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The Continuation of the Past by Other Means¹

Seloua Luste Boulbina

Translated by Samuel Lamontagne

“France is the most beautiful country in the world,” is what teachers used to “teach” in schools. In the face of national identity, loving France and praising it unconditionally are one and the same thing. Moreover, the republic can very quickly and easily become an obsession and lifeline for those who only assert their nationalism when embedded in republican myths that a welcome motto—“liberty, equality, fraternity”—and an appropriate anthem—“La Marseillaise”—establish in the comfort of righteous sentiments and the courage (or rage) of warlike fervor.

“Do you hear, in the mountains, the roar of ferocious soldiers?” Last time, let’s not forget, it was in the djebels, full of fellaghas, that young Frenchmen, called up to fight, were chasing impure blood.² Politically speaking, reviving the song means seizing the ultimate opportunity to wage war against the foreigner, the sworn enemy, and as we used to say in Old French, the Muslim Frenchman. By extension, it is the North African, or more simply, the Arab—these terms being synonymous with immigrant. Does he speak the French of France to begin with, the French of the French, or is he reduced to his poor gibberish? Does he wear his hat backwards like a new King Dagobert? Is he looking for work? Isn’t he a lazy king?³ And his name, for God’s sake, his name, isn’t it Muslim? That, at least, he will never be able to hide it.

From mosque to minaret, from headscarf to burqa, from one thing leading to another, France, seen from the sky, shows its talent for liberty, its attention to equality and its sense of fraternity. Yes, but in difference. Indeed, equality in difference, liberty in difference, fraternity in difference. When some want indifference, whether in recruitment or entry to nightclubs, renting an apartment or getting married to a so-called “pureblood” French person, remuneration or promotion, eligibility or driving, identity check or protection of liberties, others track down difference. Pursued in this way, difference is thus the royal path to unequal treatment. Islam then becomes an incomparable religion, unlike

Judaism or—even less so—Christianity, and, as a consequence, a religion deemed contrary to republican principles. Wearing a Muslim name signifies deviation and dissimilarity, whether one wants guarantees or alibis, stigmata or prosecution. The political trajectory of Rachida Dati or Fadela Amara, however, shows how much “sameness” is in everyone’s mind.⁴ If the president of the Republic takes communion in church, so be it, but if his ministers go to the mosque. . .secularism would be offended.

In 1905, secularism was considered by its opponents as a Judaization of the republic. One hundred years later, on the same benches of the Assembly, one religion obsessively chases away the other: The Islamization of the country is feared. Seen from above, indeed, the durable development of France seems to be based on its identity and not on its immigration. An alternative is thus durably and artificially created between identity (on the right) and immigration (on the left). But in reality, immigration can refer to French people by birth whose parents, grandparents or even great-grandparents were foreigners in the past. In this way, the past is asserted over the present. The vanity of the undertaking will not escape anyone. How could the France of today be daddy’s France? How could it resemble a childhood memory or a past reconstructed by the imagination?

No state official will take the insult of a comparison of the current political and administrative action with Vichy France. And yet. . .French people were losing their nationality. Since then, France had reestablished legal and administrative protection in terms of nationality. Many people are encountering strange difficulties. Michka Assayas, who recently testified in *Le Monde*, or Dominique Décant-Paoli, recently profiled in *Libération*, are of course not stripped of their nationality. They have suddenly lost it, forced to prove they did not steal it: The identity and French nationality documents that the (French) administration has issued them until now are no longer sufficient. Retroactively, by the grace of Eric Besson, whose firmness in terms of principles is indisputable, new provisions transform some French citizens into French citizens from elsewhere, if they were born abroad or of parents born abroad.⁵ In many cases, this foreign country was a French colony. Often, foreign parents were previously forced to be French. How ironic!! When one is, as in my case, born in France, but obviously does not have the appropriate name, the one that other natives from Isère (French department) have, the

secular and republican civil servants in charge of issuing national identity cards invoke the “antiterrorist measures” to justify the longer delays in obtaining these indispensable papers. Eric Besson is indeed the scarecrow of the government.

This is how the French state discards its colonial past: by denying it. The wound is widespread. The media are not spared. When *L'Express* opens its columns to “colonization,” it gives the floor to a “historian” Daniel Lefeuvre, who, in his books, writes “bicot” and “bougnoule,” as he writes “négro” without quotation marks. What is, indeed, here and now, the language of science? It does not necessarily make respect one of the pillars of objectivity. Who is offended by this? On the contrary, reality is confused with guilt, and recognition with repentance. In France, Fanon has been little studied. He is much better known abroad, in the United States in particular. If French universities were autonomous, they would not be any more liberal. They would not easily welcome, as it is the case elsewhere, in the United Kingdom or in the United States, studies explicitly considering colonial issues, especially if these studies are carried out by French people from elsewhere or by foreigners. By that I mean non-Europeans. Indeed, the border is not strictly speaking ethnic, religious, or racial. It is, but improperly so, to name a negation: non-European.

Does France need to be purified? When the Jamaican Stuart Hall taught in London, the Martinican Edouard Glissant taught in New York, not in Paris. The French “from elsewhere” were told to get lost. In this respect, France is well behind, but that doesn't shock anyone. On the contrary, the French differential fraternity makes supernumeraries. When the French National Front, a free party if there was ever one, dictated its watchword: “France for the French,” it was merely describing; there is no need for prescription. This slogan, moreover, was already that of the anti-dreyfusards.⁶ It is worth remembering, at a time when the dream history of the French is being restored, how the Republic (especially the Third) mistreated the Jews, how it discriminated against its own people, even in the files and careers of those who served it: its civil servants. Not all traditions are good to follow.

During the Evian Accords, the photographer Marc Riboud was able to observe a quite symptomatic scene. As the Algerian delegation was getting out of the helicopter, “one of them went to shake hands with one of the French representatives waiting for them, but the latter remained with his arms dangling along his body,

without responding to the handshake.”⁷ Disciplined, the French representative was obeying orders. Did the orders change? The policy of the raised fist is still on the agenda. That is the national identity. The present is the continuation of the past by other means. According to Alain Peyrefitte, it was good for General de Gaulle that there were “yellow Frenchmen, black Frenchmen, brown Frenchmen. They show that France is open to all races and that it has a universal vocation. But on condition that they remain a small minority. (. . .) France is a European people of white race, of Greek and Latin culture and of Christian religion.”⁸ And yet, France then extended to the dimensions of its vast colonial empire: North Africa, West Africa, part of Central Africa, Indochina, part of the Americas, large islands in the Indian Ocean, islands and archipelagos in the Pacific Ocean. The current political events show that times have not changed much since the independences. Bad times. The political stupidity of the French rulers is remarkable: supposedly busy gaining the votes of the far right, they are only defending a narrow postcolonial nationalism. It consists of taking the demon out of the national identity to better demonize all of those who, French or foreigners, are not considered worthy because they are not of Greek or Latin culture and/or of Christian religion and/or of white race. This is how diversity is destroyed with one hand and—supposedly—promoted with the other.

At the very moment of the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the independences of the African continent, we prefer to promote a colonial author, a Frenchman from Algeria, Albert Camus, who accidentally died fifty years ago. Are we talking about Algeria with Camus? Are we talking about the Algerians with Camus? Camus for the Pantheon and the foreigner for the birds: a beautiful arrangement! With Camus, Europeans go wherever they like and do whatever they like. With Camus, it isn’t about the Arabs! With Camus, Europeans speak neither Berber nor Arabic and do not address Algerians: they speak about them. This generalized ignorance, this profound indifference did not spare the French soil. It was the same in Paris as in Algiers. And today? Camus does not work critically; he defends his interests: did he ever advocate equality? In Algeria, Camus was indeed well integrated. If Nicolas Sarkozy loves Camus, it is because he offers liberty in difference, equality in difference, fraternity in difference; it is because he politically prefers his mother to his neighbors.

Notes

¹ Initially published in 2010, on *Médiapart* under the title of “La continuation du passé par d’autres moyens.”

² In Arabic *djebel* means mountain, and *fellaghas* bandit.

³ Lazy king is the literal translation of “roi fainéant,” a phrase generally referring to the kings following Dagobert, and the weakening of the Merovingian dynasty.

⁴ Rachida Dati and Fadela Amara were two officials of the French government. Both came from North African backgrounds.

⁵ Eric Besson was the head of the Minister of Immigration, Integration, National Identity and Codevelopment from 2009 to 2010.

⁶ Opponent to the release of the Captain Alfred Dreyfus in the Dreyfus Affair, generally expressing antisemitic positions.

⁷ Personal interview with the author.

⁸ Alain Peyrefitte, *C’était De Gaulle* (Paris: Fayard, 1994).

