By Mike Follert

When the beachwear known as the burkini was temporarily banned by municipalities along the French Riviera in 2016, Prime Minister Manuel Valls marshaled the allegorical figure of the Republic, Marianne, to offer his support. Or, that is, he recalled one version of what has been a shifting signifier of the Republic since the auspicious days of the French Revolution: "Marianne has a naked breast because she is feeding the people! She is not veiled, because she is free! That is the republic!", the PM remarked. Unlike the figure of Liberty often seen in Revolutionary iconography holding a Phrygian cap on a pike, Valls called back to an image perhaps best captured in Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* (1830).

Left: Delacroix, *Liberty Leading the People*, 1830. Right: Sama Wareh walks along the sand dressed in the burkini in Newport Beach, Calif., Thursday, Feb. 15, 2007. (AP Photo/Chris Carlson)
At times framed as Marianne, and at other times as the Goddess of Liberty, the female form has been varyingly deployed to personify abstract principles in modern French culture. Such was the case when the famous American opera singer, Jessye Norman, was called upon to sing la Marseillaise at the Bicentennial of the French Revolution in 1989. Norman performed while draped in a giant tricolor, designed by Tunisian-born couturier Azzedine Alaïa. The image takes on a new light given what would come to be known in France as l'affaire du foulard (the scarf affair) in the decades to follow. It was just months after the Bicentennial that three students in Creil were suspended for wearing their traditional headscarves to school. In retrospect, Norman’s appearance is remarkable: she is dressed in a way that suggests little of the female form, and her head is covered by a blue scarf. It is both patriotic high-fashion, and reminiscent of any number of garments worn by Muslim women. Rather than the “traditional blonde peasant woman, allegorically sowing the seeds of liberty,”[1] performing the role of high priestess over the national commemoration was a Black woman covered nearly head to toe.

Going back two centuries, we may recall how feminine allegory figured prominently in the festivals of the French Revolution. In lieu of statues, the organizers of the Festival of Reason in 1793 opted for actresses to bring abstract principles like Liberty and Reason to life. Some commentators were aghast that women were deployed to embody such lofty ideals – struck by the seductiveness of “the goddess’s cool charms.”[2] Others celebrated the goddess image as “masterpiece of nature”, fitting here in its beauty and ‘purity’. It was a brief episode all the same. With Catholicism expunged, the way was soon made for Robespierre’s Festival of the Supreme Being, offering up deism in response to the odious atheism of mere Reason. We may consider the more conservative juxtaposition of virile and maternal images in the script for this festival’s participants: “The chaste bride braids her dear daughter’s hair with flowers; while the suckling child—a mother’s most beautiful ornament—presses her breast; the son seizes his weapons with a vigorous arm; he wants to receive his baldric from his father alone…. The mothers leave their spouses and sons…the fathers lead their sons armed with swords.”[3] Of course, whether embodying Liberty or Marianne, we should remember in the context of the Declaration of the Rights of Man that those women called upon to symbolize the Republic were precluded from enjoying the rights and responsibilities of active citizenship.

The Bicentennial celebrations of July 14, 1989 commemorated the virtues of the Revolution while remaining decidedly opaque about its contentious history. Creative director Jean-Paul Goude remarked on his plan for the grand parade down the Champs-Élysées: “The Phrygian cap and the guillotine, thank you, no. I celebrate the Revolution of modern times. Thus the crossbreeding of cultures.”[4] Goude’s parade called upon the world to mark the occasion, featuring acts that ranged from African drummers to Chinese breakdancers; yet the legacy of the Revolution around the world has been mixed. Despite the Revolution’s role in spreading the gospel of liberal democracy, slavery persisted in the French colonies and the rights of freedmen were forestalled through the Revolution’s early years. When the organization “Société des Amis des Noirs” founded in 1788 advocated the abolition of slavery, it simultaneously justified the colonization of Africa in order to spread “the light of civilization and culture.”[5] Given France's campaigns in the following centuries to 'liberate' Muslim
women from the “oppressions of the harem,”[6] the overall legacy of the Declaration appears at best contradictory.

We might wish to contrast the spirit of Goude’s parade with the narrow nationalism of one French wig-maker who remarked upon the Festival of August 10, 1793: “Why have those in charge of the festival given those figures...an Egyptian style?...Take the woman I saw yesterday on the place de la Bastille. Well, I would like to know why her hair was dressed in that way. We are French, and under the pretext that we have been corrupted in our morals and in our monuments, they want to turn us into Egyptians, Greeks, Etruscans.”[7] These admonishments of ancient allegory aside, to the extent Europeans of the eighteenth century saw ancient Egyptians as the cradle of civilization, they were still viewed as White. Was there, then, anything progressive, even deliberately provocative, in the Bicentennial’s cosmopolitan vision? Perhaps, but it’s difficult to ignore Goude’s well-known aestheticization of Blackness, which bordered on fetishization[8]: “Stunningly regal, exotically beautiful, dark ebony in color, and immense in size, Norman loomed as an upscale version of all of Goude’s fantasies.”[9]

Whether depicted as Liberty or Marianne, fully clothed or bare-breasted, the female form finds itself deployed as an open signifier to capture ideals to which actual women are often, in a more material sense, refused access. When Norman emerged that day alongside a monument of Egyptian antiquity, she both channeled something of this tradition of personification and, now in retrospect, cast an image that appears ironic. Looking beyond her performance toward the colonialist preoccupation with the headscarf, we see women of color deployed to justify ‘civilizing missions’, while being denied the agency to authorize the meaning of their own bodily display. In this sense, the continued restrictions on the headscarf in France represents one of the persistent contradictions of the Revolution.

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Title Image: Jessye Norman pictured next to the Luxor Obelisk, singing La Marseillaise at the Bicentennial celebrations of the French Revolution (AP).

Further Reading:


**Endnotes:**


[8] Norman herself was confused by the symbolism of her selection, remarking at the time: “Is the president of the thought that I come from one of the former French colonies in Africa, or from Martinique, Haiti, or Guadeloupe, perhaps?” Jessye Norman, *Stand Up Straight and Sing!* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), 230.

The Phrygian cap or liberty cap is a soft conical cap with the apex bent over, associated in antiquity with several peoples in Eastern Europe and Anatolia, including Phrygia, Dacia, and the Balkans. In early modern Europe it came to signify freedom and the pursuit of liberty through a confusion with the pileus, the felt cap of manumitted (emancipated) slaves of ancient Rome. In artistic representations it signifies freedom and the pursuit of liberty.