

The Decolonizing Struggle in France An Interview with Houria Bouteldja (MIR)

"We are the children of an illusion that consisted in believing that the independences of our countries signified the end of colonization": Interview with Houria Bouteldja, spokesperson of the decolonial movement in France known as "Les Indigènes de la République" (The Indigenous of the Republic).[1]

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Translator's Note: This article is an interview with the spokesperson of the decolonial movement known as the Movement of the Indigenous of the Republic (Mouvement des Indigènes de la République - MIR) in France, composed of Arab, African and Antillean youth who struggle against the coloniality of power within the French imperial state today

Question: Why do you assert yourselves as indigenous?

Answer: Well, because we live a neocolonial reality. We are the children of an illusion, which consisted in believing that the independences of our countries signified the end of colonization. And in reality, it was a matter of the first act of decolonization. We see it as much in the metropolis as in its relations with its old colonies, decolonization has yet to be finished. Its ideological and cultural bases are still prevalent. We thus continue living a different colonial phase. We who live regimes and systems of oppression of diverse types/various natures, we recognize ourselves in this name because it demonstrates precisely and in a crude way to all the oppressors the reality of the state in which they want to confine us.

Question: Why do you reject the notion of integration?

Answer: Indeed, the abstract republic, so celebrated in all places, refuses to recognize as citizens with full exercise of rights all those who have an origin in Africa or in the Arab-Muslim world. To integrate oneself, you have to deny the fundamentals of your culture and adopt what is the common representation of the ideal citizen according to the television or Alain Finkelkraut [3]. But even like that, it is insufficient. Look at the history of the Harki [4] and the discrimination they face in France since the end of the War of Algeria. It demonstrates the absurdity of this negation of one's self, which, nonetheless, is proposed as the ideal option. At minimum, it seems we would have to resort to esthetic surgery to try and get rid of our inerasable differences...

Question: How are acts carried out against the MIR?

Answer: It is not easy to dispatch with us saying we are Islamists, terrorists, overall because we are also a movement of Africans, of Antilleans, of the French. ...That's why the attacks that they make to us are indirect: constant defamation, the spectre of fear of the marginalized suburbs [5], of Islam... The ruling elites can no longer say openly that we are inferior, so instead they let it be understood in various ways. What appears to them as most efficient is to place showcase "diverse" people that represent for them successful integration. The major sign of this success, of this dissolution into what they call "the French society" are people, above all women, that manifest publicly the abandonment of all reference to their origins (it is what we call "integration via ham" [6]), or better yet, that adopt a very offensive posture against their community of origin. This posture, that leads, among other things, to the undifferentiated/systematic stigmatization of the youth of the suburbs, is the one that results in the dominating political consensus. This is illustrated, for example, by the association "generously" supported by the state, whose name perhaps your readers find shocking and I prefer not to mention.

Question: You referring to the association "Neither Sluts, Nor Submissives" [7]. They are a notorious group and are not going to shock anyone in Algeria. But these people stand up, even so, equally against a very real problem, that of the status of women and young girls in the marginalized suburbs...

Answer: In all society there exists a problem of masculine domination: the disadvantaged neighborhoods are not the only ones that have mistreated women. To designate the youth of the suburbs as a specifically violent category is a strategy aimed at confining us, Maghrebians and blacks, in a representation where the foreigner, and more so still if Muslim, is retrograde and dangerous.

Question: What is it that makes "indigenous" a politically pertinent category?

Answer: The triptych "colonialism, imperialism, superior ideological norms that should be imposed to all" continues prevailing. It has been retaken in a spectacular way by the arrival of the "neocons" to power in all of Europe. To recall then, in terms of political thought, this truth and positioning oneself as [decolonial] resistant at this level hurts because it is a right slogan that challenges. The word "indigenous" is a destructor of myths: the one of the universal and leveling republic. Moreover, it establishes the link with the status that our parents had in the colonial era and it teaches us that the struggle of liberation continues to this day here [in France] as it does there [in the neo-colonial countries].

Question: What is it that makes it such that this reality is denied, as much within the right as within the left?

Answer: It is normal that the centers of the western propaganda themselves feel alluded. The centers are of the left and of the right. The right always colonial and capitalist, the left ideologically dominating and paternalistic. Let's remember the position of the SFIO and of the PCF [8] during the War of Algeria. The left has not

broken with its heritage. The historical mechanisms are still there and, therefore, the use of the word indigenous is justified. To that you add Zionism that nowadays is very powerful and that would want the enunciation of the truth be made only via the "new philosopher" [9] propagandists. It is the unceasingly repeated thesis of the war against the Muslims not subjected politically and their ex-colonial allies where the brainwashing was not efficient, designated nowadays as "islamo-gauchists".

Question: Are you engaged with topics of international politics?

Answer: Yes, and in the first place with respect to the Palestinian tragedy. In this drama, Westerners are making Palestinians carry the weight of their own phantoms. The negation of the Palestinian national fact is a crime. The genocide of the Jews does not justify this refusal of rights. The cause of these people is in the heart of our fight. We live in a world where representations are inverted: Israel is always painted the victim whereas it is a colonial state, violent and despoiling. It is observed that the foreign policy of Westerners aims always to impose this state on the Arab peoples and on the international community. Look at the UPM [Union for the Mediterranean]; the entire world sees well that it is a question of admitting the Israeli wolf in the Mediterranean sheepfold.

Question: How do the "indigènes" act and what are their perspectives of the future?

Answer: We are a political and nonideological group, across the false debates on the ethnic, the religious, critical of the historical and sarkosist republic, critical of the tendentious reading of the secularity, etc.... The more we advance towards the assertion of ourselves, towards the possible formation of a political party, the more we become objects of criticism, particularly of the left that would like to recuperate us within a logic that considers that our combat is finally secondary compared to what they define as the principal questions that differentiate them from the right. In addition to underlying institutional racism, one of the principle obstacles is the Palestinian question, and one sees it well, there exists a political consensus [between right and left] aligned on Israelite [and Western] theses.

Question: What is your report on Algeria?

Answer: Emotional, it is my country if origin and I am very attached to my roots and our culture of resistance and solidarity. The libratory struggle of the Algerians belongs to my history. I am interested in its political evolution in these last years and I observed with sadness what could occur there. In addition, I am anxious about the role that the Maghreb states are playing in constituting "gendarmes of Europe" against our brothers of Black Africa. They betray the spirit of independence and anti-imperialist struggle. But I have great confidence in the Algerian people. I am sure it will succeed in grasping its rights, its liberty and that it will know to remain on the side of the oppressed.

NOTES

[1] This movement is composed principally of French youth of African, Arab, Caribbean and Asian origin, born and raised in France, that live the experience of colonial racism and its consequent marginalization and social exploitation.

[2] The notion of indigènes (indigenous) used here has a particular referent in French colonial history. The French empire used the term indigènes to refer to the colonial subjects in all its colonies across the world.

[3] A very mediatic French philosopher whose discourse is characterized by the shameless defense of Zionist crimes and racism against Arab-Muslims without timidity or any sense of shame.

[4] Harkis are Algerian combatants of the French army during the French colonial war in Algeria whose rights as war veteran and citizens were never recognized by the French state. In fact, upon their arrival to France after the victory of the National Liberation Front, they were segregated and interned in military camps for many years. Nowadays the survivors and their children are a discriminated population much like the great majority of the Arab-Muslims in France.

[5] In France, the 'suburbs' are home to the marginalized neighborhoods of African, Arab, and Antillean communities that one would refer to in the U.S. as the ghettos, barrios or slums.

[6] "Integration via ham" is a metaphor that makes reference to the assimilation of Muslims to a French identity by means of leaving their own culture, identity and epistemology. The metaphor comes from the fact that Muslim religious practice entails not eating pig meat. For many Arab-Muslims who try to assimilate to a French identity, to be able to demonstrate their high degree of assimilation, resort to eating ham in public space. This is reminiscent of the "celebration of the pig" in the 16th century Imperial Spain following the conquest of Al-Andalus and the Americas, where many Jews and Muslims held the celebration of the pig as a public act in their municipalities to hide their origins or their religious identity, with the purpose of eliminating any suspicion on the part of the ecclesiastical/statist authorities of the Catholic Spanish monarchy.

[7] This organization was formed by some women of the marginal districts of France that organized activities, marches and demonstrations against the use of the veil on the part of the Muslim women, generalizing the idea that the majority of the Muslim women did not "self-veil" but that the men in their communities forcibly veiled them. They were party to the French state and the French political elite in favor of the law passed on March 15, 2004, that prohibits the use of the veil in public institutions of the state, among them, the state schools. The law establishes that any young Muslim that uses the veil will be expelled from the school system. In a number of studies, it has been demonstrated that the majority of the young people who use the veil do so out of their own volition, spiritual conviction, or as an anti-state response against French assimilationism and not by imposition of their spouses or parents. In fact, in the majority of the cases the Arab/Muslim-origin parents are against their daughters' use of the veil in the schools. This debate divided French feminism in irreversible ways. French feminists, such as Helene Cixous and Julia Kristeva, supported the State law prohibiting the veil, while other feminists such as Christine Delphy sided with the Muslim feminists against the law of the veil.

[8] This is in reference to the collaboration and support, over several decades, that the French Left, and the Communist Party of France in particular, provided to the colonialist politics of the French empire, above all in favor of the Algerian War,

[9] This refers to a well-known group of French ex-Maoists and ex-Trotskyites that veered to the right in the mid-seventies. The most known among them are Bernard Henry Levi, Andre Glucksman, Alain Finkelkraut among others. These intellectuals are still very important in the French public debate supporting Bush in Iraq and supporting the crimes of Israel and their colonizing policy in Palestine and the Middle East. During the invasion of Iraq in 2003, they publicly criticized Chirac for not supporting the trio of the Azores (Bush, Aznar and Blair) in plans to invade Iraq.