

Social Fracture and the Rise of Racism in France

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The crisis of the European Union is not only economic and financial; it is also, perhaps first and foremost, a political-ideological crisis, as reiterated by Slavoj Zizek. One of the most manifest and alarming expressions of this crisis is the presence in Europe of growing sectors of public opinion voicing intolerant attitudes toward others; of populist political parties sharing anti-immigrant and anti-Roma programmes and rhetoric; as well as of fringes that are openly racist, neo-Nazi, and often homophobic.

Almost everywhere the growth of intolerance is fostered by the social effects of the economic crisis and the increasing fracture that divides the class of the super wealthy from the multitude that comprises the poor, wage earners, the unemployed, the socially declassed, and those who live in fear of social declassment. Also important is the crisis of representation, and in great measure, what has been defined as *democratic racism*, practiced by parties of the centre, and even of the Left, who attempt to regain popularity and electoral approval by competing with the Right.

An exemplary case is present-day France, an increasingly segmented society, marked by increasing difficulties in coexistence between its diverse people; beset also by a serious crisis of identity. Here the spectacular electoral advance of the *Front National*, led by Marine Le Pen, has triggered a rush to the right by the parties of the centre and even of the Left on the subjects of 'national identity,' immigration, the presence of Roma, and the role of Islam. Le Pen had the cunning to embellish her discourse with rhetoric defending secularism and republican values, making her programme more easily digestible, which, even so remains essentially racist.

It was in the vain attempt to counteract the rise of the *Front National*, by depriving the Lepénistes of the securitarian sceptre, that Nicolas Sarkozy, at the outset as president of the Republic, hardened immigration policies and fostered a debate on 'national identity,' whose basic idea, implicitly, is to purify the nation from the debris of foreigners.

The mediocre presidency of Sarkozy under the banner of law-and-order – only for *others*, since he is at the centre of numerous political and economic scandals – left a profound impression on public opinion and on the political class. Consider the torsion in his party, the UMP, in the direction of intolerance, in some cases open racism, and of the policies that the Socialist Party conveys on the questions regarding immigration and above all the 'Roma question.'

When one considers that the Roma population in France does not exceed 20,000 persons, of which half are children, one can grasp how this 'question' is skilfully inflated, reviving widespread anti-gypsy hostility; a feature constitutive of French history, like the tendency to

make the Roma a scapegoat. It is enough to recall the law of 16 July 1912, which established the requirement for an anthropometric document reserved solely for 'nomads,' with a photograph, fingerprints and information such as eye colour, length of right ear, left foot, middle finger, and left elbow, etc.

This infamous law was only abrogated in 1969, substituting the document with an obligatory "right of movement." In 2010 *Le Monde* revealed that OCLDI (Central Office for the Fight against Mobile Organized Crime Groups), an agency of the French gendarmerie, created and maintained until 2007, completely illegally, a catalogue of Roma, with genealogical data for the mapping of "gypsy families" and "groups at risk"; almost to reaffirm the old racist biological theorem that classified the Roma as delinquent by nature.

In particular, from the presidency of Sarkozy up to the current one of Hollande, racist statements or acts otherwise disrespectful of basic human rights against the Roma increased exponentially. This includes the mass expulsions of persons, despite being citizens of the European Union, and even attacks with corrosive acid, in the heart of Paris, against Roma adults and children on the part of "exasperated people." To say nothing of the violent clearing of informal settlements, sometimes requested by mayors of the Left and Far-Left, as in the case last November with the mayor of Saint-Ouen, Jacqueline Rouillon, of the *Front de Gauche*.

While advocating for the removal of the word "race" from the constitution, the 'socialist' Interior Minister, Manuel Valls,[\[1\]](#) rehabilitated the 'good old' racism legitimizing, on 24 September 2013, the theory of the non-assimilability of the Roma. This is in continuation, at bottom, with what a couple of months before Gilles Bourdouleix, of the UDL (Union of Democrats and Independents), another so-called centrist party recently established, dared to declare publically: "Hitler did not kill enough of them."

"The name is erased in order to make the unmentionable reappear," observed the philosopher Michel Feher in an interview in *Les Inrocks* on 26 September 2013. The demure racism of the bien pensants, *differentialist*, as we have defined it, now often gives way to that which is expressed, even coarsely, with 'classic' racist attacks and insults, as for example, those against minister Christiane Taubira, who was depicted several times with ape-like features, and even mocked by a group of children shaking bananas, incited by parents hostile to "marriage for everybody."

In the meantime, as reported by the most recent report prepared by the CNCDH (National Consultative Commission on Human Rights), 2012 witnessed, next to as always a progression of islamophobia, "a disturbing return" of anti-Semitism, and for the third consecutive year, an increase in racist acts against persons presumed to be religiously Muslim, identified only with North Africans and considered "a separate social group." This is the old colonial spectre, still present in the imagination of the French political class and a section of the citizenry.

Data from the report brings to light "the growing rejection of foreigners, perceived increasingly as parasites if not as a menace," at the bottom of an alarming spread of xenophobia and intolerance, and of a "public liberation of racist discourse": fostered, in turn, by the instrumental use of themes such as French identity, immigration, and secularism on the part of the political class. Further proof that popular racism is always nurtured and/or exploited by the dominant elites.

In times of economic crisis and increasing social despair, like in the present one, only in the short term can this strategy serve to divert public attention from real problems and from the inadequacy of the elites to resolve them. In the long and medium term it is a highly dangerous game, as history teaches us.

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