Indexing Integration: Hierarchies of Belonging in Secular Paris

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In the wake of recent terrorist attacks in Paris, stereotypes of Muslim migrants who pose a threat to the French nation loom large. This paper explores the rising stakes of immigrant integration to consider the ways that communicative practices thought to index belonging in France shift with rising tensions surrounding Islam and immigration. These observations are based on 18 months (Jan. 2014 – June 2015) ethnographic fieldwork in Senegalese households in Paris. Faced with economic decline and heightened xenophobia, university-educated Senegalese provide a striking example of the ways transnational migrants reinforce hierarchies of class, education and religion as they struggle to maintain a place in France’s shrinking middle class. For many educated Senegalese, the recent success of the extreme-right Front National represents a public measure of discrimination they experience daily, as they are increasingly categorized alongside stigmatized migrants.

Secularism has gained heightened importance in France as fears of “homegrown” terrorism have piqued. Muslim migrants in Paris are subject to increased scrutiny and suspicion in the context of escalating anti-Islamic sentiment, such that even naturalized citizens feel pressure to permanently perform their integration according to the ever-shifting demands of French secularism. To demonstrate belonging, immigrants must distance themselves from stereotypes of foreigners who pose a threat to the secular French nation. Through analysis of the language used in state discourses, on one hand, and in conversations in Senegalese households, on the other, this article examines “integration” in France, as a legal category and a powerful metapragmatic framework that mediates social indexicality in everyday interactions. Analysis of the language used at state and household levels to directly and indirectly index integration reveals the ways normative expectations of immigrants are naturalized and carried across contexts, drawn on by immigrants themselves to perform their own integration in ways that produce nested hierarchies of belonging among France’s immigrant populations.

This paper shows how immigrants take part in the continual redefinition of what is required to “sound” integrated, in their efforts to demonstrate their own belonging in France. It does so, first, through analysis of the language used in state discourses that frame integration as immigrants’ legal responsibility according to France’s contractual approach to citizenship, founded in the French “Republican” tradition. It then examines transcripts of family discussions in Senegalese households in Paris to reveal the ways educated migrants from Dakar adopt the language of the French state to question the moral and legal position of other (Senegalese) migrants. This paper contends that French Republican ideologies create an axis of social differentiation between the “integrated” foreign born and potentially problematic “immigrants.” It reveals the ways immigrants appropriate state discourses in their efforts to demonstrate their own integration and argues that in so doing, immigrants reproduce nested hierarchies of belonging, in which Senegalese Catholics perform integration through critique of Muslims while Muslims denounce polygamists and members of Islamic associations.