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Race within French Academia

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In 2000, I started teaching a two-year seminar entitled “Politiques de la race” at the École normale supérieure in Paris. Only two students attended, both from Asia. By contrast, in the wake of *PaCS* and *parité*, my seminar on “Actualité sexuelle” drew crowds. But in 2006, when I started a seminar on *racialisation*, run jointly with Didier Fassin at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales, the room was packed. It coincided with the publication of our edited volume *De la question sociale à la question raciale?* and the 2005 uprisings or riots in the *banlieues*, which, for better or for worse, had put race on the agenda. Academic interest reflected public concerns.

Today, I still teach about racial issues. What has changed in the last twelve years? In 2006, deciding to have the word *racial* in the title without scare quotes felt like a bold move. In 2014, I convinced my co-authors to have the word *race* itself in the subtitle of our book on the Roma: *Une politique municipale de la race*. It did not create an uproar. On the one hand, the lexicon of critical race is now rather well established in academic circles – e.g., Black feminism, whiteness and intersectionality. On the other hand, the level of public hostility against terms like *racisé.e* is rising: in 2017, the Education Minister tried to sue a teachers’ union for talking of *racisme d’État*.

I can see three reasons that are very much present in all the controversies. The first has to do with the word *islamophobie*. The sharp divide between those who reject the term and those who embrace it has to do with the fact that the former want to talk in terms of religion (and *laïcité*) while the latter are thinking in terms of race: the racialization of Islam (Sarkozy used the phrase: “musulman d’apparence”). Of course, this is not just a national issue: Islamic terrorism has contributed to making it an international one.

The second has to do with the shift of focus, not only from ideological racism (the National Front) to structural racism (permeating French society), but also from systemic discriminations to what many (in particular, activists) now call *racisme d’État* (I usually prefer to talk of *politiques de racialisation*). The persecution of migrant Roma is a case in point: the French State deliberately discriminates on racial grounds. Racial profiling turns out to be, not just everyday racism permeating the police: it is a policy (justified by the need to control those who “look foreign” in order to catch “illegal aliens”).

The third is linked to the emergence of racial counterpublics (Nancy Fraser’s revision of Jürgen Habermas’s early work). Racial minorities have traditionally been marginalized in the public sphere; the novelty resides in the fact that Facebook and Twitter have created an alternative public sphere that makes it possible for figures like Rokhaya Diallo to emerge. The attacks against this

journalist and activist are not only signs of a persistent racism, they also signal the rise of new voices – young, educated, articulate, and often female (contrary to stereotypes about “brown women” who are supposed to need saving). So-called “visible minorities” have been defined by their invisibility, and the obsession with the Islamic veil has reduced Muslim women to mere images. But today, the emergence of racial counterpublics means that “voices” are taking over – hence the fury unleashed against Mennel, the veiled singer from a TV show called... *The Voice!*

I have left out a fourth reason that may account for the public rage, as it remains latent: while the discussions about postcolonialism and decolonialism focus on the colonial legacy of sub-Saharan Africa and the Maghreb, the racial politics of today’s overseas *départements* (in particular, Antilles and Réunion) are usually forgotten. This does not mean that they are not simmering under the surface – we might think here of the 2018 referendum on independence in New Caledonia. But they are not explicitly present. What I want to suggest is that it’s not just *déjà vu*: despite obvious historical continuities, something is happening. This is a why today’s racism is not so much conservative as it is reactionary – in reaction against change.

How does this impact our work on race? Academia is a microcosm of French society. It still functions as a traditional public sphere, overwhelmingly white, even in race studies, while racial counterpublics are emerging, in particular among students and former students who use the concepts of race studies (French, American, and from the Global South) to question the politics of race within academia. This does not go without racial tensions – including between non-Whites and their White “allies.”

As a White academic working on race, I experience this in the first person, all the more so since I no longer teach in “central” institutions: I am now based at Paris-8, founded in 1968 in Vincennes, a decade later sent into “exile” in the working-class, largely non-white suburb of Saint-Denis. This paradoxical situation can be uncomfortable at times, but I believe it is also productive. It serves as a reminder that sociology is not outside society. The racial tensions in France are also present in academia. But they are signs of change. We have long been blind to academic racism; now, we can no longer afford to be deaf.

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