

Houria Bouteldja: White progressivism or Indigenous « fertile regression »? Get your hands dirty and go beyond the dilemma

I start with a direct question: Indigenous of France, are we progressive? Are we the progressives they dream of us to be, those presented to us as our natural allies, the Left? Are we anti-capitalists, feminists, ecologists? Are we for gay rights? Welcoming of migrants? In brief, are we good people according to the Left's criteria? Instinctively, I would answer that we are not. This isn't a timeless or definitive « not ». It is a temporary « not ». In other words, a complex « not ». First, so as not to fall into essentialism, I would say that we are not a fixed and homogeneous body and that, as such, we might even answer with a partial « yes » if we wanted to consider members of this group, the Indigenous, as autonomous and independent units. The name Indigenous contains multitudes and there are within it progressive ones. However, what interests me here is not so much what we are individually, nor our heterogeneity, which is true of every group, but rather: 1) the community of fate particular to us, post-colonial subjects -- socially segregated, discriminated against, subject to a specific form of control by public authorities, illegitimized in our relationship to the nation, and deprived of political representation; and 2) the effects of this condition on our social and political trajectories. What interests me, therefore, are the broad tendencies that can be seen over the last thirty or forty years, that are the product of recent history.

From there, what I can say for sure is that if we observe the generations born in France since the 1960s up to today, younger generations are less progressive than older ones, and this trend keeps increasing. In the vocabulary of the Left, we would speak of « reaction ». Some examples:

- Extremist fringes of secularists, republicanists, progressives, and feminists accuse French Islam of being a return to patriarchal order and to the family. They say it from a racist point of view, but is it false?

- 300 petitioners sign a manifesto against "the new anti-Semitism". They write it from a clearly racist and Islamophobic viewpoint, but is it false?

- A firebrand by the name of Farida Belghoul launches a national "day of educational withdrawal" for schoolchildren (the JRE) in 2013 because, she says, the Department of Education wants to introduce gender theory in schools, making it necessary, according to her, to protect notions of male and female. She meets with such great success that she provokes a wave of panic among local educational authorities.

- Alain Soral castigates feminism for castrating men, as well as « Zionist » Jews who occupy France, galvanizing a Muslim virilism supposed to be an intrinsic quality of Islam. He hits the bull's eye and is followed by hundreds of thousands of Internet users, among them numerous Indigenous men. And I haven't even got to the successful youtubers who advocate ultra-sexist ideas in defense of racially oppressed men (I refer you to Azzedine's intervention yesterday), ideas that say, roughly: Arab women belong to Arab men, black women to black men, and when you are a man, a real one, you look after your flock and defend your honor.

- In 2014, municipalities that were Communist or Socialist Party strongholds fall

into the hands of the Right with the support of an active part of local Indigenous voters. Indeed, there is a demagoguery of the Right that knows how to hijack for its own profit the conservatism of the inhabitants of poor outer-city suburbs. In neighborhoods afflicted by a higher unemployment rate than the national average, class is certainly a determining factor. But other motivations play their part. Many of the most practicing Muslims were shocked by the « Marriage for all » law (let us remember that the UOIF participated in the anti-law « Protest for all »). This did not escape candidates on the Right, who specifically targeted Muslim families during their campaigns. In so doing, they claimed victory in historic bastions of the Left. It's worth noting that in addressing « the Muslim electorate that the Left has taken for granted », Bruno Beschizza -- a former cop, Nicolas Sarkozy's little protégée, and a man convinced that the discourse of « authority and generosity » would go over well in the housing projects of Aulnay-Sous-Bois, symbol of the economic crisis since the PSA factory closed there -- used a book called « Mehdi puts on lipstick », riding the gender theory debate to reach voters he judged as « committed to transmitting fundamental values to their children ». He won the election.

- Last but not least, to garner votes in these poor neighborhoods, some candidates promised, on one hand, free school lunches and, on other hand, the closing of Roma camps, which did not displease a number of inhabitants in these marginalized neighborhoods, who see the eviction of Roma as revitalizing their environment and even as a sign of respect. I refer you back to the plenary on intracommunity racism, and in particular to Said Bouamama's and Norman Ajari's interventions.

So I ask, once more, my initial question: are we progressive? It's hard to say « yes ».

But to answer as precisely as possible, I want to take a small detour and talk about Black American literature.

What I like about this literature is the implacable, merciless eye cast by Black writers on their people. I'm thinking in particular of Chester Himes and of Richard Wright. What I like is the lucidity, the coldness with which they judge their own. They know they are dealing with an unstructured, alienated, sick, often neurotic world that is capable of the worst. But they never give into contempt, because they share an essential knowledge: they know that this people is the product of the American nation. They always have safeguards in their head, a scale that protects them from any kind of disdain. They know that this people is stuck and that it is struggling, and they know, above all, how to belong to it. This means that there is always, paradoxically, a place for empathy and even for tenderness alongside their hardness. This is what constitutes the greatness of their literature in contrast, for instance, to a Houellebecq who takes himself to be an outcast author but who will remain, in fact, only a paltry lampoonist because, as some have observed, "he loves to hate and wants to be loved, but is incapable of either loving or admiring".

So, I want to try, like Himes, not to give into contempt, and even to try to learn something of this divorce from, this rejection of the Left's values, and – why not? -- to turn this rejection toward a project of liberation.

How, then, to judge Farida Belghoul's JRE and thousands of people she convinced? How to judge those who voted for Beschizza in the name of patriarchal order and security? How to judge the women about whom Louisa Yousfi spoke yesterday, who bemoan the death of "real" men even though a certain kind of feminism wants to see them delight in it? How to judge those who drift towards the most reactionary ideas and who are, socially, the most Indigenous of the Indigenous? Those who occupy the bottom-most rungs of the social ladder, those so excluded from political life that they that wouldn't even come to Bandung of the North, because excluded even from our circles? Those whom reactionary and racist demagogues manage to seduce, something the progressive Left pitifully fails to do and that we struggle with ourselves?

From a decolonial point of view, I would say two things:

1/ Let's stop cultivating a false romanticism and let's recognize our ensavagement. I say « ensavagement » and not « savagery ». Nuance. Ensavagement implies a notion of process, of evolution, while savagery implies a natural state. As Chester Himes invited us to do, let's remain lucid. I don't say this with a light heart, but we are living a moment of strong political regression. At the time of the first, historic Bandung, there existed -- without wanting to overestimate or to embellish -- a strong consciousness of common interests and a hope to work towards a better future. From Algeria, Fanon dreamed of creating a new man. But, as said Sadri Khiari has said, revolution contains within it counter- revolution. Nowadays, the Algeria that Fanon helped to liberate takes part in the counter-revolution by rounding up sub-Saharan migrants bound for Fortress Europe, sub-contracting its racism. This is one of the most deplorable demonstrations of our ensavagement, for the Maghreb's position in the hierarchy of powers is refracted in Arab Muslims who exploit it for their gain, even in interpersonal relations. Such racism of the dominated is not the monopoly of Arabs, though. It's characteristic of all dominated groups thirsty for integration. And it is in light of this thirst for integration that we must judge the new forms of intra-communal racisms and anti-Semitisms. It's in light of this thirst for integration that we must judge the degradation of relationships between men and women, the increasing intolerance towards homosexuals (I refer back to Paola Bacchetta's intervention). And it is in light of this thirst for integration that we must understand the success of a certain economic and cultural liberalism that gains ground in the form of a faith -- Obama's famous « Yes we can » or Macron's « Become yourself » - - that is nothing but a capitalist promotion of the individual to the detriment of collective strength, capable only of creating the conditions for a real resistance in the face of the neoliberal steamroller.

2/ Let's not cry over spilt milk. If we are no longer progressives, or if we are less progressive than before, it's because progressivism betrayed us. Or, to be more precise, because it was not made for us. I quote Sadri Khiari: We do not live in the same time. "Imagining a decolonial border strategy means breaking with the concept of a singular and homogeneous political arena. Forged in the history of battles between progressives and conservatives, Left and Right, working class and bourgeoisie, this concept of a political space-time is also, although not only, the fruit of colonization. Colonization did not only occupy space; it occupied time. Through armed force, colonization imposed a

racialized conception of time and of space, resting on a racial division of the world and a linear eurocentric history, allegedly universal, signposted by the advent of modernity and of progress, which relegates all other spaces and histories to non-history or to the early stages of history. What is at stake in liberation is the dismantling of the instruments and devices of power and knowledge that enable the continued colonial occupation of space and time. This position is foreign to that of universal emancipation, constructed according to the ideology of a single and homogeneous space-time within which a single political field exists, where struggles against different forms of oppression converge, and where, inevitably, « reactionaries » and « progressives » face off against each other.”

What Sadri says, in other words, is that the Left-Right divide is a product of colonial history. That’s what Césaire discovered when he wrote his famous resignation letter to the Communist Party, and it’s what we continue to discover today. What is new these days is the development of a “progressivism in the name of law and order” -- to use a phrase from the website “Serve the People” -- that takes on the uninhibited tenor of homonationalism and femonationalism.

I propose, therefore, a hypothesis: what if the reactionary conservatism of a growing part of us, the Indigenous, contains within itself a secret? And what if, to discover this secret, we need to change our glasses? If I were to put on my decolonial glasses, would I see the same thing as a white progressive?

Let’s take the case of the withdrawal into family values so hated by the Left (which has declared the death of God and of the family) and so cherished by the Indigenous. Shouldn't we see in that a shrewd consciousness of one’s material interests when the welfare state steps back, when the state abdicates responsibility and where the only place for protection and solidarity is the family, at times oppressive, yes, , but where one can find protection and affection in the face of the onslaught of neo-liberalism? When women bemoan the « death » of men, aren't they in fact a step ahead of progressives? Don't they know better than anyone that without material help from the men around them, they will have to face down precarity and care for their children entirely on their own? Is it not from this point of view that we must judge and appreciate the desperate and tragic participation of all these Indigenous and poor families in the JRE?

Let’s take, too, the case of growing hostility toward Jews. Isn’t it due to the abject amalgam between Jews and Israel long maintained by the ideological state apparatuses and by the Zionist movement? Isn't it due to a White good conscience that, on the one hand, turns the genocide of the Jews into a civil religion and, on the other, minimizes the transAtlantic slave trade or glorifies colonialism? Isn't it due to the structural anti-Semitism of the state that, in order to protect its racial character, organizes a hierarchy of communities, refuses to integrate Jews into the national narrative, but instead subtly organizes competition between communities, all the while distributing points between good and bad racial subjects? Finally, isn’t it due above all to a visceral attachment to Palestine, a land occupied for 70 years and a symbol of the North/South relationship, an occupation viciously presented not as a Western project but as a Jewish project?

Thus, when we put on decolonial glasses, what we observe is a dialectical phenomenon: a real regression, a real decay, a real degeneration, yes, but behind each of these regressions, implicitly, the critique of a system.

Behind familial conservatism, there is a critique of the anti-social state. Behind the hostility towards Jews, there is a critique of the nation-state and of imperialism.

Put another way, behind each of our regressions is a revolutionary dimension in the sense that they contain a critique of the state, of liberalism, and of imperialism. This regression can prolong our servitude and end up doing us in; it can also, just as much, become fertile and revolutionary if given the proper means.

We face, therefore, an alternative that I would summarize as follows: ensavagement or liberation? Reaction or revolution? Hatred of Jews and of Whites, or revolutionary love?

To tell the truth, this situation is not new. It is not even original. The history of the internally colonized is shaped by these contradictions. CLR James observed it a long time ago:

“The movements which seek ‘to drive the Jew out of Harlem or the South Side’ have a valid class basis. They are the reactions of the resentful Negro seeking economic relief and some salve for his humiliated racial pride. That these sentiments can be exploited by fanatical idiots, Negro anti-Semites, or self-seeking Negro businessmen, does not alter their fundamentally progressive basis. This progressiveness is in no way to be confused with the dissatisfaction of the demoralized white petty-bourgeoisie which seeks refuge in fascism. American reaction can and probably will finance or encourage some of these movements (Bilbo and Back to Africa) in order to feed ill will. But the Negroes are overwhelmingly proletarian, semi-proletarian, and peasant in their class composition. Such is the whole course of American history that any nation-wide Fascist movement (however disguised) will be compelled to attack the Negro struggle for equality.”

What to say? Are we going to let demagogues of all stripes, starting with that former cop, instrumentalize our ambivalences in the service of a project that is truly reactionary because backed by the means of the state? So as not to give into this instrumentalization, are we going to want at all costs to transform the Indigenous into a Left-progressive, against all social reality? Or are we finally going to make the audacious gamble made by the non-aligned movement in Bandung in 1955, of finding our own way?

At this point in my intervention, you’re going to tell me: but when are we going to talk about alliances with the Left, the subject of this plenary? Am I not drowning myself in conjecture? Not at all!

Because this progressive Indigenous, who is so rare, is the one dreamt about by our allies on the Left, allies with whom we share a radical critique of capitalism even if, for us, what we question is the entirety of modernist logic. And that’s where the rubber hits the

road. Because if the progressive Indigenous is so rare, a Left that would accept converging with such an Indigenous, who remains so unappetizing, so unsexy, so ugly – that Left does not exist either. Because to be bestowed this honor, we have to get an A+. We have to be exemplary. We have to take tests the way one takes a sobriety test. So it's a tricky situation. And yet, when we see the coming barbarism, there's no way out.

Albert Memmi declared more than 60 years ago in *Portrait of a Jew*: “reaction excludes me ... but Socialism and the revolution reject me.” I want to apply this citation from Memmi to us, for it's incredibly relevant. Let's observe the scene and take up Memmi:

1/ “Reaction excludes me”: precisely. Reaction does its work 1/through an extremely offensive neoliberal politics that takes the face of a young, handsome, dynamic president who went so far as to place a wreath of flowers in memory of Brahim Bouarram on May 1st. And 2/ through an ultra-nationalism that works to prevent migrants from treading on European soil, and advocates for the defense of the white race in France, in Germany, in the United States ...

2/ “Socialism and revolution reject me”: yesterday, at the same moment as this Bandung conference, an anti-government, anti-neoliberal march was launched by la France Insoumise. This demonstration -- which delights me personally, since I delight in the strikes taking place at the moment, which concern a part of the Indigenous -- is almost an allegory of our space-times, of our parallel worlds, white and Indigenous: they in Paris, we in Saint-Denis.

Of course, the initiators of this demonstration will not miss out on wondering about the massive absence of non-whites but they will not ponder their own negationism. And their biggest mistake is to reject the discordant Indigenous. Their biggest mistake is to believe in reforming this Indigenous, as if it were enough to make appeals without taking into account the material causes of this discordance. Their biggest mistake is denying their own collectivity, which exists only because their political agenda has served, first and foremost, the interests of the white subaltern classes for the past 30 years. This question must be put on the radical Left's agenda in months and years to come, just as we must put the White Question on our decolonial agenda.

Let's do justice to the truth. The discordant Indigenous is not the only blind spot for the radical Left. There is another one: the white proletariat.

Indeed, as noted time and again by Sadri Khiari, the radical Left cannot manage to break with its cold materialism, which prevents it from understanding the need for history, for identity, for spirituality, and for dignity on the part of the white subaltern classes, a dignity that is not only the dignity to consume. The French blue-collar types who voted for Sarkozy or Le Pen don't just expect an increase in salary. They vote for « values », whatever we may think of these values. And we can't oppose these values with 1500 euros but with other values; we oppose them with politics and culture. The question of dignity is an entry point that is much too neglected. This tarnished dignity managed to find amongst « poor whites» in France and « white trash » in the United States a

subterranean voice to express itself, namely, identity. Identity is the vicious inversion of white dignity, which, in this form, has found political translation only through votes for the FN, since these poor whites are – in the words of Aymeric Patricot – “too poor to interest the Right, too white to interest the Left.”

To oppose a politics of « national identity », then, we cannot content ourselves any more with a universalist, homogenizing, Eurocentric internationalism. We must find other answers.

To conclude, I propose that this blind spot on the Left become the spot of our clear-sightedness. The white proletarians have their grey area, but they also have their dignity. It is neither desirable nor generous on our part to believe that the white proletariat is condemned to fascism. This tendency is undeniable, true, but just as many of them simply withdraw from politics, abstain from voting, resist, and, yes, live their contradictions as despised white proletarians. Contempt for white subalterns is not just a myth put forth by the extreme-Right. It is at the heart of the numbing of the Left, a self-satisfied Left that gives moral lessons in anti-racism to poor whites on the one hand and, on the other, lectures immigrants about republican integration. At these two extremities are two camps staring each other down, united by a common experience: the negation of dignity.

What to do then? Peace between poor whites and the post-colonized is not pre-ordained. And there are already dubious strategies of reconciliation on offer. So we have before us a minefield into which we must nevertheless walk, setting off neither from the Left as it is nowadays, nor from the extreme-Right, but rather from a decolonial politics, the only politics that will get us out of this deadly duel – a duel maintained by various interests – between the two pariahs of society: poor whites and the Indigenous. Or, to put it more bluntly: between the rednecks and the barbarians.