

National Identity and Colonial History

"Towards a Real Debate"

Translated from the French by Dominic Thomas

"The great national identity debate". Hundreds of thousands of hits to the web server set up in November 2009 by Éric Besson (the Minister of Immigration, National Identity, Integration and Co-Development), town hall meetings throughout the provinces and over 50,000 posts (including numerous "dérapages" – a term that usually connotes political slip-ups and that refers here to the racist and xenophobic blog entries that initially appeared on the site). Overall, the Minister claimed in early January 2010, confirmation that the initiative had been a resounding success. However, virulent criticism from the Left, repeated demands to put an end to this dangerous debate, and misgivings on the Right in recent weeks offer a quite different picture. Intellectuals, scholars, writers, and journalists working on colonialism, immigration, and postcolonialism drafted a response (initially circulated December 24, 2009 at www.rue89.com and subsequently widely disseminated on other sites) which, while refusing from the outset to participate in this debate, offers an alternative to the current debate and its hidden agenda. An expanded version of this text is provided here.

On the web-site, www.debatidentitenationale.fr, one finds a broad range of contributions, excerpts and citations from various statements made by personalities, hundreds of carefully selected articles and declarations, as well as a most revealing "Bibliothèque" (library - now updated and available as "Textes de référence") section. By clicking on the relevant menu icon the web-site visitor is offered a sub-list that includes authors and texts with hyperlinks: thus, alongside classic authors (Claude Nicolet, Maurice Agulhon, Marc Bloch, Dominique Schnapper, Eugen Weber...), one finds what are often anachronistic works (Léopold Sédar Senghor, but not Aimé Césaire; François Mitterrand, but not Pierre Mendès France; Simone Weil, but not the specialist of immigration Patrick Weil; to put up a good show, Léon Blum and Théodore Zeldin; Pierre-Jakez Hélias and Jacques Julliard complete the survey).

Besson's "recommended" reading list provides a strong indication as to the pillars upon which the debate must rest: Luc Ferry (Luc rather than Jules), Max Gallo (and his book *Fiers d'être français* – Proud to be French), Daniel Lefeuvre (emblematic figure of "anti-repentance"), Gaston Kelman (the new advisor to the Minister), De Gaulle and André Malraux (including two entries for the latter!), and to round off the list, inserted among the various works and "thinkers", the weekly magazine *Marianne* (although recently removed from the site). In other words, just enough material to enable fellow citizens to gain familiarity with such a vast and complex subject. But that is not the

objective; rather, it is to be found in the calculated attempt by the Minister to manipulate public opinion.

We all know only too well that the way in which a question is asked, the context and the presuppositions that are made often determine the response. One must therefore pay careful attention to the various speeches and statements that have been made by the Minister, his colleagues and those deputies who back the government, and analyze the various references proposed by the Minister so as to "guide" the debate. Responses posted by internet users or others who have participated in the debate stand to have very little impact since the dice are loaded and the answers have been predetermined: the French must honor France, its flag, its great men, its national anthem, its glorious past, and embrace values of generosity and open-mindedness... in other words, a return to a nationalism of symbols, a narrow-minded and exclusionary model, one which of course will fail to attend to the most pressing contemporary questions.

From the evidence we have thus far - although the term is not actually invoked - the debate keeps returning to the (on the eve of regional elections) theme of immigration (in particular postcolonial immigration) and its impact on "national identity", even if several UMP (Union pour un Mouvement Populaire, the ruling majority Party) personalities and former government ministers have sensed the ill winds and have recoiled from the initiative. Yet, there are no references on the web-site to immigration, colonialism or slavery! The real debate remains to be had! The message is all too clear: let's stay away from these ticklish subjects and focus instead on the original principles of the Nation's "founding fathers", updated in this instance by the zealous guardians of national pride.

On the subject of immigration, for example, one might have expected to find a broad range of references that would have opened up the debate to its full complexity, with works by Pascal Blanchard, Ahmed Boubeker, Suzanne Citron (on the links with the Nation), Éric Fassin, Pieor Galloro, Yvan Gastaut, Vincent Geisser, Nancy Green, Nacira Guénif-Souilamas, Alec G. Hargreaves, Hervé Le Bras, Pierre Milza, Pap Ndiaye, Gérard Noiriel, Abdelmalek Sayad, Ralph Schor, Patrick Simon, Émile Temime, Dominic Thomas, Patrick Weil, Michel Wieviorka... On slavery, one would have expected to find the names of Myriam Cottias, Marcel Dorigny, Benoît Falaize (in relation to pedagogy), Hubert Gerbeau, Michel Giraud, Frédérique Régent, Nelly Schmidt or Françoise Vergès... And on the colonial era, the names of Charles-Robert Ageron, Nicolas Bancel, Yves Benot, Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, Marc Ferro, Raoul Girardet, Mohammed Harbi, Daniel Hémerly, Sandrine Lemaire, Claude Liauzu, Gilles Manceron, Achille Mbembe, Elikia M'Bokolo, Gilbert Meynier, Alain Ruscio, Benjamin Stora or Sylvie Thénault, as a starting point for discussion and analysis. The impression one gets from the Minister's web-site is that no debate, thinking or analysis has taken place in France on these questions over the past twenty years.

Likewise, no references are included to those populations residing in French overseas departments or territories who have naturally had much to say on the question of culture, identity, memory and history over recent months; or for that matter a single reference to the questioning that has come from the underprivileged *banlieues* housing projects, to urban cultural expression or to the struggles associated with immigration. Are we to assume that the Minister considers such contributions without interest? Yet others would like to see history classes eliminated as curricular requirements for advanced high-school students who have selected scientific tracks. Why ask those people living in the *banlieues* or in overseas departments or territories to share their views on identity when they have already done so previously in 2005 (during the *banlieues* uprisings that took place in the Fall of that year) and in 2009 (through strikes and rioting)? In the end, are we simply to assume that such consultations would be pointless?

However, the fact nevertheless remains that numerous authors have written about the complexity of identity transformation, in works infused with overseas and diasporic experiences and that have made it possible to shed light on the multiple facets of these questions. But it would appear from the information uploaded to the web-site that all this research is null and void, and that all that is left for us to do is simply to reread Max Gallo, Daniel Lefeuvre, and Gaston Kelman, while sprinkling our readings here and there with a little touch of Malraux, some zest of the General, a pinch of Blum-Mitterrand, and then to spice things up a little, add a touch of diversity thanks to a few lines from Senghor. A few wonderful classics from Bloch-Braudel complete the picture!

And yet, hidden behind this "debate on national identity" lies another one, omnipresent, that has to do with France's colonial history and its legacy (immigration, awareness of and knowledge pertaining to this history, memory wars, the place of Islam, pseudo-repentance...). The President of the Republic himself, in one statement, referred to notions of integration and assimilation interchangeably, potentially allowing for the two to be confused. In this "great debate", the unspoken question is not "What is it to be French?", but rather: "Can one be Black, Arab, Asian, or from a French overseas department or territory *and* be French?", because we remain, as Yazid Sabeg rightly reminds us, "haunted subterraneously" by colonial history (*Le Monde*, November 7, 2009).

Some five years after the whole saga on "positive colonization" that began at the end of 2004 and culminated in the Decree of February 2005 (most notably with regards to article 1 pertaining to the official recognition of the French colonial enterprise), a second installment has now been served up in the guise of a return to "French identity" that bears all the hallmarks of a reactionary project. Immigrants and their children (grandchildren even) provide the backdrop to this debate. And we're not just talking about any immigrant here; the most "colored", the "inheritors" of colonies, the most fervent advocates of "communitarianism", and those who refuse to assimilate

provide the focus (as Élisabeth Lévy has explained on Yves Calvi's television show and in the columns of the *Figaro Magazine*). In other words, "those who don't love France", who are heard booing the national anthem or demonstrate in the streets when Algeria qualifies for the soccer World Cup, cause havoc in the *banlieues*, destroy the economy in "our" exotic overseas paradises, and seek to diversify the "ethnic" and religious profile of the Republic. The same people who are weakening "our" soul, our "essence" and who force their "sisters" to wear the Burqa.

By ignoring – worse even, stigmatizing these components of French society by evoking "assimilation" for calculated political ends - means that the debate on identity is flawed from the outset. In its quest for a national essence, it excludes from the "national" realm precisely those forms of alterity that are the hallmark of our globalized society and of its continual creolization.

This history and its legacy are at the heart of the real debate. But, debating "national identity" has every chance of leading to the reification of a mythic "national narrative", while simultaneously stealing the thunder from a shaky extreme Right on the eve of a strategic election, at the mid-way point of the President's term in office, and in a race for majority control. A sign of the times perhaps, since all references to the "colonial" are now to be avoided: this was certainly the lesson learned, especially by its supporters, when in 2005 then-President Jacques Chirac repealed Article 4 of the decree pertaining to the "positive aspects of the French colonial experience overseas". Having said this, Besson's operation (scheduled to reach its pinnacle at the beginning of February 2010) has been coordinated with the media in a similar fashion to a major speech delivered in Toulon during Nicolas Sarkozy's presidential campaign.

On that occasion, Nicolas Sarkozy had outlined the contours of what "eternal France" corresponded to:

The European dream needs a Mediterranean dream. It shrunk when the dream that had propelled in days of yore the knights from all corners of Europe on their expeditions to the Orient [the Crusades] was broken, a dream that had drawn so many emperors of the Holy Roman Empire and so many French kings to the south, a dream that had been Bonaparte's in Egypt, Napoleon III's in Algeria, and de Lyautey's in Morocco. This dream that was not so much a dream of conquest as it was a dream of civilization. Let's not tarnish our past [...]

And then to conclude:

I want to ask them: What gives you the right to judge them? I want to ask them: What gives you the right to ask the sons to repent for the sins of their fathers, sins which their fathers only committed in your imagination? [...].

Similarly, Minister Éric Besson's initiative on national identity would have us believe that those who adopt a critical reading of the colonial past are simply "repentants", unworthy of participating in the process of reflecting on our collective memories.

And so, what options are available to us when it comes to reacting to this identitarian tsunami launched by the Minister with the endorsement of the President of the Republic? To participate according to the framework offered by the Minister, refuse to contribute to this truncated debate during the electoral season and remain silent, or reframe the debate by focusing on what is really at stake here and put up resistance?

The answer to these questions will seem obvious, and for some time now we have been leaning towards the second option given the degree to which the "debate" is distorted and the conclusions predictable (which accounts for our earlier silence). Yet, both silence and the unwillingness to debate leave our fellow citizens alone before the governmental machine, a realization which Yves-Charles Zarka was right to draw attention to in a recent article published in *Le Monde* (under the heading "To be done once and for all with this debate", December 11, 2009). This is why, in the months to come, we will engage in a relentless campaign aimed at steering reflection towards other issues while also offering concrete tools that promise to assist French people in reaching a better level of understanding. At the same time, we recognize that opinions on these matters are nearing saturation point, that media outlets in general are reluctant to intervene, and that most politicians have little interest in an alternative "debate" with only limited electoral appeal. Nevertheless, we have decided to act, to do more than just call for the closure of the "ministry of ambiguity" or to remain silent, thereby avoiding the risk that people may think we have nothing else to say with respect to our "identities" in France.

In the first instance, we need to go back to basics and actually attempt to understand history. Most people are unaware of the history of slavery and colonialism and the history of immigration from the global south to our country, and these histories must be taught. This history and the "contributions" (as invoked by the Minister) will no longer be the subject of "debate" when knowledge concerning them exceeds the realm of phantasms. Evidence of this is available when one visits the exhibition *Génération. Un siècle d'histoire culturelle des Maghrébins* that just opened at the Centre national de l'histoire de l'immigration in Paris (CNHI), attends one of the meetings organized at the École Normale Supérieure within a Franco-American comparative framework on the subject of "Visible minorities in France", or reads the recently-published eight-volume boxed set *Un siècle d'immigration des Suds en France*. Knowledge must first be taught, compared and transmitted before one entertains a debate.

Secondly, several among us took the initiative (as early as June 2009) to launch on January 20, 2010 (one year after the social movement got

underway in the overseas departments and territories and on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of African Independence) a campaign that would bring together dozens of contributors in order to prepare a concrete proposal for a "multicultural and post-racial Republic" capable of reflecting both our histories and the diversity of our country.

Finally, in order to relocate this Franco-French debate within a broader international context, *Ruptures postcoloniales* is due to be published in March 2010, a book that brings together forty or so texts by a vast array of specialists, with references to postcolonial issues in several countries, and that proposes to analyze important 21st century questions and to explain why "identity concerns" must be apprehended simultaneously "here" and "elsewhere". Along similar lines, several works (including *Enjeux politiques de l'histoire coloniale*, *Les immigrés algériens en France* or *L'histoire bling-bling*), meetings and colloquia have already been planned for the coming year and will include "other debates" throughout the first four months of 2010 culminating in early February with several counter-colloquia as a response to the one announced by the Minister.

These initiatives, among many others, combine intelligence and knowledge in order to combat phantasms and emotional responses. We believe these will be effective in ensuring a different kind of participation by citizens in a "genuine debate", while also avoiding, as the philosopher Yves-Charles Zarka has argued, "the pitfalls of a possible reification of national identity as a permanent identity that would then make it easy to exclude a certain number of people based on their skin color, their culture, or their religion, or for that matter just about anything".

Let us not confuse approaches here. Identities are made of permanent elements and newer components, and through a dynamic process history mixes these identities in order to produce newer ones. The rapid transformations that have occurred in our country together with older forms of *métissages* must also be explained; some are afraid of these, but these fears must be confronted and overcome rather than accorded value and manipulated. The time has come to move beyond memory wars and to finally enter the postcolonial era. The memory of slavery must be validated because it is a part of our shared heritage. The time has come to abandon hollow debates pertaining to the decline of French "national identity", as if changes to our collective identities only had negative consequences. The time has come to fight against the kind of violent diatribe that associates "communitarianism" and "repentance" with every attempt at discussing cultural diversity.

And finally, one should be reminded that when a society silences its past (colonialism, slavery...), marginalizes segments of its history (immigration, the workers' struggle...), ignores the wide range of memories and leaves so many episodes unexplained (as the result of not having a large museum devoted to slavery and colonialism), then this same society, incapable of

confronting reality, can only ultimately find itself in crisis when it considers the concept of "identity" in the singular.

Now that we have commemorated the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989-2009), the time is right to tear down another, namely the one erected in our collective imagination and which, as far as populations from the global south or from French overseas departments and territories are concerned, has yet to be dismantled. This remains one of the most important challenges confronting our generation and we must face up to this responsibility in order to preempt further crises in our overseas and *banlieues* communities. And so yes, one has to pick "one's" debate, but not the one on "national identity"; rather, the one that concerns the very manner in which our collective identities, shared and Republican values are built, today, in postcolonial France, some fifty years since African Independence.

Members of the collective: "Towards a real debate":

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