Postcolonial France

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Race, Islam, and the Future of the Republic

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Introduction
Whither Postcolonial France?

In November 1934, in the midst of the interwar economic crises and far-right street riots that threatened to topple the elected French government, Leon Trotsky posed the pressing question of "whither France?" Would it descend into the violent fervor of fascist nationalism that marked its neighbors to the east and the south? Or would the working class and exploited peasantry rise up against the decades of bourgeois Bonapartism that had bankrupted French society economically, politically, and morally. "Will it be revolutionary socialism or Fascist reaction which will first … demonstrat[e] in words and deeds its ability to smash every obstacle on the road to a better future?" he asked. "On this question," he argued, "depends the fate of France for many years to come" (Trotsky 1968: 14).

France's fate for many years to come would be one of fundamental division. France was literally torn asunder by the German invasion a few years after Trotsky posed his question, physically fragmented into a Nazi-controlled north, a nominally autonomous south governed from Vichy, and a Free French Forces government in exile under Charles de Gaulle. Moral, ideological, and tactical divides between "collaboration" and "resistance" continued to mark the French sociopolitical landscape long after the nominal "liberation" of 1944, morphing into extant rival national narratives of a rural, Catholic "true France" (see Lebovics 1994) and a secular, urbane Republic.[1] A shifting wartime geography of Allied and Axis military zones would give way to a new landscape outlined by a Cold War divide between East and West, and an emergent unified European zone into which De Gaulle would ambivalently position France as both within and without, jealously preserving national autonomy from American and German political-economic domination.

And such a postwar landscape was eminently an imperial one, with nominal distinctions between metropole and colony blurred in practice by the administrative incorporation of overseas territories, the granting of some level of citizenship to colonial subjects, and the circulation of African, Asian, and Caribbean students, soldiers, and workers who to a great extent carried the burden of the liberation and rebuilding of France during the so-called *Trente Glorieuses*, the 30 years of relative prosperity following the liberation. The debt owed for such lives and labors broadly

animated anticolonial struggles for both national independence and alternative post-imperial federation arrangements, the latter envisioned by bicultural intellectuals like the *négritude* poet-politicians Aimé Césaire (Martinique) and Léopold Senghor (Senegal)—as historian Gary Wilder (2015) has recently traced. Most strikingly, on May 8, 1945, the very day Nazi Germany surrendered to Allied forces, French gendarmes fired on celebrating Muslim Algerians in Sétif and Guelma, northern Algeria, leading to a series of massacres that are often viewed as the opening salvoes in the long French–Algerian war of decolonization. While some critics like Ferhat Abbas, Albert Camus (2013), and Germaine Tillion (1958, 1961) continued to imagine for some years a future Algeria in which former colonizer and colonized could be reconciled,[2] most ultimately came to agree with Simone Weil's earlier assessment, echoing Trotsky, that "France will have to choose between attachment to its empire and the need once more to have a soul" (Weil 2003: 124). As Césaire (2000) and the Jewish-Tunisian intellectual Albert Memmi (1991) would attest, imperialism was but another form of fascism, and colonizing society was ultimately a diseased one that could only possibly be cured through its destruction.

National self-determination and the juridical separation of France from its African and Asian peripheries were of course not the inevitable outcomes of the anticolonial struggle, in spite of our methodological nationalist tendency today to take independent territorial nation-states for granted (see Wilder 2015). Decolonization had to be invented, as Todd Shepard (2006) has insisted. But the putative demise of France's overseas empire did not bring about the end of colonial relations or their entailments. The colonial situation remains written into the French landscape through the very structures and institutions forged in imperial times: in its present multiracial and multicultural demography, its architecture and urban plans, its fashions and customs, its security regimes and policing practices, its governmental mode of political liberalism.[3] Whether imperialism during its heyday was embraced as an ideology or massively contested by any given party, it ended up insinuating itself within France as a material condition and structuring structure, as a habitus and set of durable dispositions, as a structure of feeling and way of being-in-the-world.

To assert that France is *post*colonial is precisely not to claim that colonialism is over and done with. As postcolonial scholars have long emphasized, the work of the appellation "postcolonial" (hyphenated or not, with or without postmodern parentheses around the "post") is to underline that the present, the temporally post, is still, in some nontrivial ways, decidedly colonial (see Chakrabarty 2000; Prakash 1995; Spivak

1999).[4] But it equally should not imply that the French present is merely defined by a singular, static colonial "legacy," or that that "legacy" is all determining and mono-causal of the contemporary sociopolitical debates and dilemmas around citizenship and belonging. Not only must one take into account the heterogeneity of the colonial experience in and for different European subjects, but also recognize that the parameters and institutions with colonial genealogies have transformed over time, as have their coloniality in the process. Present structures of inequality may seem to recapitulate colonial ones, with barely reconfigured racialized subject positions, but they are situated in different contexts, and as such take on new forms and dynamics. Responding to their critics, French colonial historians Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard, and Sandrine Lemaire specify that their insistence on the "liveliness of colonial memories" in the French present does not in any way imply "a linear heritage, an identical reproduction of past practices." Rather, they continue, "thinking the postcolony is to necessarily understand how the phenomena engendered by the colonial fact have continued but also hybridized, transformed, retracted, reconfigured" (Blanchard et al. 2005: 13). Ann Laura Stoler has more recently drawn on the metaphor of "duress" to emphasize the "durability and distribution of colonial entailments that cling—vitally active and activated—to the present conditions of people's lives" (Stoler 2016: 25), a "past which is imagined to be over" (ibid.: 33) but which continues to exert force in transfigured and recursive forms. But, as she emphasizes, one must likewise take into account the "creative and critical—and sometimes costly—measures people take to defy these [forces and] constraints, to name that damage, or to become less entangled" (ibid.: 346). The challenge, she maintains, is not to flatly claim everything has a colonial genealogy, but to "track the tangibilities of empire as effective [and, I might add, affective] histories of the present" (ibid.: 378). This book takes up this challenge by showing how various, differently racialized men and women in contemporary France endure, express, engage, and ultimately enlist such postcolonial duress in charting a future beyond racist denials, assimilationist policies, discriminatory structures, and national frontiers.

COLONIAL LEGACIES?

Insisting on France's postcoloniality, and exploring how French subjects of color racially live and respond to it, is to enter fraught terrain. My first ethnographic field project conducted during the 1990s focused on young Franco-Algerian men and women in the outskirts of Paris who pushed back against the space-time of the French nation-state (see Sil-

verstein 2004a). They commemorated their parents' lives as late-colonial immigrants, looked to the United States to make sense of the racial discrimination and police violence they regularly faced, and felt themselves viscerally connected to the Palestinian conflict and the violence in Algeria through family ties and a sense of a common struggle. I traced this contested field of belonging and suffering—what Michael Rothberg (2009) has since called "multidirectional memory"—to enduring tensions within French republican universalism, particularly as it developed in the colonial Algerian contexts: an ambivalence between the theoretical incorporation of indigenous Algerian populations as putatively equal subjects, and their slotting into new categories of racial, ethnic, and religious others in colonial law, policy, planning, and military administration. The state pressure on Franco-Algerian men and women to "integrate"—to relegate their cultural and religious beliefs and practices to the private sphere and subsume their public presentation to normative conventions of Frenchness—combined with the everyday popular racism and institutional discrimination they faced which made them feel like second-class citizens, seemed inseparable from these earlier colonial moments to both myself and many of those I interviewed.

Yet to make these connections was to run against the grain of mainstream French thought at the time, which broadly pigeonholed the study of "immigrants" (of whom those I worked with were classed as "second-generation") to the field of urban sociology and approached them as a "problem" of unemployment, inadequate housing, education failure and so on—of ultimately the failed social mobility of a former working-class population in a postindustrial context. The French republican social contract left no room for alternate identity diacritics, and French law prohibited the official collection of demographic data on race, ethnicity, or religion. For me to chronicle the racialized and ethnic dimensions of Franco-Algerian lives in peripheral Parisian neighborhoods and suburban housing projects (*les cités*), often experienced by my interlocutors as veritable "ghettos," in terms other than that of class was to import foreign categories of analysis and engage in a form of American academic imperialism (see Wacquant 2008: 135–62; cf. Bourdieu & Wacquant 1999). But as the sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad (2004)—himself an Algerian immigrant to France—brilliantly argued, mainstream French urban sociology tended to merely echo "state discourse" by treating Franco-Algerians as but objects of state projects and never subjects of their own destiny or the remaking of the French nation by cutting them off from the Algerian context of colonial and postcolonial emigration with which their lives remained deeply entwined. As I tried to connect French and Algerian sociopolitical and historical

processes, I was accused of smuggling in alien postcolonial and diaspora theory more appropriate for the British or American (post)empire. Colonialism, for many of my white French interlocutors, was history, and colonial history was a separate field of study, broadly relegated to peripheral universities (Bancel 2005). My own work was of potential interest to them, not for what it had to say about France as a racialized postcolony, but for what it had to say about US obsessions with race and coloniality.

Since the mid-2000s, French academic and public discourse has decidedly shifted, resulting in what Bancel and Blanchard have called a "Paxtonization" of colonial history (Bancel & Blanchard 2005: 26), referencing the historiographic revolution that followed American historian Robert Paxton's study of the constitutive legacy of the Vichy regime for the postwar French republics (Paxton 1972).[5] The generalized amnesia surrounding the French–Algerian war—and the Algerian colonial past and present more broadly—tracked by Benjamin Stora (1991) had been ruptured during the new conflict in Algeria during the 1990s, with a proliferation of memory projects by differently situated actors (Berbers, *harkis*, *pied-noirs*) who demanded official recognition for their sacrifice for the French and Algerian nation-states.[6] On the one hand, Franco-Algerian artists, activists, and associations called attention to the suppressed violence of colonization and decolonization, the torture of Algerian revolutionaries, and the massacre of Algerian immigrant demonstrators in Paris on October 17, 1961. These efforts were emboldened by the 1997 trial of Maurice Papon, the chief of police responsible for the 1961 massacre, for his role in arresting and deporting Jews during World War II, as well as the later 2001 revelations by General Paul Aussaresses of the systematic use of torture during the French–Algerian war (implicated in the death of National Liberation Front militant Larbi Ben M'hidi), for which Aussaresses was subsequently indicted for "apology for war crimes." On the other hand, *pied-noir* groups insisted on national recognition of their respective sacrifices, planning several museums and monuments to commemorate the French colonial "presence" in Algeria and sponsoring a French parliamentary law of February 23, 2005, in which the "Nation expresses its appreciation (*reconnaissance*) for the men and women who participated in the work (*oeuvre*) accomplished by France in its former French departments of Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and Indochina" (Article 1). The law's fourth article caused particular public controversy for its specification that school curricula recognize the "positive role [of] the French presence overseas, notably in North Africa." French historians across the world denounced such an official imprimatur on what they decried as "colonial nostalgia," and while the

French Constitutional Council ultimately abrogated Article 4, the international outcry persisted.

Perhaps the most outspoken critics were a group of heterodox French scholars of colonialism and immigration associated with the Achac research group who would engage in a series of controversial publishing projects over the next decade tracing the "colonial heritage" within postcolonial France (see Bancel et al. 2010; Blanchard & Bancel 2005; Blanchard et al. 2005). This group included important Franco-Algerian scholars Ahmed Boubeker and Saïd Bouamama who had long been working on the fringes of French academia, as well as a new generation of historians, political scientists, and sociologists of color—including Nacira Guénif-Souilamas, Pap Ndiaye, and Françoise Vergès—with close ties to and training in American and British universities. Indeed, French universities had increasingly opened up to transatlantic postcolonial approaches in the wake of a Bologna process that had gradually harmonized higher education across Europe and resulted in a broadening of international graduate programs in France with instruction in English. In 2005, Ndiaye, author of a study on "the black condition" (Ndiaye 2008) co-founded the Representative Council of Black Associations (CRAN), the first French federation of Caribbean diasporic and French-African groups along the rubric of race, which, among other engagements, has led a campaign for reparations for victims of slavery and colonialism. Vergès, a feminist and antiracist activist from a politically engaged family of Réunion background, has served as president of the National Committee for the Memory and History of Slavery, which oversees the implementation of the 2001 Taubira Law that public recognized slavery as a crime against humanity. She and Guénif-Souilamas, a public intellectual in her own right, have been critical interlocutors of the Party of the Indigènes of the Republic (PIR) founded in 2005 by Franco-Algerian feminist activist Houria Bouteldja and Tunisian Marxist militant Sadri Khiari. Speaking on behalf of those "originating from the colonies, former or present, and from postcolonial immigration" who face discrimination, social exclusion, precarity, and "indigenization," the PIR's call to arms declared that "France remains a colonial state" and advocated for a "decolonization of the republic" (Bouteldja and Khiari 2012: 19–21).[7] These various efforts were catalyzed by the uprisings in October-November 2005 in suburban housing projects outside of Paris and other urban areas, in response to which the French government instituted a state of emergency (*état d'urgence*), originally formulated during the French-Algerian war, and applied overseas to suppress anticolonial insurrections in the intervening years.[8] In the wake of the Paris attacks attributed to the Islamic State of November 13, 2015,

the extra-judicial policing powers enabled by the state of emergency legislation have been deployed as a mode of antiterrorism and adopted into permanent law.

MORAL PANICS

These palpable challenges to putatively color-blind policies and universalist ideologies have called forth a public reckoning that borders on a full-scale moral panic. On the one hand, a number of scholars, politicians, and pundits have mounted an ardent defense of the French Republic presented as under immediate, existential threat. Some have drawn on an Islamophobic "clash of civilizations" (*choc des civilisations*) rhetoric and identified the source of the threat as Islam, understood to be incompatible with French republican values of individual freedom and gender equality, or with norms of state secularism (*laïcité*), which ostensibly restrict religious expression to the private sphere. If the 2015 Paris attacks underlined for many the susceptibility of France to "Islamo-fascist" operations directed from abroad, others have pointed to the internal threat of born or converted Muslim-French populations who since the 1990s had been suspected of being seduced by jihad, training abroad and fighting in overseas Islamic wars, and re-importing the violence back home (see Pujadas & Salam 1995).[9] More insidiously, others, like prize-winning author Michel Houellebecq in his novel *La soumission* ("Submission") (2015), have portrayed liberal tendencies to tolerate and accommodate Muslim religious practices as ultimately complicit in the gradual (and willing) transformation of France into an Islamic republic. *Le Figaro* journalist Eric Zemmour (2014) characterized this as a veritable "suicide."

On the other hand, defenses of French republican universalism, particularly from mainstream socialist and feminist perspectives, have rejected the encroachment of particularist, sectarian tendencies that have arisen in the name of diversity. They accuse certain antiracist artists and activists, like those associated with the PIR, in their defense of black and Muslim lives, of promoting misogyny, anti-Semitism, and even anti-white racism.[10] They reject the postcolonial critique that posits colonial racism as immanent to political liberalism and, echoing the public defense of Nicolas Sarkozy, then interior minister, of the February 23, 2005 law, refuse to engage in overwrought apologies or "permanent repentance" for the past. Unimpeachably humanist scholars like political-scientist Jean-François Bayart (2010), historian Emmanuelle Saada (2006), and anthropologist Fanny Colonna (Colonna & Le Pape 2010) have criticized the historiographic simplifications of certain

French adaptations of postcolonial studies: the reduction of colonialism to mere violence (see Grandmaison 2005), the ignoring of hybrid identities and co-constitutive relations forged between colonizers and colonized, and the implication of an unaltered, linear colonial "legacy" in the present. For other scholars and pundits less outspokenly critical of past or present racial violence, the stakes tend to be more identitarian than historiographic, amounting to a defense of liberal ideals traceable back to the Revolution, to which colonialism and slavery are presented as regrettable exceptions (see Bruckner 2006; Gallo 2006; Lefeuvre 2006; Paoli 2006; Taguieff 2005). A postcolonial critique of the Republic, whether from a scholarly or activist perspective, calls into question their worldview, the "story they tell themselves about themselves," to use an expression of anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973: 448).

From the perspective of what Bouteldja calls the "decolonial majority" (Bouteldja 2016: 139), the stakes are equally existential. Indeed, she presents her plea for solidarity and "revolutionary love," as a peace offering to a "dying Old World" (ibid.: 27). Meanwhile, Marwan Muhammad (2017), director of the Collective against Islamophobia in France (CCIF)—a key watchdog monitoring anti-Muslim hate crimes and advocating for Muslim-French rights more broadly—less polemically draws on economist Albert O. Hirschman's classic distinction between "exit," "voice," and "loyalty" (Hirschman 1970) to describe the choices that Muslim-French citizens face. Demanded by state policies and pundits to continually demonstrate their loyalty, these "children of Marianne, loved or not" (Muhammad 2017: 6), have grown increasingly frustrated by the barriers they face for success in France and opted for exit strategies, whether through adopting Salafi interpretations and identifying with the Islamic community (*umma*), or emigration to the Arabian Gulf, North America, or elsewhere in Europe seen as less Islamophobic. However, insofar as Muslim-French citizens "define this country, no more or less than any of our fellow citizens" (ibid.: 7), it is ultimately their decision whether to take voice or not that will help determine the future of France:

> On this ground depends the future of not only Muslims, but of the whole of French society, in its capacity to innovate and renew itself, to be true to what it wishes and pretends to be: a country where everyone can find their place, whatever their trajectory, their origin, their religion, or their beliefs. (ibid.: 232)

He offers his book, not as a "prayer for peace" (ibid.: 5), but as a plea against fatalism and as an "act of resistance" (ibid.: 7).

Journalist Edwy Plenel strikes a similar chord. Modeled on Emile Zola's famous 1896 article "For the Jews" in the French newspaper *Le Figaro*, Plenel calls his essay a "warning cry against indifference" and, moreover, an "appeal to forestall disaster … to avoid a *politique du pire* ['heartless politics']" (Plenel 2016: xii–xiii). Cautioning that Islamophobia rots French values from within and makes a "war of civilizations" a self-fulfilling prophecy, he warns of the rise of a reactionary right not only in the guise of the National Front, but also more mainstream political parties similarly anxious over the so-called "Muslim question." Such groups are but the "sorcerer's apprentices" of a "colonial past that has never really been closed" (ibid.: 12) but acts like a "ghost that continues to prowl, from the closet of unappeased memories" (ibid.: 29). The central dilemma of postcolonial France, for Plenel, is a choice "between identitarian retrenchment and national necrosis, on the one hand, or, as we wish on the other hand, the truth of history and reconciliation with historic memory" (ibid.: 29).

> Beneath the Muslim question, therefore, there lies the French question: our capacity to reinvent a France that instead of congealing into a fantasized and deadly sameness, launches itself toward the world by making its relationship to diversity the best key to every door. (ibid.: 51)

Plenel concludes that his book, entitled *For the Muslims*, could have equally been called *For France* (ibid.: 89).

While Plenel situates his historical narrative in the rise of fin-de-siècle anti-Semitic fascism, Trotsky and Weil's existential concerns over a different moment of anti-Semitism still ring strikingly prescient. Postcolonial France, as elsewhere across the Global North in the early decades of the twenty-first century, is facing new crises of capitalism and the rise of new demagogic populisms that similarly speak in the name of the nation against various internal and external others: immigrants, refugees, Muslims, Roma, or often some combination of these vulnerable targets. As in the 1930s, new EU-imposed austerity measures to stave off declining profits have rolled back social protections and dramatically sharpened the divide between rich and poor—a fracturing of the social compact that again is blamed on a cultural fracture of the nation. As in the 1930s, this has been accompanied by rising violence provoked by different groups who feel sidelined from social mobility, sometimes accomplished in the name of the nation-state, sometimes explicitly against it. As in the 1930s, some of these oppositional groups are organized transnationally, and such external organization is taken

by some state actors and pundits as a form of treason. As in the 1930s, neo-nationalist groups threaten to turn populist rhetoric into electoral success and regressive, anti-humanist governmental policy (the *politique du pire* about which Plenel worried).

But as in the 1930s, the descent to further violence and fascism is not inevitable. As Trotsky repeatedly insisted, hope remains that various groups can come together in solidarity, fight back the demagogues, and create lasting social change. Such efforts necessarily require coordination beyond the nation-state, uniting movements for social justice both within and without France, with similar movements across Europe, and in the former colonial and presently neocolonial periphery. In this book, I explore the trajectories, works, and engagements of outspoken artists and activists like Marwan Muhammad or the PIR who are finding renewed inspiration in the late-colonial writings of Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Malcolm X, Amílcar Cabral, Audre Lorde, C.L.R. James, Stokely Carmichael, Kateb Yacine, James Baldwin, Angela Davis, and other theorists-*cum*-militants of race and revolution. These French men and women of color—whose families trace their migrant histories particularly to colonial North Africa, but also to West Africa, the Caribbean, Indochina, and the Indian Ocean—are insisting that they remain, in one way or the other, the oppressed "natives" (*les indigènes*) of a contemporary French Republic still subjected to and fighting against an even more insidious form of internal, racializing colonialism—that they are the new *sans-culottes* of a decolonizing revolution in the metropole still to come. They—like their racialized counterparts across Europe—look to the ongoing Palestinian struggle, to the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States, and to the successes and failures of the 2011 uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East not merely as sites of empathetic solidarity or instructive parallels, but as necessarily conjoined efforts for social justice whose outcomes are inevitably linked. And such an insistence—alongside their absolute refusal to apologize, remain quiet, or strive for invisibility as black or Muslim—has earned them further accusations of social treason, anti-Semitism, and reverse racism from self-appointed defenders of secularism, liberalism, and nationalism.

This book plumbs the dynamics and dilemmas of this present moment of crisis and hope. Through a set of interconnected chapters, I explore recent moral panics around urban racialized violence, female Islamic dress and male public prayer, anti-system gangsta rap, and various sporting performances in and around which seemingly sectarian politics have controversially appeared to arise. Inspired by courageous French artists, activists, and intellectuals of color, I trace these conflicts to the unresolved tensions of an imperial project, the present-day effects of