

Academics against Academia: Explaining Accusations of “Islam-leftism” in French Academia

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Abstract

This article examines the public engagement of academics in the controversy over “Islam-leftism” in France (2020–2023), framed around university activism and its alleged ties to religious fundamentalism. It draws on a corpus analysis of press articles and essays, a prosopographical study of the academics involved, and a network analysis designed to map the media proximities of these actors. The public engagement of academics against “Islam-leftism” turns out to be part of a broader movement that structures a cultural axis within political life and reinforces conservative positions across the intellectual, political, and media fields. To understand their contribution to this movement, it is important to emphasize that, at the intersection of these fields, an interstitial space has emerged, providing visibility to a new type of intellectual whose standing depends not on scientific expertise but on the ability to act as an intermediary between different forms of power.

Keywords: Academic freedom; Cultural wars; Media visibility; Wokeism.

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In October 2020, Jean-Michel Blanquer, the French Minister for Education, evoked an “intellectual complicity in terrorism”, explicitly linking an “islamo-leftism” (islamo-gauchisme) that was allegedly “wreaking havoc in universities”. In February 2021, Frédérique Vidal, Minister for Higher Education and Research, reiterated this framing, depicting islamo-leftism as a phenomenon “corrupting” the university. This expression, specific to the French context, links the term Islamism with the political left in order to denounce the alleged complacency of part of the latter toward religious fundamentalism, particularly under the banner of protecting ethnic and religious minorities. Such criticism is articulated in the name of academic freedom, whose expression targets islamo-leftism as one of the manifestations of so-called “wokeism” within the scholarly world. Academics did not remain silent. A petition drafted by scholars, denouncing the “witch hunt” conducted by the minister and calling for her resignation, gathered more than 23,000 signatures;¹ while others endorsed the minister’s remarks, framing islamo-leftism as symptomatic of a problematic conflation between academic inquiry and political activism. These criticisms are both voiced in the name of defending “academic freedom”, which thereby becomes a site of struggle between two opposing camps. This article does not aim to study the controversy in its entirety, but rather focuses specifically on the attack against so-called islamo-leftism within the university, and on the ways in which academic freedom is instrumentalized in this context. How can we explain the decision of certain academics to actively engage in public debate — particularly in the media — by challenging the functioning of the academic field and the role that islamo-leftism has allegedly come to play within it?

This article addresses this question by objectifying the relationship between academics’ public engagement against the so-called islamo-leftism in academia and the forms of recognition or reward that such engagement may yield beyond the academic field. This article demonstrates that this engagement must be understood in relation to the institutionalization of an interstitial field at the nexus of politics, academia, media, and economics. This field contributes to the emergence of a new type of intellectual, one less grounded in scientific expertise than in their ability to serve as an intermediary between different forms of power. Through these intellectuals, the critique of so-called islamo-leftism in academia appears to be linked to broader dynamics structuring the cultural axis of political life and the growing consolidation of conservative positions within increasingly porous intellectual, political, and media fields. To substantiate this argument, we may consider two complementary hypotheses:

- 1) We first hypothesize that, due to its political and media resonance at a given historical juncture, islamo-leftism becomes a strategically valuable argument for academics seeking increased visibility, insofar as it allows access to non-academic channels of recognition.
- 2) This first hypothesis leads to a second: The existence of these non-academic channels of recognition leads to the replication within the academic field of dynamics specific to other fields — political, intellectual, and media, among others.

Reflecting on the public engagement of academics who position themselves against the alleged prevalence of islamo-leftism in academia contributes to the literature on two distinct levels. The first, adopting a pragmatic approach, involves examining actors’ engagement by considering their individual situatedness (Latour, 1987; Callon, 1989; Boltanski & Thévenot,

1. Collectif (2021). “Islamo-gauchisme”: “Nous, universitaires et chercheurs, demandons avec force la démission de Frédérique Vidal”. *Le Monde*, February 20. https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2021/02/20/islamogauchisme-nous-universitaires-et-chercheurs-demandons-avec-force-la-demission-de-frederique-vidal_6070663_3232.html.

1991; Trom, 1999; Thévenot, 2001; Barthe et al., 2013). This leads to questioning how actors assess their capacity to “make a move” through engagement, and how such assessment is socially produced (Callon & Law, 1982; Callon, 1986; De Blic & Lemieux, 2005). However, this further requires attention to the sectoral dynamics that shape the public value of such interventions, rendering them simultaneously possible and desirable. This pertains to a sociology of interventions, which “takes as its unit of analysis the movement of intervention itself and is therefore interested in how forms of expertise can acquire value as public interventions” (Eyal & Buchholz, 2010, p. 120). This sociology seeks to understand what kind of value — and from which sources — academic actors might derive from speaking publicly as experts while simultaneously distancing themselves from standard academic practices (Swartz, 2024). Such a perspective necessarily requires, through a sociology of fields, taking into account the state of the fields involved (academic, media, intellectual, and political). This approach makes it possible to link the distribution of various forms of capital with preferred modes of engagement (Sapiro, 2009; Hauchecorne, 2019). In this perspective, asking what makes islamo-leftism a compelling argument involves exploring what it grants access to: both the dynamics that imbue it with value for certain actors, and the social properties of those actors that help explain why they take it up.

This sociology of intellectual intervention thus reveals how the analysis of intellectual engagement contributes to a social history of political ideas — and, in this case, to the development of conservative or illiberal ideas that directly affect the very definition of academic freedom. Indeed, the social history of ideas — aiming to capture the entanglement between the social and the intellectual (Gaboriaux & Skornicki, 2017) — emphasizes that the players have reasons for saying what they say (including in cases where they are unaware of it). Thus, it raises the question of what they say and why they do not say something else. By asking why, for the individuals studied and at a given moment, islamo-leftism constitutes an interesting argument — in the sense of something that is of interest — and how this contributes to the political reappropriation of academic freedom, this sociology of intervention illuminates how individual and sectoral dynamics intersect, thereby explaining specific choices made by actors in relation to the range of available options.

The issue of islamo-leftism is particularly interesting insofar as it intertwines scientific and political dimensions. It is specific to the French context and refers to the controversy surrounding universalism and minorities. This critique originally emerged within the political field, where it has been used as a weapon against the Left, but was subsequently imported into the academic field in order to politically reframe certain research currents. Its broad media visibility and political use thus make it possible to reflect on the dynamics of fields and the circulation between them.

1 Data Collection

To explore these hypotheses, this article is based on a qualitative discourse analysis of two corpora. The first is a press corpus, compiled from the *Europresse* and *Factiva* databases covering 2020–2023,² including only op-eds signed by academics and their interviews that directly ad-

2. These dates correspond to the period spanning from Jean-Michel Blanquer’s initial remarks to the official abandonment of the inquiry commissioned by Frédérique Vidal to the CNRS. See: Le Nevé, S. (2023). Enquête sur “l’islamo-gauchisme” à l’université: histoire d’une vraie fausse annonce. *Le Monde*, March 29. https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2023/03/29/enquete-sur-l-islamo-gauchisme-a-l-universite-histoire-d-une-vraie-fausse-annonce_6167488_3224.html.

dress islamo-leftism in universities ($N = 45$).³ The second corpus covers the same period and is made up of books by academics whose content — at least a significant chapter or section — focuses on islamo-leftism as university activism ($N = 35$). This is complemented by a prosopographical analysis aimed at identifying the social properties of the authors, as well as their trajectories, the degree and sources of public visibility available to them, and the forms of commitment they invest. Finally, a network analysis is conducted to map the media proximities of these actors and to determine whether a coherent space of anti-Islamo-leftist visibility exists. These data are presented in the second part.

The article is divided into two parts. The first focuses on the position of academics who publicly engage against so-called islamo-leftism in the university and on how they behave in the public sphere. It shows that these actors are characterized both by high media visibility and their membership in groups occupying an intermediate position between knowledge and various powers. The article then demonstrates that this stance becomes intelligible when observed as engagement within an interstitial space, marked by a complex relationship with the academic field and by the valorization of actors' capacities to act as intermediaries between different spheres of power. The popularity of the anti-islamo-leftism argument can thus be understood by examining the access it provides to this space and the visibility it offers. This observation invites reflection on the instrumentalization of academic freedom in connection with sectoral dynamics that converge to transform conservative or reactionary ideas into levers for gaining extra-academic legitimacy.

2 Getting In and Staying In: The Accusation of Islamo-leftism in the Channels of Media Visibility

The analysis of the corpora introduced above reveals several argumentative regularities within the academic critique of so-called islamo-leftism in the university. These arguments are made in the name of defending academic freedom, which is thereby claimed by opposing camps. Firstly, the scientific nature of the criticized works is called into question. These works are redefined as political and accused of being militant claims disguised as science, thereby undermining academic standards. The authors denounce what they describe as the use of political methods aimed at extending their influence — particularly within major research institutions — and at silencing any form of criticism, a phenomenon captured by the expression “intellectual terrorism”. Above all, they target the social and political consequences of a form of activism portrayed as anti-Western, anti-universalist, anti-republican, or even “totalitarian” — which is embodied in the critique of wokeism. In this sense, the critique of “islamo-leftism” in academia both occupies and reinforces the framework of the “culture war” (Hunter, 1991; Norris & Inglehart, 2019) and longstanding divisions surrounding republican universalism (Laborde, 2010; Gaboriaux et al., 2023). The criticism goes beyond asserting that targeted academics promote a political agenda — it critiques the content of that agenda itself. It thus enters political rather than epistemological debate.

As a result, the fight against islamo-leftism is not presented as a sectoral battle, confined to academia and epistemic norms. This is the basis of a logic of de-singularization, which consists of extracting the dispute from the personal or sectoral spheres and anchoring it in the space of

3. Only published interviews are examined here, excluding quotations reported in articles written by journalists. Texts are identified using keyword searches [Islam-leftism(s)/Islam-leftist(s)/Islam-leftist(s)] in databases, and subsequently refined by manually selecting those involving contributions from scholars.

public polemic, the consequences of which are not merely professional but civilizational (Roy, 2019). It is noteworthy in this regard that the use of the term “islamo-leftism” in reference to the university itself depends on its prior use in politics, against left-wing parties accused of complacency toward religious fundamentalism, and on the media attention it is consequently likely to generate. Academic freedom is thus, in a sense, turned against itself — that is, invoked to better justify the political condemnation of certain forms of knowledge. How are we to understand why certain academics decide to engage in such a political offensive, publicly denouncing their peers? In order to address this question, this section turns to the actors themselves, analyzing their positions and questioning their dispositions. As the pragmatic approach suggests, “dispositions, indeed, do not describe action; they are made describable through it” (Barthe et al., 2013, p. 171). It is therefore by describing action that it becomes possible to identify the dispositions manifested within it. The key question, therefore, is how the academics concerned position and conduct themselves in the public sphere.

2.1 A Pursuit of Media Recognition

The identification of public positions on islamo-leftism in academia — based on a survey of academic interventions in the mainstream press and the publication of books on the subject — enables us to distinguish two sets of actors: those who engage by co-signing collective op-eds, and those who engage in their own name, whether by responding to journalists’ requests or by publishing essays or individual opinion pieces in the press. These are not competing groups: people who speak out individually can also take action alongside others. However, the second group is both smaller and more visible than the first. This study concentrates on the second group, which constitutes the media-visible face of anti-islamo-leftism, aiming to identify the specific modalities of its political engagement.

This group can itself be subdivided. Some actors had already established a media presence prior to the controversy, either through the publication of widely circulated academic work or through regular contributions to media outlets (e.g., writing editorials). Others gained visibility more directly from their association with the islamo-leftism controversy and the critiques they formulated in that context. In order to analyze these differential patterns of media visibility, we examine press mentions of individual actors using the Europresse database.⁴ Two exemplary figures are compared: Pierre-André Taguieff and Xavier-Laurent Salvador. The former, a CNRS senior researcher, had been a well-known public intellectual since the early 2000s. He has published a number of essays on racism and anti-racism, anti-Semitism, communitarianism, populism and conspiracy theories, among other topics, and has easy access to mainstream media, including regular appearances and published contributions prior to the islamo-leftism debate (see Fig. 1). His books are frequently reviewed, and he has authored numerous opinion pieces, including newspapers such as *Le Monde*. As such, his media visibility predates the 2020–2023 period.

4. This database allows for extending the temporal scope beyond what Factiva offers, thereby enabling the historical contextualization sought in this study. While certain outlets (such as *Marianne* or *Le Point*) may be missing, the objective here is less to achieve an exhaustive account of media mentions than to capture the media visibility of the actors involved.

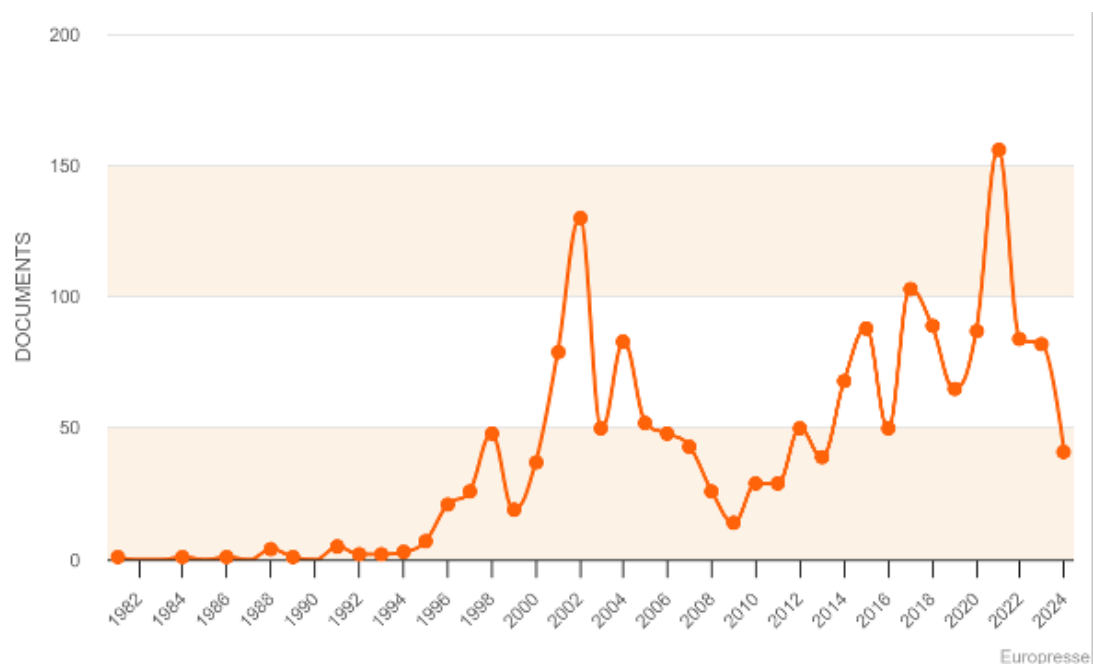


Figure 1. References to Pierre-André Taguieff in the French mainstream media. Database and graph: Europresse.

The case of Xavier-Laurent Salvador — a senior lecturer in linguistics and medieval studies, with a specialization in biblical texts — illustrates a different trajectory, one in which public visibility emerged primarily as a result of his outspoken opposition to what he characterizes as “militant excesses” within the university. Relatively absent from the media landscape prior to the islamo-leftism controversy, he gained temporary prominence thereafter (see Fig. 2), particularly as a co-founder of the *Observatoire du décolonialisme* (Observatory of Decolonialism — later renamed the Observatory of University Ethics, a self-proclaimed “think tank” devoted to identifying what it regards as activist distortions within academia).

Regardless of the reasons for or timing of their public visibility, these actors are united by a strong media presence — often characterized by multi-positionality or professional reorientation. Several of them have been invited to contribute regular opinion columns in various media outlets — for example, Nathalie Heinich in national daily newspaper *Libération*, Renée Fregosi in *Causeur* (an opinion monthly magazine positioned between the far right and the reactionary right), or Pierre Vermeren, who writes a recurring column in regional daily newspaper *Sud Ouest*, drawing on his expertise on the Maghreb, which he also uses to advance his positions on activism within the university.

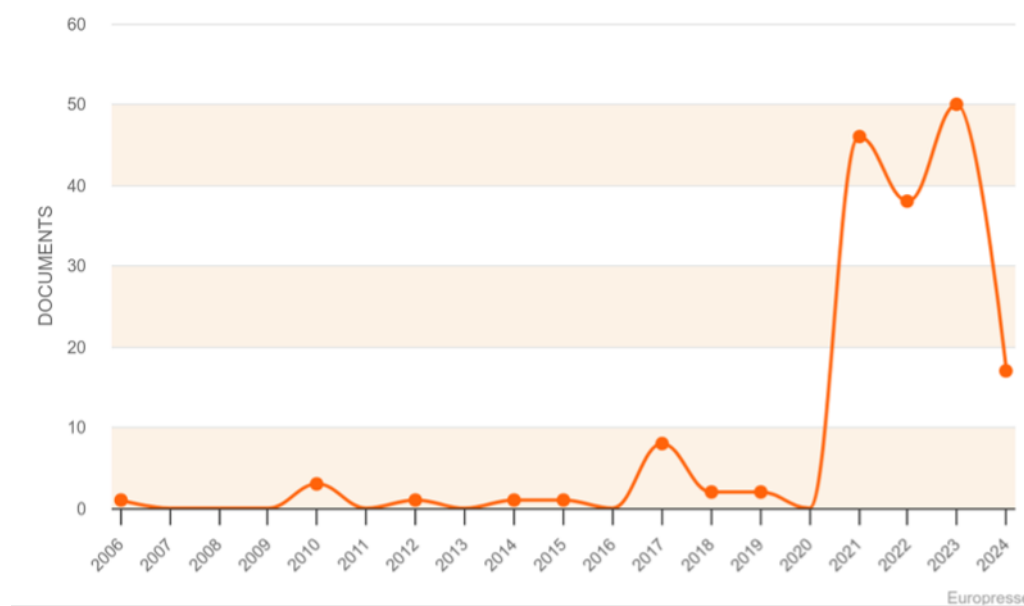


Figure 2. References to Xavier-Laurent Salvador in the French mainstream media. Database and graph: Europresse.

It is analytically useful to examine how this visibility is distributed across the media landscape between 2020 and 2023, using network analysis tools. An analysis based on the number of press mentions for each member of this group — encompassing both direct contributions (interviews, op-eds) and indirect citations, such as when *Le Figaro* references Nathalie Heinich’s pamphlet (2021) to ask “How a damaged France might be reborn”⁵ — reveals that a small number of outlets account for the majority of mentions. This editorial space is largely dominated by *Le Figaro* (both its print and online editions), a newspaper associated with the conservative right, which accounts for 63.54% of all mentions of academics critical of so-called islamo-leftism in the university. Far behind come weekly magazines *Le Point* (12.5%) and *Marianne* (5.63%), and news website *Atlantico* (4.66%). These outlets share a strong emphasis on issues related to collective identity and particular identities, and they are the principal promoters of a divide between “republicans” and “identitarians”. They are both the journals that cite the greatest number of actors and those in which the most visible actors most frequently express themselves. While publications associated with the lexical field of republican and universalist values against communitarianism are represented, along with right-leaning and far-right outlets, left-wing media are notably absent. Only *Libération* and *L’Humanité* appear, accounting for just 0.8% of total mentions. *Le Monde* (5.61%) occupies a more ambiguous position, with a comparable number of mentions to *Marianne*. It oscillates between publishing op-eds by these authors, reviewing their books, and offering critical commentary on the usage of the term “islamo-gauchisme”.

These actors also distinguish themselves through prolific publishing activity — particularly in the non-academic essay format — while not producing peer-reviewed research on activism, knowledge production, or minority issues during the same period. A considerable number

5. Bastié, E. (2021). Nathalie Heinich: “Certains chercheurs font croire qu’une bouillie militante serait de la science”, *Le Figaro*, May 24. <https://www.lefigaro.fr/vox/societe/nathalie-heinich-certains-chercheurs-font-croire-qu-une-bouillie-militante-serait-de-la-science-20210524>.

have authored one or more books focused on the controversy, often receiving significant media attention and, in some cases, commercial success. Jean-François Braunstein's *La religion woke* [*The Woke Religion*] (2022), for instance, sold 14,000 copies; Nathalie Heinich's *Le wokeisme serait-il un totalitarisme?* [*Is Wokeism a Totalitarianism?*] (2023) sold 4,500.⁶ The most prolific figure is Pierre-André Taguieff, who published no fewer than ten books between 2020 and 2023. In these cases, the previously described media ecosystem plays a decisive role, ensuring substantial promotional coverage. Taguieff's publications, for example, are frequently accompanied by exclusive excerpts, interviews, reviews, and additional op-eds across various platforms.

Academics opposed to islamo-leftism in academia are therefore distinguished by a high degree of media visibility, largely sustained by a limited number of media outlets aligned with the right and far right, which may be regarded as significant agents in the dissemination of illiberal ideas. The extensive media presence of these actors, coupled with their regular commentary on a wide array of topics — often far removed from their disciplinary expertise — reflects a strategic pursuit of what might be described as the ability to “exist in the public sphere as self-evident voices” (Attencourt, 2017). This visibility is both a product of their access to media gatekeepers who help define the public legitimacy of ideas (Attencourt, 2021), and a factor that fosters the blurring of traditional boundaries.

2.2 Belonging to Intermediate Positions

As demonstrated by David L. Swartz (2023 & 2024) regarding the relationship of conservative American academics to Donald Trump, the polarization of individuals can be understood by observing the social networks that link them to extra-academic spaces of power. Here too, the public visibility of the actors studied is sustained not only by their media platforms but also by their participation in organizations — some more institutionalized than others — situated at the intersection of media, intellectual, political, and academic fields — thereby challenging the boundaries between them (Eyal & Buchholz, 2010). Rather than transitioning abruptly from one field to another, these figures are embedded in what may be described as an interstitial space (Aubert et al., 2025). The existence of such zones reflects a longstanding dynamic involving the multiplication of “contact zones between media professionals and knowledge professionals”, leading to the entanglement of networks that facilitate a logic of “consecration by contagion” (Rieffel, 1992). These spaces may also include political and economic actors. One such example is the *Laboratoire de la République* (*Republic laboratory*), a think tank founded by the former Minister of National Education. It involves academic figures such as Isabelle Barbéris and Renée Frégosi, as well as essayists like Frédéric Encel, writers like Pierre Jourde, journalists, senior civil servants, and private sector executives. These spaces work, to varying extents, as intermediary arenas between distinct forms of power and as potential reservoirs of social and symbolic capital.

Some of these organizations have been directly created by academics opposing islamo-leftism in the university, particularly to address a lack of social or symbolic capital (or even economic),⁷ and to claim new media visibility. The *Observatoire du décolonialisme*, chaired

6. de La Rochefoucauld, L.H., Mahler, T., & Pavot, M. (2023). Ventes de livres: les grands gagnants et perdants de 2023 (avec les vrais chiffres). *L'Express*, December 20. https://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/ventes-de-livres-les-grands-gagnants-et-perdants-de-2023-avec-les-vrais-chiffres-56KTIKFYFEYVGM2AQIWRVHZA/?cmp_redirect=true.

7. This question is not addressed within the scope of this paper, but it would warrant further investigation,

by Xavier-Laurent Salvador, serves as an example, notably enabling him to gain public recognition and even to be called upon as an expert based on the authority he claims through his observatory. These kinds of groups can also compensate for a lack of mainstream media exposure by creating dissemination communities and promoting academics' publications or relaying their opinions. Such groups have multiplied throughout the 2010s — for instance, *Vigilance Université* (VU), founded in 2016; as well as the *Laboratoire d'analyse des idéologies contemporaines* (LAIC) and the *Observatoire du Décolonialisme*, both established in 2020.

By associating academics with journalists, editorialists, or actors from the private sector — without always making their respective professional affiliations explicit — they also contribute to the blurring of boundaries mentioned earlier. This boundary-crossing is exemplified by the publication of collective volumes bringing together academics, journalists, and essayists — for example, when academics Nathalie Heinich, Anne-Marie Le Pourhiet, François Rastier, Xavier-Laurent Salvador, and Jean Szlamowicz appear alongside figures such as writer Mazarine Pingeot and conservative essayists French Canadian Mathieu Bock-Côté and Béatrice Levet in the volume *Malaise dans la langue française [Unease in the French Language]* (2022), edited by essayist Sami Biasoni and prefaced by Annie Genevard, then a Member of Parliament and Vice President of the National Assembly (Les Républicains, right-wing).

3 Entering an Interstitial Field: Islamo-leftism through the Lens of an Economy of Visibility

By publicly taking a stance, these actors insert themselves into a preexisting polemic — concerning the place of minority identities in society — and operate therefore within a specific social space characterized by the proximity of academic, media, and political actors (Chabal, 2016). These interventions are inseparable from the long-term transformations that have reshaped intellectuals' relationships to the media, including their interactions with journalists (Rieffel, 1992 & 2022; Pinto, 1984), the reconfiguration of the editorial field in relation to intellectual production (Noël, 2012), and broader shifts toward “scientific popularization” (Attencourt, 2017; Lemerle, 2021) and “cultural decompartmentalization” (Dubois, 1999). These developments have notably reinforced the media valorization of academics' scholarly capital (Benhamou, 2002).

Academic interventions must therefore be understood in light of the strategic “moves” actors can — or believe they can — make, as well as the non-strategic foundations of such strategic anticipations (de Blic & Lemieux, 2005, p. 8). As this second section aims to demonstrate, this requires an integrated analysis of the degree and origin of the recognition actors enjoy, the social logics of visibility, and the accumulation of symbolic capital that visibility makes possible. A field-theoretical approach is well-suited to this framework. It allows us to explore how the distribution of different forms of capital shapes modes of engagement (Hauchecorne, 2019; Sapiro, 2009).

particularly in light of the connections revealed between the *Observatoire du décolonialisme* and the conservative billionaire Pierre-Édouard Stérin (see: L'Hospital, A., 2024). Financement, divergences, méthodes: comment l'Observatoire du décolonialisme s'est enfoncé dans la crise. *L'Express*, April 28. <https://www.lexpress.fr/idees-et-debats/financement-divergences-methodes-comment-lobservatoire-du-decolonialisme-sest-enfonce-dans-la-crise-2KFI7WNBKBHSPPMF63GV6VXGN4/>.

3.1 The Scholarly Presence in an Interstitial Field

By participating in the public debate against islamo-leftism, academics enter a social space that predates their involvement and also includes intellectual figures external to academia who nonetheless adopt similar modes of engagement. Mapping the contours of the editorial output focused on islamo-leftism between 2020 and 2023 provides an empirical entry point into this space. By considering books that are wholly or significantly devoted to the topic of islamo-leftism or wokeism, at least 70 such publications can be identified. These are distributed across 31 publishing houses,⁸ although certain publishers are particularly prominent such as the most popular publishing houses — Albin Michel (6 books) or Gallimard (4) —, but also some more explicitly linked to conservative or reactionary publications and engaged in a “culture war” narrative, such as Éditions de l’Observatoire (7).

Alongside academic authors, a range of additional figures contribute to the anti-islamo-leftism constellation, including essayists, journalists, and intellectuals whose work is characterized by a relative distance from specialized academic knowledge. For instance, writer Pierre Jourde has published two essays on identity politics and the culture of censorship; journalist and essayist Mohamed Sifaoui has authored numerous works on Islamism since the early 2000s; and French-Canadian essayist Mathieu Bock-Côté — a regular contributor to far-right media (magazine *Valeurs actuelles*, TV channel *CNews*, and radio station *Europe 1*) — has released three books on identity-related issues between 2019 and 2023. Also present are intellectuals who draw on a “culture war” repertoire, such as Pascal Bruckner, who asserts that “the far-left is fascinated by the explosive force of jihadism”.⁹

Moreover, network analysis allows for the study of the media coverage of these works — focusing exclusively on press articles that actively promote the identified books. It reveals a media constellation similar to the one previously outlined. This pole of visibility is oriented toward the amplification of scandal-driven denunciations and again dominated by *Le Figaro*, followed by *Marianne*, *Le Point*, and *Atlantico*, as well as by *L’Express* and the far-right magazines *Valeurs actuelles* and *Causeur*. If each reflects its own set of references, the only exception is *Le Figaro*, which once again emerges as the most widely distributed media, meaning that it promotes the widest range of publications. The convergence between these findings and those concerning media citations of the academics becomes more intelligible when considering that, as previously noted, several of them already held recognition — or even a stable presence — within the relevant media outlets before the islamo-leftism argument emerged. These individuals had long been leading voices in discourses centered around cultural war, thus supporting hypothesis that the notion of islamo-leftism merely functions as an additional rhetorical resource within a broader ideological framework.

Each actor contributes to the vitality of this editorial space, while benefiting from it. The publication of these works does not stem solely from the individual initiative of the authors, but rather from the existence of a broader corpus addressing similar themes — whether reiter-

8. Albin Michel (6); Bouquins (1); Éditions du Cerf (6); Le Cherche-Midi (2); Édilivre (1); Éditions du Rocher (2); Éditions F Deville (1); Éditions Léo Scheer (1); Fayard (1); Gallimard (4); Grasset (3); H et o (1); Hermann (9); Éditions Intervall (3); L’aube (1); L’Harmattan (3); La Boite de Pandore (1); Le Bord de l’eau (1); Le Passeur (1); Les Éditions de Paris-Max Chaleil (1); Michel Lafon (1); Minerve (1); Observatoire (7); Odile Jacob (2); Presses de la Cité (3); PUF (1); Plon (1); Robert Laffont (1); Seuil (1); Synthèse (1); VA Éditions (1).

9. Faure, V. (2020). “Islamo-gauchisme”: histoire tortueuse d’une expression devenue une invective. *Le Monde*, December 11. https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2020/12/11/islamo-gauchisme-histoire-tortueuse-d-une-expression-devenue-une-invective_6063006_3232.html.

ating comparable arguments or positioning themselves in opposition. This editorial field also reflects converging dynamics emerging from other social fields, notably politics, where, in addition to government statements, a variety of initiatives have served to legitimize and amplify the prominence of the islamo-leftism theme.¹⁰ It is telling that the analysis of media coverage of this editorial market aligns closely with that of the media platforms promoting the academics engaged against islamo-leftism.

Objectifying this kind of “visibility space of ideas”, Boris Attencourt describes it as an interstitial space in terms of field theory, as structured by durable borders and stabilized forms of capital. This space is marked by the saliency of relational capital and the predominance of reputational and even economic rewards associated with notoriety over the valorization of scholarly expertise. The logics at play — and the visibility afforded to the actors operating within them — are driven by macrosocial dynamics favorable to the emergence of a “cultivated general public”, comprised of agents “whose social trajectories are marked by misalignments between their educational and professional capital, prompting them to overinvest in independent cultural consumption and to reject academics spaces and its institutional hierarchies” (Attencourt, 2024). The debates and positions that circulate in this space thus form part of a broader historical dynamic rooted in the 1970s¹¹ and shaped in particular by the increasing role of media visibility as a resource for intellectuals (Kauppi, 2010). Given the social and cultural profiles of both the elite and the audiences occupying this space, the cultural production it values tends to distinguish itself from both academic output and mass cultural production — thereby imposing constraints on its participants and favoring discursive formations that combine scholarly and anti-scholarly postures (Attencourt, 2021).

3.2 An Ambiguous Interplay between Academic Authority and Public Expertise

The critique of the university conveyed through the islamo-leftism argument resonates strongly with the anti-academic stance prevalent in these visibility spaces. It echoes longstanding tropes targeting the perceived insularity and hyperspecialization of academia. It also aligns with the relatively marginal or heterodox academic trajectories of some of the actors involved — such as Pierre-André Taguieff or Pierre-Henri Tavoillot — who may interpret their own careers through the lens of a critique of the university’s current state and evolution. This is especially true for those who perceive that those developments in their respective disciplines, along with the ascendancy of islamo-leftism, have deprived them of access to the material and symbolic resources they once aspired to (Behr & Houard-Vial, *forth.*).

Nonetheless, these actors also maintain a distance from mainstream cultural production, signaling their academic legitimacy by invoking various markers of intellectual authority and university affiliation. Such references serve to establish credibility and ground the legitimacy of their interventions (Pinto, 2021), even as they blur the lines between scientific popularization, political commentary, and media engagement. For instance, academic titles are often highlighted in op-ed bylines or in biographical notes accompanying book publications. Likewise,

10. In October 2020, as Jean-Michel Blanquer publicly commented on islamo-gauchisme within the university system, LR (Les Républicains) senator Laure Darcos introduced an amendment to the draft multi-year research programming law for 2021–2030. The amendment sought to ensure that “academic freedoms are exercised with respect for the values of the Republic”. In the autumn of 2023, the far-right Rassemblement National (RN) group in the National Assembly included a bill aimed at banning the use of inclusive writing. Earlier that same year, the party had also announced the creation of an association dedicated to combating what it referred to as the “poison” of “wokeism”.

11. Including through figures such as Alain Finkielkraut, who are still engaged in the debate on Islamo-leftism.

their books regularly cite canonical figures from philosophy, sociology, and political science, invoking the symbolic capital of citation practices within the intellectual field to underscore their university ties.¹² Similarly, conferences and collective publications outside formal academic institutions replicate scholarly communication practices that signal adherence to academic norms.

What emerges is a negotiation between intellectual self-expression, claims to academic authority, and a degree of estrangement from the academic field. This negotiation is exemplified in the publication of essays, which — while addressing intellectual issues — are politically charged and elude academic standards. Such publications facilitate media access for new voices or re-legitimize those who are already familiar with the media sphere, providing a platform for renewed intervention. At the same time, they reinforce the ambiguity surrounding the status of their authors, whose modes of expression often converge. The texts examined here frequently employ argumentative techniques typical of the essay format, such as compiling several localized or anecdotal examples to produce a general claim about the academic order or society as a whole. Similarly, in their analysis of French op-eds concerning *wokeism*, Guillaume Silhol and Margot Mahoudeau (2024) demonstrate that, despite discursive overlaps, one can distinguish between “academic”, “essayistic”, and “activist” types of interventions. The first group relies on scholarly logic, where antagonisms are framed in terms of “scientific legitimacy”. The latter two adopt registers of “expertise, testimony, and satire”, shifting the conflict to the terrain of values. The media interventions of public-facing academics against islamo-leftism blur the boundaries between these types: they speak both as institutional insiders and as general experts, drawing on their knowledge of academia to support value-based critiques of shared norms.

Ultimately, engagement in the controversy contributes to legitimizing or reinforcing these actors’ presence within spaces of intellectual visibility and notoriety — and for the most established among them, to consolidating a genuine “visibility return” (Attencourt, 2017). Their public stances must therefore be understood in relation to the transactional logics specific to the fields implicated in the controversy, particularly the media field, where ideas are exchanged for access to visibility.

4 The social Profitability of Sectoral Resources

A key question nevertheless remains: why, at a given moment, did the anti-islamo-leftism argument seem attractive to academics engaging in public debate? Addressing this question requires taking into account the social and professional position of the actors. But, from a sociology of public interventions perspective, we must also consider the sectoral dynamics — related to the current configuration of the media, intellectual, and academic fields, and to the interstitial space that has emerged at their intersection — that shape the symbolic value of such forms of engagement. In doing so, the analysis also seeks to shed light on broader processes of politicization — namely, how particular issues are constructed and elevated to the status of legitimate objects of public concern.

4.1 Distanced from Academic Orthodoxy, a Pursuit of Recognition beyond the University

To understand the role the controversy plays in the trajectories of individual actors, it is essential to examine the social foundations of the identity negotiation that unfolds between their

12. See Boltanski, 1975.

group of affiliation (the university) and their group of reference (so-called “public intellectuals”). Conceptualizing interstitial spaces as a field implies the possibility for capital accumulation within them. This accumulation primarily derives from the ability to establish and maintain relational networks and occupy positions at the intersection of multiple spheres of power. Accumulating capital in this interstitial field may therefore be understood in relation to the marginal or heterodox positions that characterize some of the most visible opponents of islamo-leftism — particularly insofar as this accumulation enables them to attain media visibility. Similarly, the relative weakness of other actors’ media capital helps explain their efforts to create collectives, organize public events, or pursue institutional recognition to secure opportunities for expression or even claim a form of spokespersonship.

In this light, public engagement by academics against islamo-leftism may be seen as an attempt to socially valorize sector-specific resources that hold little value within the academic field itself. For those nearing the end of their academic careers, such engagement may even represent the prospect of a new media-oriented career. This positioning facilitates a transition from marginal to general visibility by rendering intellectual and social resources profitable within an arena where the university’s authority to define legitimate knowledge is in question. Their media visibility revitalizes or lends credence to their intellectual authority, while bypassing the usual mechanisms of scientific certification. In this sense, these actors join previous patterns in which intellectuals, in pursuit of recognition, have distanced themselves from academic orthodoxy (Pinto, 1987).

Access to this visibility space thus constitutes a potential arena of legitimacy, which does not necessarily replace the academic legitimacy they may still hold in their disciplinary subfields but rather transposes it into the public sphere and onto broader, politically charged topics. Their participation in public debate becomes more intelligible when one considers their place in the academic field and the potential benefits they derive from intellectual recognition outside of it. Notably, the most prominent anti-islamo-leftism academics in the media tend either to be distant from the social sciences (e.g., Xavier-Laurent Salvador) or to have broken with them, to be positioned on the margins of the academic field (e.g., Pierre-André Taguieff, Pierre-Henri Tavoillot), or to be retired or nearing retirement (e.g., Renée Fregosi or Nathalie Heinich).

Access to a space of visibility also facilitates interactions with actors from other fields — particularly the political and economic ones (Rabier, 2022) — which contribute to the competitive dynamics that animate this relatively autonomous universe where what is “politically thinkable, or, if you like, the legitimate problematic” (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 465) is defined. Namely, in Bourdieu’s terms, the *field of ideological production*. This is illustrated, for example, by the participation of Dominique Schnapper, Catherine Kintzler, or Isabelle de Mecquenem in the *Conseil des sages de la laïcité* (Council of Wise Men on Secularism, an expert advisory council founded by the Ministry of Education), as well as by the presence of its members and of Thierry Coulhon — then President of Hcéres (High Council for Evaluation of Research and Higher Education) and former higher education advisor to Emmanuel Macron — at an important Sorbonne symposium against islamo-leftism and wokeism in January 2022.

While such presences do not necessarily indicate the actors’ social capital or the precise nature of their relationships with political and economic figures, one may hypothesize that these forms of circulation foster the accumulation of relational resources and justify the need to “reinscribe the analysis of interpersonal networks and interactions within the objective structure of relations defined by the distribution of capital” (Hauchecorne, 2019). A similar dynamic is at play in the appearances of figures such as Nathalie Heinich, Laurent Bouvet, or Philippe d’Iribarne in *Le Débat*, a journal that from its inception aimed to institutionalize a new intel-

lectual persona and that has historically been close to ruling elites — requiring and amplifying relational resources within the political field (Attencourt, 2017, p. 132).

As Thomas Medvetz has shown (2010), the emergence of such an interstitial field, positioned at the crossroads of the academic, media, political, and economic field, has produced a new type of intellectual whose legitimacy rests less on scientific expertise than on the capacity to act as an intermediary between distinct forms of power. The composition of the scientific council of the *Laboratoire de la République* reflects this intermediary logic, bringing together academics, senior civil servants, journalists, and private-sector actors. Other hybrid spaces combining academics with actors embedded in different fields could also be mentioned. One example is the *Fondation pour l'innovation politique* (Fondapol), a liberal think tank closely aligned with the right-wing parties. Its director, Dominique Reynié, is a professor at Sciences Po, a media commentator, and a former political candidate. Its scientific council includes several prominent anti-islamo-leftism figures, such as Pascal Perrineau, emeritus professor at Sciences Po, and Laetitia Strauch-Bonart, essayist and journalist at *Le Point* and later *L'Express*, where she covered islamo-leftism-related publications.

4.2 The Symbolic Valorization of Critiques of the Academic World Arising from the Convergence of Sectoral Dynamics

The objectification of this interstitial space as a field in which the value of ideas is negotiated is essential to understanding academic interventions against islamo-leftism, insofar as it entails “the conformity of scholars to the politico-economic and journalistic logics of visibilization” (Attencourt, 2017). In particular, the tension between seeking a wide audience and maintaining intellectual legitimacy constrains not only how these interventions are expressed but also their very content (Pinto, 1994; Godechot, 1999). Given the influence of conservatism on intellectual production since the 1980s (Rieffel, 2022), it is analytically productive to link the adoption of anti-progressive discursive registers to positioning within such interstitial spaces. That is, one must ask why the use of the notion of islamo-leftism emerged at this particular moment as a viable access point to visibility. Without succumbing to strategic reductionism or ignoring the global dynamics of “cultural wars”, the goal is to understand how this discourse can function as a strategic “move”.

The answer, at least in part, lies in the expectations of the gatekeepers of media recognition and the actions of other actors — whether academics who perceive anti-islamo-leftism rhetoric as a threat to academic freedom and publicly oppose it, or political figures who see it as a potential mobilizing issue. The very trajectory of the term islamo-leftism testifies to this: already circulating in existing literature, it offered a synthetic formula that — like *wokeism* — “capitalized on novelty and lexical strangeness to draw attention and enhance editorial marketability” (Hardy et al., 2023, p. 463). Beyond terminology, the social logics governing the production of media visibility help explain the self-reinforcing success of such references: “‘we talk about it because we talk about it’, a process Bourdieu described as ‘the circular circulation of information’” (Mahoudeau, 2022). Editorial and media logics aside, visibility is more likely when a given position conforms, if not to a hegemonic definition of reality, then at least to preexisting sectoral dynamics that, though not necessarily coordinated, collectively shape the legitimacy and valuation of particular discourses.

From this perspective, the position of academics opposing so-called islamo-leftism in academia should be analyzed in connection with the dynamics shaping a cultural axis in political life (Norris & Inglehart, 2019), but also with the strengthening of conservative alignments

across intellectual, political, and media fields, whose boundaries have become increasingly porous (Matonti, 2021). Because the notion of islamo-leftism now enjoys substantial visibility due to the actions of media, intellectual, and political actors, it offers a valuable tool for those seeking to gain or stabilize a presence in the public sphere. A similar function is performed by its frequent pairing with the vocabulary of the Republic, which may reflect “a desire to provoke a media-political dynamic of polarization or rallying” (Gaboriaux et al., 2023, p. 19). In any case, given that “the specificity of the intellectual’s mode of intervention lies in the requirement to refer to debates internal to the intellectual field — on pain of exclusion” (Sapiro, 2009, p. 9), the controversy over universalism has become a structuring force that imposes itself upon new entrants and aspirants to public intellectual status.

In this way, the circulation of positions across academic, media, and intellectual fields calls for an analysis of the resources actors hold in each space, as well as the ways field-specific constraints reverberate across others.¹³ Ultimately, the capacity of these actors to benefit from the visibility generated through criticism of islamo-leftism depends on their ability to accumulate capital within the visibility space of ideas. This helps explain why academic attempts to publish essays against islamo-leftism have had mixed outcomes. The controversy, in turn, does more than reflect the balance of power; it also redefines it — altering the position and resources of the actors involved and influencing broader power relations, particularly with respect to academic freedom, the legitimacy of critical knowledge, and the social existence of minority groups.

5 Discussion and Conclusions

The public dispute triggered by government statements on the place of islamo-leftism in the university can be considered as an argumentative resource within a broader, older, and more complex controversy. This framing brings to light the political nature of the accusation — not as a comment on the internal functioning of academia but as a political critique aimed at an intellectual and ideological project. It reveals the connections between this argument and the broader constellation of ideas involved in the universalism controversy. From this vantage, academic freedom appears politically instrumentalized, temporarily drawn into a debate involving actors external to the academic field. The analysis has sought to explain why academics deploy this argument, in light of their positions across various fields and the forms of capital they possess.

Several actor profiles emerge, including a small group characterized by significant media exposure. Their media presence, editorial activity, and participation in hybrid collectives signal their embeddedness in an interstitial field located at the crossroads of academia, intellectual life, media, and politics. Their opposition to what they call islamo-leftism must thus be interpreted in relation to their academic positioning — sometimes marked by distance from the social sciences, by marginality and heterodoxy, or merely by a sense of losing the symbolic resources they coveted — but also to the symbolic, social, and intellectual capital afforded by this interstitial space. This does not mean dismissing the purely ideological aspects or the personal convictions of the actors involved — which remain a crucial factor — but situating them in relation to the social positions they hold, those they aspire to, and the opportunities and constraints these positions entail.

13. Regarding refraction, see Bourdieu, 1992, pp. 360–361. Regarding its application to a social history of ideas, see Hauchecorne, 2012.

At the same time, the actions of media, political, and intellectual fields shed light on the value this argument holds for academics. Through political discourse, editorial decisions, and cultural initiatives — each operating as an invitation to engage — islamo-leftism became a readily available and appealing resource for academics seeking visibility and extra-academic legitimacy. The political and media context, shaped in part by concerns around terrorism and geopolitical logics, establishes the value of the term and the visibility return it can yield. These actors simultaneously legitimize the term and the worldview it reflects, thereby increasing the social acceptability of certain political attitudes and behaviors — particularly those casting suspicion on minorities, critical knowledge, and research autonomy. Conversely, the circulation of this argument imposes constraints on the language and interpretive frames available to actors. In this sense, the islamo-leftism controversy does not merely reflect the state of the intellectual field — it transforms it, subjecting academia to the refracted pressures of an interstitial space where the value of ideas is defined.

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