between “what falls under academic freedom, research freedom whose evaluation by peers is guaranteed, and what falls under potential errors or infractions, which are the object, if necessary, of administrative [...] or penal inquiries”. It is also “surprised by the exploitation of the CNRS, whose mission is in no way to produce evaluations of researchers’ work, or to distinguish what falls under ‘militancy or opinion’”.

Similarly, the permanent commission of the French National Council for Universities (whose members are permanent university professors and researchers) emits a very critical statement, entitled “no to Islamism witch hunt!”.²⁰ For the academic association *Qualité de la science française*

¹⁷ CNRS, “L’«islamogauchisme» n’est pas une réalité scientifique”, communiqué from 17.02.2021, access 01.09.2021, <https://www.cnrs.fr/fr/l-islamogauchisme-nest-pas-une-realite-scientifique>.

¹⁸ Hugues Maillot, “«Islamogauchisme» à l’université : Frédérique Vidal va devoir s’expliquer devant le Conseil d’État”, *Le Figaro*, 11.06.2021, access 02.09.2021, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/islamo-gauchisme-a-l-universite-frederique-vidal-va-devoir-s-expliquer-devant-le-conseil-d-etat-20210611>. I contacted the press service of the CNRS but did not get any answer.

¹⁹ Conférence des présidents d’Université, “‘Islamogauchisme’ : stopper la confusion et les polémiques stériles”, communiqué from 16.02.2021, access 09.09.2021, <http://www.cpu.fr/actualite/islamo-gauchisme-stopper-la-confusion-et-les-polemiques-steriles/>.

²⁰ Commission permanente du Conseil national des universités, “Non à la

(QSF), which strongly criticises the use of the fuzzy “Islamism-leftism” concept, the militant drift in academia “cannot be solved by the intrusion of political power inside the scientific institution”, but only “by the action and vigilance of academics themselves”, through peer review.²¹

One can also see a concrete impact on hiring procedures. At Paris-Est Créteil University, a job advertisement is modified: any mentions of “race”, “gender” and “intersectional” are deleted from the advertisement, before being mentioned again.²² This shows an unavowed (and all the more dangerous, because impossible to detect) impact on hiring procedures.

3.3. From academics

One can roughly classify (published) academic reactions in three categories: supporting Vidal’s statements; condemning them; and taking a more or less neutral stance. I leave aside the latter for lack of space.

Pro Vidal, the research collective *Vigilance universités* criticises “pseudo-scientific identity currents” present in universities, students who prevent conferences from taking place, as well as the increasing importance, in some social science departments, given to “identity thought currents [...] which, on a militant basis, assign individuals to a reductive and simplifying gender or race identity, and exonerate themselves from scientific requirements”.²³ While not denying the contribution of militancy to research, they call for a rigorous evaluation of the latter, to be done inside universities. In a stronger tone, some academics²⁴ directly agree with Vidal’s diagnostic on “Islamism-leftism”, a term which, according to

chasse aux sorcières islamogauchistes!”, Communiqué from 17.02.2021, access 09.09.2021, <https://cnu27.univ-lille.fr/motions/cpcnu-communique-20210217.pdf>.

²¹ QSF, “«Islamogauchisme» et dérive ministérielle”, 19.02.2021, access 10.09.2021, <http://www.qsf.fr/2021/02/19/islamogauchisme-et-derive-ministerielle/>.

²² Simon Blin, “A l’université Paris-Est Créteil, l’étrange caviardage d’une fiche de poste”, *Libération*, 03.03.2021, access 02.09.2021, https://www.liberation.fr/idees-et-debats/a-luniversite-paris-est-creteil-letrange-caviardage-dune-fiche-de-poste-20210303_JATL7MTURVGEVAJVD3JQVHT5E4/.

²³ *Vigilance universités*, “Il faut protéger la liberté académique face aux pressions militantes”, *Libération*, 26.02.2021, access 09.09.2021, https://www.liberation.fr/idees-et-debats/tribunes/universites-il-faut-protoger-la-liberte-academique-face-aux-pressions-militantes-20210224_NFTTP476G5FHPCDBONP-FJQZHHY/.

²⁴ “Protéger l’université contre le dévoiement militant”, *Le Monde*, 24.02.2021: 28.

them, has indeed a scientific definition given to it by Taguieff.²⁵ But they disagree on the method since, according to them, the problem is bigger than Islamo-leftism: it is the militant and pseudo-scientific drift of higher education and research. They believe the regulation of academic teaching and research should be done by the High Council for the Evaluation of Research and Higher Education (HCERES).

However, there have probably been more negative than positive reactions to Vidal's statements. A petition signed by more than 23,000 people (many of them academics) requires Vidal's resignation.²⁶ They find the accusation of "Islamism", which insinuates a complicity between some works in social and human science and Islamist terrorism, akin to far-right and conspiracy theories. Considering this accusation to be a diversion from real problems, they fear a restriction of academic freedom and a climate of intimidation. The French controversy also attracts attention from abroad. Petitions by anglophone, German speaking and international academics express their support to their French colleagues. They underline "the resonance with the darkest moments of French history, and notably with a discourse attacking 'Judeo-Bolsheviks' which already served to create an amalgam between political and religious engagements".²⁷ They consider Vidal's declarations a "false narrative which takes France out of a world debate, lively and urgent. It subjects racialised academics – already few and marginalised – who produce critical studies on colonialism, is-

²⁵ Taguieff Pierre-André, *La nouvelle judéophobie* (Paris: Mille et une nuits, 2002). The analysis of the concept of Islamism as such lies outside the scope of this article. Let me only recall that the origins of this neologism are unclear (see the English and French Wikipedia pages dedicated to it; the French one, covered by multiple warnings, shows the controversial nature of the concept). Taguieff is credited with the introduction of the concept in France, to designate the alleged antisemitic alliance of far-left militancy and Islamism against globalisation and in support of the Palestinian cause. For the history of the term, see Sonya Faure, Frantz Durupt, "Islamism-gauchisme, aux origines d'une expression médiatique", *Libération*, 14.04.2016, access 13.12.2021, https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2016/04/14/islamism-gauchisme-aux-origines-d-une-expression-mediatique_1445857/; and Valentine Faure, "Islamism-gauchisme : histoire tortueuse d'une expression devenue une invective", *Le Monde*, 11.12.2020, access 19.03.2021, https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2020/12/11/islamism-gauchisme...ession-devenue-une-invective_6063006_3232.html#xtor=AL-32280270.

²⁶ "Nous, universitaires et chercheurs, demandons avec force la démission de Frédérique Vidal", *Le Monde*, 21–22.02.2021: 24.

²⁷ "Islamism-gauchisme : «Nous ne pouvons manquer de souligner la résonance avec les plus sombres moments de l'histoire française»", *Le Monde*, 04.03.2021, access 26.08.2021, https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2021/03/04/islamism-gauchisme...s-plus-sombres-moments-de-l-histoire-francaise_6071892_3232.html.

lamophobia, anti-black racism, etc., as well as their allies, to even greater risks”.²⁸ They support an unconditional defence of academic freedom with respect to the methods of investigation, and reject any evaluation of academic work by political entities.²⁹ Finally, there is even a judiciary response, since six professors sue minister Vidal for abuse of power at the highest administrative jurisdiction of the country, the *Conseil d’Etat*. They ask the minister to officially renounce the inquiry which, according to them, “flouts academic freedom and threatens to subject to political control, not only social science but the whole of research”.³⁰

4. Discussion

4.1. At the juridical and institutional level

It is not the purpose of this article to delve into the juridical and institutional aspects of the controversy. We can only mention that Vidal’s statements both enforce and challenge article L141-6 of the French Code of Education, which reads: “The public service of higher education is secular and independent from any political, economic, religious or ideological hold; it tends towards objectivity of knowledge; it respects the diversity of opinions. It must guarantee that education and research have a possibility of free scientific, creative and critical development”. Indeed, inasmuch as Vidal’s inquiry is intended to establish or restore the independence of higher education and research from any “ideological hold” (in other words, influence of illegitimate non-epistemic values, see § 4.2), it is in line with this article. But inasmuch as for doing so, it runs the risk of breaching the same independence of higher education and research from any “political hold”, and its “free [...] development” (in other words, its autonomy, see § 4.2), it contravenes this article. This tension is illustrated by article L952-2: “Professors and researchers enjoy full independence

²⁸ “Nous voulons exprimer ici notre solidarité avec les universitaires français”, *Nouvel Obs*, 17.03.2021, access 10.09.2021, <https://www.nouvelobs.com/idees/20210317.OBS41524/nous-voulons-exprimer-ici-notre-solidarite-avec-les-universitaires-francais-par-angela-davis-gayatri-spivak-achille-mbembe.html>.

²⁹ “Note de solidarité à l’intention des chercheuses et chercheurs en poste en France”, access 10.09.2021, https://docs.google.com/forms/d/14hYPQUdtm2wk-dr0ksqVOe70oguPY3W8beRzR1HGJQ6w/viewform?edit_requested=true.

³⁰ Hughes Maillot, “«Islamism-gauchisme» à l’université : Frédérique Vidal va devoir s’expliquer devant le Conseil d’État”.

and complete freedom of expression in their teaching and research activities, provided they respect the principles of tolerance and objectivity, in conformity with academic traditions and provisions of the present code”.

With respect to the institutional aspect, the CNRS, like any higher education and research organisation, already has an internal inquiry commission (the National Committee of the CNRS) to evaluate and hire researchers, in conformity with academic peer review. Regarding the ATHENA alliance, performing such inquiries is not part of the missions of this organisation,³¹ which indeed officially refused to conduct the inquiry.

Finally, the fact that Vidal talks of “what, in sociology, is called an inquiry” raises more questions than it answers: an inquiry in the sociological sense cannot establish the scientific nature of the works investigated (which requires an evaluation of the contents of these works, by specialists of the fields in question). Note that some members of the government would have preferred that the French General Inspection of Higher Education be commissioned for this task,³² but the latter does not have the required scientific competence neither. Only scientists qualified in the incriminated fields can perform their evaluation. This does not mean that they cannot collaborate with administrative staff within the scope of such an inquiry, but the content evaluation of the incriminated works depends only on them.

4.2. The philosophical debate

The Islamo-leftism controversy illustrates two issues in the philosophy of science:

- the autonomy of science, i.e. the freedom for the scientific community to choose its research avenues, and to self-regulate and self-organise itself: this is mainly a pre-epistemic (pertaining to the choice of research questions³³) and “para-epistemic” (i.e. organisational) matter;³⁴

³¹ ATHENA, “Missions”, <http://www.alliance-athena.fr/missions/>.

³² Sarah Belouezzane, Olivier Faye, Abel Mestre, Sylvia Zappi, “Emmanuel Macron empêtré dans le débat sur l’«islamo-gauchisme»”, *Le Monde*, 22.02.2021, access 09.09.2021, https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2021/02/22/emmanuel-macron-empetre-dans-le-debat-sur-l-islamo-gauchisme_6070756_823448.html.

³³ Daniel Hicks, “A New Direction for Science and Values”, *Synthese* 191, 14 (2014): 3271–3295.

³⁴ E.g. Vanevar Bush, *The Endless Frontier* (Washington: National Science Foundation, 1945).

- the values in science (both intra and extra-scientific values): this is mainly an epistemic matter (pertaining to the validation of knowledge³⁵).

Both issues are obviously linked (note that there is not necessarily a correspondence between full autonomy of science and value-free ideal, as the position of the *pro* camp illustrates, see §4.3), and both are unsettled. In the first issue, contrary to the position generally advocated by scientists and scientific institutions, there are also strong (democratic, but also epistemic) arguments against the autonomy of science.³⁶ The second issue, in spite of a “value-laden turn” and a decrease in popularity of the value-free ideal of science, remains controversial.³⁷ Indeed, both positions (the value-laden vs the value-free ideal) have advantages and drawbacks: for example, values ensure a socially and democratically responsible science (especially in the case of risk³⁸), but introduce the risk of undue political or ideological influence, thus threatening the integrity of science. What is more, within the value-laden position, once values have been allowed in, there is ample room for controversies, since values are by definition polemical concepts.

Note that the conflict between the value-free and the value-laden ideals holds not only for science with practical or political applications (e.g. climate science³⁹), but also for “pure” science.⁴⁰ While most case studies of non-epistemic values influence concern (as one could expect) human, social and life sciences (because they take humans as their object of study), there have also been documented cases in the physical sciences.⁴¹

³⁵ E.g. Heather Douglas, *Science, Policy, and the Value-Free Ideal* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009).

³⁶ Stéphanie Rupy, “La science doit-elle être autonome pour être utile”, in: *Science, Philosophie, Société*, (Presses universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2017), 61–79; Baptiste Bedessem, Stéphanie Rupy, “Scientific Autonomy and the Unpredictability of Scientific Inquiry: The Unexpected Might Not Be Where You Would Expect”, *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part A* 73 (2019): 1–7.

³⁷ Kevin Elliott, Daniel Steel, *Current Controversies in Values and Science* (Taylor & Francis, 2017); Julian Reiss, Jan Sprenger, “Scientific Objectivity”, in: *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Metaphysics Research Lab (Stanford University, 2020).

³⁸ Sven Ove Hansson, “Politique du risque et intégrité de la science”, in: *Risque et expertise*, ed. Alexandre Guay (Presses universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2018), 57–86.

³⁹ Eric Winsberg, *Philosophy and Climate Science* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁴⁰ Sven Ove Hansson, “How Values Can Influence Science Without Threatening Its Integrity”, in: *Logic, Methodology and Philosophy of Science – Proceedings of the 15th International Congress, 2017*, 207–221.

⁴¹ Stéphanie Rupy, “Rôle des valeurs en science : contributions de la philos-

Importantly, some scientists are aware of the tension between value-free and value-laden in their practice.⁴² Interestingly, both sides of the debate (including those advocating a lesser autonomy of, or a greater influence of values in science) generally claim to preserve – or even improve – the epistemic quality of science.

It is striking that, whereas the philosophical debate remains highly controversial, it is completely ignored in the present controversy, and similar public debates. Although it is not surprising, it is regrettable: each party could certainly benefit from such knowledge, which could increase the epistemic quality of their argumentation and contribute to their self-critique. Instead, the controversy was most often reduced to an ideological battleground where each party was convinced that they held the truth and essentialised the other one as the enemy.

4.3. Analysis of the positions in the controversy

Let me first make clear a few points. Firstly, there is no biunique correspondence between positions in the controversy (*pro* and *contra* Vidal) and positions in the philosophical debate (about autonomy and values). The following only describes the main correspondences I have witnessed based on my bibliographical search, but of course it might be that there are others. Secondly, and in connection with the first point, the following is just a *descriptive* account of these correspondences: there is no intention to normatively explain or justify them (by, e.g., claiming that being *pro*-Vidal implies defending the value-free ideal, or the reverse). I then discuss the cogency of the positions in the controversy in light of the philosophical debate, but again I do not claim that there is, or should be, a biunique correspondence between the two. Finally, by proposing to analyse the controversy in terms of autonomy and values, I do not claim that it is reducible to these issues, and I do not intend to reduce the importance of its central concept, namely “Islamism” (although I believe it only stands for a more general problem of ideological influence in science, as some proponents, and Vidal herself, claim). But I am not interested here in elucidating the concept of “Islamism”: rather, having noticed that both parties of the controversy largely rely on uncritical assumptions about

ophie féministe des sciences”, *Écologie & politique* 51, 2 (2015): 41–54.

⁴² E.g., in climate science, Torbjørn Gundersen, *How Climate Scientists View the Expert Role: Value-Freedom, Responsibility, and Relevance*, ARENA Working Paper (University of Oslo, 2018).

the autonomy of, and values in, science, I believe analysing these assumptions can clarify the controversy itself, and shed light on the strengths and weaknesses of each camp.

Regarding “Islamism-leftism”, without investigating the concept as such, I will only note a symmetry: each main camp in the controversy accuses the other one of infringing scientificity. The *pro* accuse Studies of militancy and pseudo-science; the *contra* accuse the *pro* of using a fuzzy and non-scientific concept (“Islamism-leftism”). Both have good arguments. On the one hand, there have been indeed documented cases⁴³ of various Studies breaching basic requirements of what can be considered scientific knowledge (in the broad sense, including humanities and social science⁴⁴), so that the suspicion of ideological influence in these disciplines is plausible. On the other hand, the only reference invoked by the *pro* to back their use of the “Islamism-leftism” concept is a book⁴⁵ whose scientific status seems fragile, and which seems more akin to a polemical or partisan essay than to an academic, empirically supported, work. This is of course ironic for the camp allegedly defending scientificity. In fact, since the beginning of the 2000s, it seems that only about fifteen people are responsible for the circulation of the concept in France, essentially in a few right-wing newspapers.⁴⁶ It has been analysed as a term essentially used by the far right to ostracise and denigrate a particular social group and to polarise public opinion.⁴⁷ More generally, there have also been critiques with respect to the cogency or the accuracy of the arguments used by the *pro*. For example, the booklet written by Heinrich,⁴⁸ one of their main proponents, was criticised for its errors.⁴⁹

With respect now to the two philosophical issues mentioned above (autonomy of, and values in science), the *pro* and *contra* camps have more

⁴³ For a classic, see Alan Sokal, Jean Bricmont, *Impostures intellectuelles* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1997).

⁴⁴ See Sven Ove Hansson, “Politique du risque et intégrité de la science”.

⁴⁵ Pierre-André Taguieff, *La nouvelle judéophobie*.

⁴⁶ Valentine Faure, “Islamism-gauchisme : histoire tortueuse d’une expression devenue une invective”.

⁴⁷ David Chavalarias, “‘Islamism-gauchisme’ : le piège de l’alt-right se referme sur la macronie”, *Politoscope*, 21.02.2021, access 09.09.2021, <https://politoscope.org/2021/02/islamogauchisme-le-piege-de-lalt-right-se-referme-sur-la-macronie/>.

⁴⁸ Nathalie Heinrich, *Ce que le militantisme fait à la recherche* (Paris: Gallimard, 2021).

⁴⁹ See e.g. Jean Baubérot, “Nathalie Heinrich, le bébé... et l’eau du bain: à propos de «ce que le militantisme fait à la recherche»”, *Le club de Mediapart*, 31.05.2021, access 07.09.2021, <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/jean-bauberot/blog/310521/nathalie-heini...et-l-eau-du-bain-propos-de-ce-que-le-militantisme-fait-la-recherche>.

similarities in the former than in the latter issue. The *contra* generally defend an absolute conception of scientific autonomy and academic freedom, combined with a programmatic research avenue to take into account, study and more or less defend minorities. The *pro* also defend scientific autonomy, as we have seen, especially with regard to the evaluation of academic work. But they are more willing to allow some control by the state or society, especially with respect to directions of research, and, potentially, the organisation and regulation of the scientific community. This seems a position that is more defensible and democratic than the *contra* position, whose absolute conception of autonomy somewhat contradicts its democratic concern.

It is with respect to values in science that the two camps most oppose each other. The *contra* usually strongly support the influence of values (including non-epistemic ones) in science (often at all stages of research, including the epistemic phase of validation of knowledge). On the contrary, the *pro* defend the value-free ideal (at least in the strict sense of excluding non-epistemic values from the phase of validation). But contrary to what the *pro* implicitly imply, the value-free ideal is not necessarily part of the definition of science neither, and, as we have seen, is controversial. Interestingly, the *contra* position combines a defence of values in science (a position usually associated with a reduced autonomy of science, which is supposed to be responsible towards society, the latter having a word to say on its research avenues and/or organisation), with a defence of a full autonomy of science. Again, this seems to be a position difficult to hold for the *contra*, since it implies that only the scientific community – and not society – can choose which social values are allowed to influence its work.

Finally, positions in this controversy are not only characterised by statements, but also by actions. Now inadmissible actions have been performed, mostly by *contra* supporters, so it seems.⁵⁰ Of course, such actions should not be considered representative; they do, however, discredit their own camp (something which the *pro* have indeed exploited against the

⁵⁰ The only unacceptable action I know of *pro* supporters (although it may have been the most dangerous in this controversy) apparently originates outside academia: it was the publication of 600 names of researchers who signed the call for Vidal's resignation on a far-right blog. See Sylvain Duchamp, "'Islamogauchisme': 600 noms de chercheurs, dont une vingtaine de Toulouse, livrés à la vindicte sur internet", FranceTVinfo, 08.03.2021, access 02.09.2021, <https://france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr/occitanie/haute-garonne/toulouse/islamo-gauchisme-600-noms-de-chercheurs-dont-une-vingtaine-de-toulouse-livres-a-la-vindicte-sur-internet-1988527.html>.

contra).⁵¹ The *contra* camp is infamously known for its “public shaming” or “no-platforming” practices: for example, intimidation of professors at Sciences Po Grenoble⁵² or Aix-Marseille University;⁵³ or hindering academic talks or theatrical representations.⁵⁴ These are clear infringements of academic freedom and the scientific *ethos* (not to speak of potential threats to people’s careers and even safety). Since these freedoms are precisely those defended by the *contra*, their position is somewhat paradoxical. The consequence of these actions is that academics or students can adopt selecting or avoidance strategies (of the public invited to a seminar, of the curriculum chosen, of the courses given). This results in self-censorship, suspicion with respect to students, colleagues, or management. However, there is also self-censorship caused by the *pro*, and less known than the one caused by the *contra*. Indeed, there has been reported self-censorship of professors or researchers of the incriminated Studies, whether in classrooms, seminars, answers to calls for proposals or invitations, or job interviews.⁵⁵

Let me conclude with a few clarifications as well. The purpose of this paper is not to take a side in the controversy but, as said above, to analyse the positions in light of the philosophical concepts of autonomy of, and values in, science. The previous analysis may give an impression that the *contra* are somehow “wrong”. In fact, although I sympathise with their position, I believe their absolutist posture on autonomy and values is difficult to hold and harms them (not to speak, of course, of the inadmissible actions of their most extreme supporters). Conversely, the *pro* probably exhibit a more coherent and democratically acceptable position in terms of autonomy and values, even if I believe their position relies on a pseudo-scientific concept (and even if I do not share their views regarding values).⁵⁶

⁵¹ In fact, some of these actions happened before Vidal’s statements, and she used them precisely to condemn “Islamism-leftism” in universities.

⁵² “L’affaire des professeurs accusés d’islamophobie ‘est une illustration des pressions politiques et économiques qui s’exercent sur l’université’”.

⁵³ QSF, “Le climat d’intimidation à l’université ne peut perdurer”, 16.03.2021, access 08.09.2021, <https://www.qsf.fr/2021/03/16/le-climat-dintimidation-a-luniv-ersite-ne-peut-pas-perdurer/>.

⁵⁴ Marie-Amélie Lombard-Latune, “Décolonialisme: à l’université, la résistance s’organise”, *L’opinion*, 06.10.2020, access 08.09.2020, <https://www.lopinion.fr/edition/politique/decolonialisme-a-l-universite-resistance-s-organise-225579>.

⁵⁵ Le Nevé Soazig, “«Islamism-gauchisme» à l’université : la ministre Frédérique Vidal accusée d’abus de pouvoir devant le Conseil d’Etat’”.

⁵⁶ My personal views do not matter here. I strongly condemn Vidal’s statements and enterprise, and I have strong doubts as to the soundness and empirical

5. Conclusion

I would like to conclude with two broader issues raised by this controversy.

The first one is the social role of universities: is it only to produce scientific knowledge, or is it also to politically educate future citizens? Most academics would probably choose the first answer. If it is clear that one can accept political initiatives within universities, the question remains whether one should accept events which promote certain values, even if these values are morally or democratically attractive. Indeed, values are by definition polemical objects. Thus, at the very least, one should keep a clear demarcation between such (value-laden) initiatives, and the (scientific) curricula offered by universities.

The second issue is that of the validation of scientific knowledge. Even if this validation makes use of extra-scientific values, it seems that it can only be performed by competent scientists, i.e. through peer review – and not by any external (administrative or political) inquiry commission (and certainly not by government members) which has no (epistemic) legitimacy to do so. It is thus not up to such non-scientific actors to decide “what falls under science and what falls under opinion”. These external actors can potentially commission scientists who are competent in those fields to do so (thereby acting as experts). This would reduce scientific autonomy as freedom to self-organise (here, a peer-review triggered from the outside, and, most importantly, concerning an entire disciplinary field instead of a single work), as well as freedom to define research orientations (if it appears that some disciplines are excluded from universities and not financed any more).

However, one should not forget that there are other disciplines whose unscientific character has been thoroughly demonstrated (e.g. homeopathy), but which are still present in French universities, without this disturbing many people. This shows that the issue here is mostly political; in other words, Islam, gender, and racial discrimination are highly charged topics in France. In addition, if these various Studies are already constituted into academic communities (as indeed is the case in many English-speaking universities, but sparsely in France), they already have their acknowledged specialists. If the latter are commissioned to investigate their field, they will

reality of the “Islamism-leftism” concept (although it lies outside my field of study). Regarding the philosophical issues discussed here, I would argue for a partial autonomy of science, and a value-laden science, but this is not the purpose of this paper.

certainly not disqualify it entirely. If, on the other hand, academics from outside these fields are commissioned to investigate them, that would raise questions and would go against the normal functioning of science.

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Summary

In February 2021, the French Minister of Higher Education and Research, Frédérique Vidal, ordered an inquiry – to be led by the French National Centre for Scientific Research – about the alleged “Islamogauchism” (*islamo-gauchisme*) which, according to her, was corrupting French academia. Vidal’s concern was, purportedly, to distinguish “what falls under academic research and what falls under militancy and opinion”. She had in mind, in particular, recent interdisciplinary fields in the social sciences, such as Postcolonial Studies. Her statements caused a controversy in French academia as well as outside. The goal of this paper is to present this controversy and analyse it in light of the philosophical literature on autonomy of, and values in, science.

After recalling the political and institutional context of the controversy (1st part), I present Vidal’s intervention (2nd part) and various reactions to it, which can roughly be classified *pro* and *contra* Vidal’s statements (3rd part). I then pro-

vide a philosophical discussion of the controversy (4th part), by recalling the philosophical debate to which it is related (the autonomy of, and the values in science), and analysing the assumptions, arguments and actions of both camps. I show in particular that a political intervention inside the very production of academic knowledge implies a strong risk of censorship (whether self-inflicted, intra-academic or extra-academic), and that letting academia self-regulate itself with respect to the validation of knowledge remains the best way to go. I conclude with the deeper questions raised by this controversy: the social role of universities, and the institutional aspects of scientific knowledge validation.

Keywords: "Islamism-leftism", autonomy of science, values in science, militancy, Frédérique Vidal