

Réjane Sénac, *L'invention de la diversité* [The Invention of Diversity].
Paris: PUF, 2012

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The debates concerning the coexistence in modern societies of people with different cultural background tend to be thorny ones, regardless of the country concerned. Réjane Sénac's book, *The invention of diversity*, offers a look into the complexities and contradictions of one such debate, through an exploration of the emergence and the uses of the term "diversity" in French public discourse. Indeed, this expression, having appeared in the 1990s, has recently become widespread and the idea of "promotion of diversity" is nowadays a prevalent model in approaching a number of social issues. It is a concept which not only serves to describe divergence of cultural norms and identities, but touches upon a wide range of subjects, questioning the way in which a society articulates and approaches questions such as social cohesion, equality and identity. Réjane Sénac's work concentrates on the meaning ascribed to this terms by those most active in its creation and implementation—politicians and members of various public or non-governmental institutions. However, far from being a simple account of the history of a concept and its uses, it draws on this analysis to explore further the underlying questions, hesitations and difficulties that French society inevitably faces.

Specializing in a variety of domains of social science, ranging from political science, through law, to sociology and philosophy, Réjane Sénac has previously approached the issue of equality and difference mainly through the lens of gender studies, with works concerning parity and equal treatment. Her present work both appears as a continuation of this previous research and enlarges its scope. Hence, the approach is deliberately interdisciplinary, examining the subject at hand from a wide range of methodological and theoretical perspectives.

To comment on this publication, it is first necessary to sketch a brief definition of what is referred to under the name of diversity. In a very general manner, diversity as used today in French public discourse can be seen as a "portmanteau word" (p. 39) designating a certain mode of dealing with differences inside society. It also has strong links with conceptions commonly referred to as models of integration. Indeed, as Réjane Sénac shows well, while the discourse on diversity is supposed to apply to all kinds of difference, be it gender, race, sexual orientation, religion, handicap, or

social position, it is often very rapidly restricted to the question of ethno-cultural minorities. In that sense, the discourse referring to diversity appears as an attempt to reformulate the French model of integration of foreigners and French citizens of immigrant origin. As such, it is positioned as different both from the classical French assimilation stance and from what most actors interviewed by Réjane Sénac refer to as the American multiculturalist model. The promotion of diversity, as endorsed by most actors, implies a certain recognition of differences and valuing them as an asset. It seems to function as a politically correct phrase replacing expressions such as race, immigration, or visible minorities, for some of the respondents bearing witness to an evolution of society towards more openness to difference, for others hiding problems behind a neutral term which avoids naming them. As to the practical applications of this concept, the promotion of diversity aims at a wider access to the public sphere for people belonging to various minorities and takes mostly the form of priority given at entry to talented representatives of those groups—in this sense it is clearly distinct both from anti-discrimination measures and from so called positive discrimination, that is to say pre-established quotas of minority members in various institutions. However, beyond this very general ideas, the meanings given to the term become complex, fluid and at times contradictory. The exploration of those complexities constitutes the main object of Réjane Sénac's study.

From the point of view of methodology—which is thoroughly exposed in a separate chapter—the book is based both on a series of official documents and public statements and on an important fieldwork consisting of 163 semi-structured interviews with public figures. The documents are reports ordered by state authorities and independent institutions, as well as speeches and declarations by politicians. The interviews were conducted between October 2008 and December 2009. The author has contacted a wide range of political actors and public personae, including politicians, state officials, businessmen, religious leaders, members of various organizations and trade unions, researchers and journalists. Attention has been paid to gain access to different levels of decision-making, from ministers to local officials. Some of the interviewees are directly concerned by the subject of the study, being what is labeled in French political discourse as people “originating in diversity,” others are related to the topic through the functions they hold or the work they have accomplished. One critique that could be addressed to the author, and has been indeed, for instance by Jeremy Guedj in his short review of the book,¹ concerns the choice of interviewees. Indeed, while the number of interviews is high, Réjane Sénac does not seek representativity—the people contacted are not a sample of French political elites, or even less of the general population and the study says nothing about the reception of the idea of diversity amongst the public. However, this critique is partly answered by the precisions the author gives on the theoretical background on which her methodology is based. Indeed, the work links an approach that could be qualified as that of history of ideas with an analysis of “interactions between actors and norms” (p. 277), giving an insight into what the author names “ideas in action” (p. 278). While the author acknowledges that

¹ Guedj, Jérémy (2012).

those “ideas in action” are co-constructed by various actors, she defends the choice of members of the elite on the basis of their playing a “more visible and more explicit” role in constructing public policy (p. 281). She states her aim as being “to analyze the interviews taking into account institutional configurations and strategies that they express and reveal in order to clarify the ideas at play” (p. 285). From this point of view, her approach seems justified and its limitations inevitable. One could however imagine that they can give ground to potential further research on issues such as the reception of the uses of the concept of diversity amongst the wider public.

Operating at the intersection of different domains and fields of research, the book refers to a rich of bibliography, both in terms of methodology and theory. Besides French literature on issues of identity and immigration,² the author draws on works in numerous fields. The first part of the book as well as its general framework make use of public policy analysis, and in particular the works of Pierre Muller, who’s also an inspiration when it comes to the methodology of the interviews. The second part is situated closer to the perspective of political theory and the author refers the concepts under discussion to conceptions of liberalism and multiculturalism elaborated by such classical authors as Will Kymlicka, John Rawls, or Charles Taylor. Various approaches belonging to political science and sociology are also very present. Finally, gender studies play an important role, the question of gender equality being a predecessor of that of diversity in the public sphere. Here the author includes Anglo-saxon authors such as Judith Butler or Iris Young, but also texts by French feminists, including her own works on parity. In all of those cases, she captures the specificity of the case under study not only by exploring French works, but also by using foreign—in particular Anglo-saxon—literature to shed a light on the French case, be it by endorsing the stance of the authors in question or by contrasting it with the situation in France. While the author clearly states her intention to establish a continuous dialogue between theory and data, in the body of the text she often gives the voice entirely to her interviewees, sometimes causing the reader to be slightly overwhelmed by the empirical material and making it difficult at times to make out the limit between the author’s theoretical analysis and the actors’ interpretation. This however is mostly due to the extreme density of the material gathered and to the number of issues covered.

The book is organized in two parts, the first one more concerned with the particular context and meaning of the emergence and functioning of the term “diversity” in France, the second one being more theoretical and questioning the term’s links to questions of equality, social cohesion and justice.

The first part begins by an analysis of the process of “publicization” (p. 39) of the term and its passage from the status of a fact to be acknowledged to that of a norm to be promoted. It is interesting to note that the idea of promoting diversity originates in the business circles and has been willingly and spontaneously endorsed by private companies before being integrated into the political discourse by state actors. It is also in this part that the author explores the way in which diversity has been an answer to a difficulty in naming differences. While referring in theory to all kinds of

² In particular authors such as Gerard Noiriel, Patrick Weil or Michel Wiewiorka.

differences, the term is clearly used mostly to describe ethnic, racial or religious ones, thus providing a solution to a situation in which French political discourse refuses to make use of words such as race, for fear of condoning their negative implications, but finds no other, more acceptable term to describe minority groups accurately. The title of this chapter—"Naming that which cannot be named"—sums up very well this ambiguity. This restricted definition of diversity, as difference of origin above all, also draws the attention to the relation between the appearance of the discourse on the promotion of diversity and the evolution of the French model of integration, in particular what was perceived as its crisis. Indeed, the unrest in French suburbs in 2005 has made apparent a growing gap between a marginalized population mostly of immigrant origin and the rest of society, crystallizing fears and anxieties as to the possibility to maintain social cohesion through the then-prevalent models. Hence, diversity appears as a concept meant to take act of the irreversible presence in French society of people of different origin, and to modernize and improve the republican model of integration. However, Réjane Sénac's work leads the reader to doubt the capacity of this term to promote equality. Indeed, as the author shows, promoting diversity is also defined as distinct from—if not a move away from—the idea of fight against discrimination. While both those approaches acknowledge the existence of differences, the anti-discrimination model sees them as sources of prejudice and injustice that the law should protect citizens against. With the idea of promotion of diversity they are perceived as a potential asset that has not been sufficiently valued—this model aims both at reestablishing a form of justice and enhancing performance. Encouraging positive action, but imposing no obligations, this conception can be seen as denying the existence of conflict and structural injustice, rendering it in fact impossible to prevent. Diversity appears thus as the latest stage of an evolution of the debate on integration and identity, but serious doubts can be expressed as to its potential to solve the problems that French society struggles with in this respect.

Questions of justice and equality are at the heart of the second chapter, the title of which—"Liberty, equality, diversity—a new fraternity?"—exposes very efficiently what is at stake. The concept of diversity is analyzed here as questioning not only French identity but also the very philosophical bases of the republican thought. It poses the fundamental question of how to ensure the equality of citizens all the while admitting the existence of differences. In this light, diversity is firstly seen as a way of formulating a new social contract and redefining the republican idea of meritocracy. This social contract supposes that social cohesion can be obtained through the recognition of individual identities and talents. Réjane Sénac becomes increasingly critical of the concept of diversity in this second part, giving voice to those of her interviewees who see such an approach as both a denial of the structural nature of inequalities and a overly individualistic insistence on personal success of talented minority members. She then concentrates on the idea of transmitting the responsibility for the minority members' chances to succeed from the state to the individual and on the place and role of the members of the elite "originating in diversity." A vision of diversity as a "totem"—that is to say, the promotion of a few talented individuals as a proof of the existence of equal chances—is contrasted with what the author calls

“the mixed-race Republic” (“la République métisse”) (p. 194)—an approach which would only restore social cohesion after a redefinition of the identity of the whole, so that particularities of all citizens are taken into account. This would also imply coming to terms with the colonial past.

However, the most severe critique of the concept of diversity is based on the question of principles of justice and the definition of equality. Indeed, Réjane Sénac quotes a number of interviewees pointing to the promotion of diversity as a means of governing over inequalities rather than of eliminating them. According to her, in this vision equality is replaced by what she names equity—that is to say the absolute obligation of equal treatment and equal status is supplanted by a sort of equilibrium in which treatment is differential to match the pre-existing differences. This is mostly because this conception conditions equal treatment for members of minorities on the existence of a difference. Their status as “other” becomes an asset, but an ambiguous one—they are not promoted because of the inherent right of all citizens to be treated as equal, but because of an additional value attributed to their difference. This leads to the absurd situation, ironically commented upon by a number of interviewees, where the accumulation of sources of differential status becomes an accumulation of assets. Implicit in this conception is the idea of a norm, which does not have to prove its value nor be promoted in order to be treated as it is due. Thus, the promotion of diversity in fact undermines the ideal of equality and preserves a reality of discrimination.

Beyond this general line of thought, Réjane Sénac’s study reveals a series of related, often transverse, questions. Their great number shows the complexity of the issues behind the term “diversity” as well as the density of their mutual relations. One such issue is that of the link between diversity and parity, in other word between the promotion in public life of minorities and that of women. Historically, the concept of parity and the laws implementing it appeared first and constituted a model for the formulation of the idea of promoting diversity. Nowadays, the two coexist and a person can find herself concerned by such policies both because she is a woman and a minority member. Moreover, the concept of diversity includes also gender issues. However, a growing number of women rights activists accuse the concept of diversity of causing a dilution of the specificity of gender equality as a cause. From that point of view, the French debate is very similar to that which gave birth to the concept of intersectionality in the United States.³ Other issues that the notion of diversity touches upon include the link to religion, territorial inequalities, or the exchanges between different types of actors in the public sphere. In fact, the term “diversity” appears as a focal point of a set of debates and questions crucial to the French society of our time—hence the multiplicity of subjects treated in this book and the dense network of, at times contradictory, relations they entertain with one another. A great part of those questions and issues could be objects of research in their own right. Réjane Sénac’s work has the merit of clarifying and exposing those links, often questioning definitions and relations that are widely taken as given.

³ See for example: Manuel (2006).

What can be of particular interest to the foreign reader is the insight this approach gives into the complexities and internal debates of what is often labeled as “the French model of integration.” Indeed, this model is generally opposed to the Anglo-Saxon one, and while the controversies and evolutions of the later are generally known, the French model is easily seen as stagnant. Réjane Sénac’s book is a witness to the fact that it is not so and that evolution and virulent debate are also present in the French approach of those themes. Implicit in the text, although never central to it, one can discern a form of dialogue with the classical texts of Anglo-Saxon thought about multiculturalism, community and justice. It is interesting to see how those well-known questions are posed in different terms, mostly republican ones, and how different actors struggle to adopt this particular vocabulary to a changing reality.

Although the voice of the author is very discrete in this text, mostly leaving space for that of the interviewees, Réjane Sénac does in the end take a stance against the current uses of the term “diversity” and formulates a vision of how the French Republic could solve the problem of equity and difference. Her reflexion leads her to reassert the republican faith in absolute equality and an “indifference to differences.” However, those can only function as long as the potential injustice based on existing differences is acknowledged and fought against. It also requires that the Republic itself redefine its identity, abandoning the tendency to universalize a historically created culture and recognizing not the difference between individuals but its own mixed heritage.

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