

Racism: The Comparison with the United States is not Absurd¹

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Since the tragic passing of George Floyd, a black man who was atrociously tortured by a white police officer in the United States, the debate on racism has been revived in France, where demonstrations have brought together tens of thousands of people who are calling for an end to racist violence in the French police force.

Many voices are rising up against this parallel drawn between systemic racism in the United States and what would be only the sum of isolated acts in France. Comparing our great France to such a racist country? A clearly infamous idea to which [the prime minister] Christophe Castaner, in particular, is opposed to, as he firmly denies any resemblance.

It is fascinating to see how our media and our politicians are able to observe and describe with the utmost precision the racial dynamics linked to American history, while at the same time brandishing the totem of a universalism denying any systemic dimension when it comes to French racism.

However, this is not the first time that young people have taken to the streets of France to denounce police brutality in reference to the North American context. In 1983, 19-year-old Toumi Djaïdja fell into a coma after getting between a police dog and a child. When he woke up, the miracle survivor decided to organize a peaceful march against racism. The “March for Equality and Against Racism” (racialized by the media as they renamed it “Marche des beurs”), which brought together 100,000 people in Paris, was explicitly inspired by another event that had taken place twenty years earlier: the 1963 March on Washington where Martin Luther King gave his famous “I Have a Dream” speech.² Toumi Djaïdja, who is of Algerian descent, still claims this legacy and inspiration from the movements of oppressed Blacks on the other side of the Atlantic. Neither then, nor now, has it occurred to anyone to accuse him of “Americanizing” the French debate. . .

Our countries are certainly different, as racism is inherent to the very existence of the United States. The American territory was built on the genocide of Native peoples and the massive deportation of enslaved Africans, whose free labor constituted the wealth of the country. And if police brutality is killing more people in the United States today, it is because violence is more endemic there. Whether you are black or white, you are more likely to die from firearms in the United States than in any other democracy.

However, we must not lose sight of the fact that the United States were populated by Europeans who exported theories born on their own continent. Since it has also spread to the American continent, where several of its territories are still geographically located, France has played a major role in the international dissemination of racist ideology. The French West Indies have been a laboratory for the concentrationary and dehumanizing organization of slavery, and many of our fellow French citizens are descendants of people who were tortured by slavery. If today France is the only country in the world that is present on five continents, it is because it has institutionalized in a very singular way its own version of racism.

Unlike in the United States, these murderous tragedies took place far from “mainland France,” so it is easier to deny them and dismiss them in the name of a so-called universalism. But these denials omit another aspect of the history of race relations in France: French soil has long been the theater of institutional racism. Beyond Colbert being at the initiative of the *Code Noir* (1685), which limited slavery to colonized territories, French law has established categories without having to draw inspiration from anyone. Following the transatlantic colonial invasions, France promptly formulated the racial question in its own terms. In 1776, the Dictionary of the French Academy defined the word “Noir” as “the name generally given to all black slaves in the work of the colonies.” The racialization of slavery is thus explicit, “black” being the color of the dominated being, a position then inscribed in the official vocabulary.

In a recent article, the scholar Grégory Pierrot examines the historical roots of systemic racism.³ He reminds us, for example, that in 1777, Louis XVI signed a “Declaration for the police of Blacks” to severely restrict the presence of “blacks, mulattos, or

other people of color” on mainland France—Black people without approved documents risked being imprisoned in “black depots.”

Thus France, which is said to be blind to race, created the subaltern condition of “French Muslims” in Algeria and conceived a “Code de l’indigénat” (1881) which distinguished French “citizens” from colonized “subjects.”

If Black French and American intellectuals organized the “Congress of Black Writers and Artists” in 1956, bringing together French and American writers and artists at the Sorbonne, it was because there was an awareness of a common black condition on both sides of the Atlantic. This unique event, which featured brilliant minds such as Aimé Césaire or Richard Wright, born under the aegis of the publishing house *Présence Africaine*, and whose poster was designed by Pablo Picasso, had received the support of the leading thinkers of the time such as Jean-Paul Sartre, André Gide or Claude Lévi-Strauss.

Thus, the repeatedly used argument that in the 20th century, African-Americans fleeing segregation in their country rushed over to take refuge in a more welcoming France is totally fallacious. Indeed, the France that applauded Josephine Baker (who was wearing a banana belt) and swayed to the rhythm of Sidney Bechet’s jazz was also the France that oppressed its colonized populations and exhibited them in Paris’ human zoos. This fascination with Black Americans cohabited perfectly with the practice of forced labor (abolished in 1946, nearly 100 years after the abolition of slavery) in the colonies.

The Unimaginable Historically French Racism

To this day, our country still shows more respect to African-Americans than to French or African Blacks. In my documentary *Les Marches de la Liberté*, the American novelist Jake Lamar described the much more “subtle” racism in France compared to a more binary American racism.⁴ He spoke of the racial profiling to which he was regularly subjected: “When they see my papers, I’m American and there’s no more problem. It’s not as simple for my friends of North African, African or Caribbean background.”

In fact, the word “racialized” (which designates non-white people who are subject to the racialization of society that defines them to their disadvantage) which is denounced as a dangerous

novelty, was used by Colette Guillaumin in her book *L'idéologie raciste* published in 1972.⁵ The feminist sociologist who, nearly fifty years ago, produced a seminal work on the racial issue in France, died in 2017 in relative obscurity. Her work, like that of Albert Memmi (*Le Racisme, Portrait du colonisé*) who died this year, is totally erased in current debates even though it focuses on the production of French racism.⁶

The psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon, whose work on racism is indispensable, is one of the French intellectuals whose thought circulates the most in the world. However, the fiftieth anniversary of his death in 2011 was not the subject of any national commemoration worthy of the name. Worse, in 2019, Alain Juppé blocked the attribution of his name to a street in Bordeaux. How can we explain that Fanon, whose work was informed by French colonialism, is so used in Black American thought and almost ignored in his own country?

During a debate that set me against Raphaël Stainville on LCI about a Colbert high school being renamed Rosa Parks after the famous African-American activist, my opponent denounced the fact that “we import into the history of our high schools debates that are foreign to the way France has been constructed.”⁷ In his words, the very idea of a historically French racism was unthinkable, a very characteristic denial of a distorted perception of our history.

We are capable of quoting Angela Davis, James Baldwin or Malcolm X, but their French equivalents seem totally unknown. Why do we prefer to name our parks and stations Rosa Parks, Nelson Mandela, or Martin Luther King, rather than Louis Delgrès, Solitude, Toumi Djaïdja or Toussaint Louverture?

It is not a matter of organizing a contest for the most racist country, but of reminding that when it comes to racism, France is just as bad as the United States. French racism is also the product of a history of atrocities intertwining violence and domination, and it is just as much a part of our daily lives and institutional practices. Denying the relationship between the different forms of racism that persist within the former slave and colonial regimes is a position that, in fact, prevents us from recognizing an unrewarding reality that it is time to grapple with.

Notes

¹ Originally published in 2020 on *Slate France*, under the title “Racisme: le parallèle avec les États-Unis n’est pas absurde.”

² “Beur” is French slang (reverse of *arabe*) for “North African.”

³ Grégory Pierrot, “Aux racines du racisme systémique de la police,” *Libération* (2020). https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2020/06/15/aux-racines-du-racisme-systemique-de-la-police_1791267 (accessed December 9, 2020).

⁴ Rokhaya Diallo, *Les Marches de la liberté* (2013).

⁵ Colette Guillaumin, *L'idéologie raciste, genèse et langage actuel* (Paris: Mouton, 1972).

⁶ Albert Memmi, *Le Racisme: description, définition, traitement* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982); *Portrait du colonisé* (Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 1957).

⁷ LCI is a French TV channel.

