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The African Slave Trade and Slavery

Blind Spots in French Thought

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The current debates in France on what are known as the "memorial" laws, on "repentance" and the "colonial past" have in a strange way rearticulated the frame of discussion of what underlies the theme of this seminar[1]: to what extent has the colony determined the way the world has been organized ("determine" in the sense of shaping political, cultural, economical and legal developments)? There is profound disagreement about how France's colonial past should be dealt with both during the era of slavery and afterwards. There are two conflicting interpretations of history. One claims to have scientific "truth" as its goal and relies on the researcher's "autonomy". It draws a clear boundary between memory and history, where memory is subject to reinterpretation and belongs to the world of subjectivity and emotion, while history is written in the tranquillity of the archives, far from the noise of the outside world. This interpretation of history displays little interest in the conditions which have produced it, and arguments for the researcher's autonomy and the separation of memory from history are a total rejection of the work of the past thirty years; the

methodology which privileges the social and economic over the cultural and political (a vestige of orthodox Marxism) is one of its sub-chapters. Ideologically driven, defending a specific idea of the Republic, it clearly illustrates the methodological and critical impasse in which events such as colonial conquest, colonialism and national struggles for liberation have been locked for a very long time in France.

The second interpretation of history seeks to understand the conditions of its production, prioritizes reciprocal readings and perspectives, is interested in archives other than the ones stamped "official archives". It acknowledges that the very act of historical interpretation is contentious ground, where divergent interests clash and where the "truth" is the result of a process of negotiation which is subject to the test of time, the discovery of new archives and the shifting of paradigms. It draws its inspiration from the entire corpus of postcolonial studies, and from strands of critical theory in philosophy, history and anthropology represented by the terms 'post-structuralism' and 'postmodernism'.

The opposition between two interpretations of history is not new: it emerged as the histories of women, workers and subalterns in the narratives of national struggles for independence were recorded. It has reappeared quite violently in the context of demands for a critical revision of the French national narrative. These demands have been articulated by groups who want to reinstate the history of the slave trade, of slavery, of their abolition and that of colonialism within the French national narrative and within the creation of modernity. Such a resurgence warrants further investigation so that we might better understand it.

What is at stake however is not simply a demand for "minor histories" to be considered, for history to be democratized in a

"multicultural" way or for *histories* to be played off against *H*istory. My feeling is that today we are witnessing a campaign to delegitimize these emerging voices, a campaign which is being waged by a number of academics with significant connections in the press and the publishing world. I view this campaign as more than a methodological dispute. I see it is as the attempted refusal to understand how and why a blind spot has developed in French thought, how and why the colonial issue (during the era of slavery and afterwards) provokes a type of blockage in the national consciousness. There is no conspiracy, but there *is* conflict – conflict over an approach to politics, over an approach to conflict. There is no conspiracy – books are published, research is undertaken – but there is a divergence between ways of articulating what the colony was and what it is now in the post-colonial era. There is no conspiracy, but there is disagreement.

By disagreement, I am referring to how exactly we understand the interpretation of history and how we conceptualize notions such as citizenship, nation, colony, decolonization, struggles for independence... The way these concepts are articulated, the actual *process of conceptualization*, is the specific subject of historical research. Analysing what constitutes the colony as a space outside the national territory and, as part of the same process, analysing decolonization, sheds light on the way in which this space is conceptualized, *produced*. Postcolonial theory invites us to "problematize the *boundaries* that organize historians' mental maps".[2] These boundaries are rarely questioned, thus revealing a cultural nationalism that makes it easy to neglect space-times and more specifically the space-time of the colony. *The order of discourse and of silences* organizes the historical field: take for example the silence in 18th-century narratives surrounding the Haitian Revolution.[3] 2 But postcolonial theory also advocates a healthy

scepticism about the viability of retrieving the voices of subalterns in the colonial or national archives.

A series of recent publications – Daniel Lefeuvre*, Pour en finir avec la repentance coloniale*, 2006, Romain Bertrand, *Mémoires d'empire. La controverse autour du 'fait colonial'*, 2006, René Rémond, *Quand l'Etat se mêle de l'histoire*, 2006, Pascal Bruckner, *La Tyrannie de la repentance*, 2006, Jean-Pierre Rioux, *La France perd la mémoire. Comment un pays démissionne de son histoire*, 2006 – as well as special reports in weekly magazines and specialist journals, round-table discussions on television and radio have reconfigured the field of research, trying to conceal the political conflict by staging a methodological one instead. On one side, you have researchers driven by "topical issues" and the pressure of "memorial" groups; on the other, there are independent researchers concerned to establish the truth. The greater good of the Nation seemingly requires this history to remain in the silence of the archives for historians to deal with, since they alone are capable of disentangling the course of events. This campaign to delegitimize and *discredit* research along with those engaged in it also relies on the marked opposition that supposedly exists between memory and history. Memory is located in the realm of the subjective, the unimagined, the hysterical, the irrational, the spoken word; history on the other hand occupies the realm of Reason, the objective, the written archive.

This type of methodological detachment can only be understood if we examine the cultural, social and political implications at the root of the current debate. In fact, what is really at issue is the slave trade, slavery and colonial conquest -- referred to as "colonization", a shift in meaning which I will return to -- all of which we would like to think of as belonging well and truly to the past. Psychological advice (Rioux and Remond say we need to let go)

and political advice (Bertrand and Lejeune say we're forgetting the social aspect) also play their part in delegitimizing an entire series of interventions, writing them off as the results of an unease or a blindness.

So it would seem that these interventions have no legitimacy and a campaign is launched to maintain an interpretation of history that seeks to preserve an image of France to guarantee national unity (a national conception of history shared by Left and Right alike). In this narrative, the entire colonial experience is part of a linear progression in which history is apparently divided into "pages of light and shadow", a meaningless expression that transforms it into a landscape darkened by occasional patches of cloud. But these shadowy areas, to pursue the metaphor a little further, are inhabited not just by the ghosts of the dead but by the living as well. They are not empty spaces where a little light is all it takes to liven up the landscape. These ghosts and living beings do not exist "outside" the national territory; they are just as entitled to live there as those who declare themselves official citizens. It will not be enough simply to expose these shadowy areas to the light: we need to understand how they have been constituted, how and why their inhabitants came to live there, how and why their inhabitants have got to a point where they are demanding the right to return to the metropolis, or to build a new one.

The slave inhabits this shadowy area, a ghost forever consigned to the past and denied a presence in the French nation. Yet the slave haunts the very foundations on which France has been constructed. I don't wish in today's discussion to go back over the way the declaration of the rights of man and those of the citizen has been racialized, a process which has qualified the "all men are born free and equal before the law" clause with a silent "except for a few" detail. We are expected to believe that the qualifying "except for a

few" is the responsibility of a handful of colonists who choose in this way to stand aloof from the nation as a whole. This separation between civilized white men living in Metropolitan France, "decivilized" white men living in the colonies and the "natives" – those inferior beings by definition excluded from the community of equals -- is already apparent under slavery and continues to flourish in the colony of the post-slavery era. Pierre Nora's book, *Les Français d'Algérie,* illustrates this compartmentalization into groups through the use of a vocabulary referring to those most closely associated with progress and those at the furthest remove from it. French political perspectives continue to be haunted by the colonial vocabulary of the Republic's civilizing mission.

Demarcation of territoriality forms the basis of the Nation-State: the boundaries have to be drawn. Here we have citizens; there, foreigners. Within this territory, French citizens have rights and the national narrative is written. Citizenship, national narrative and territoriality are interconnected. Now the colony, both during and after the era of slavery, has been consigned to the realm of extraterritoriality, outside the jurisdiction of the nation and, by the same token, the victims of slavery and colonialism have been expelled from the "territory of rights". Hannah Arendt had referred to this phenomenon in her book on totalitarianism, and her theories have paved the way for an entire corpus of work by people like Achille Mbembe, Ann Laura Stoler, Edward Saïd, Michel Foucault, or Saskia Sassen. They all demonstrate the impossibility of understanding the present if we do not examine the complex and contentious history of rights and their territoriality. Membership of a political community is never granted as a matter of course.

The history of the overseas territories is still not part of national history; it exists at the margins, as an additional note. Slavery is a

chapter in this history. It is so firmly consigned to the past that, in the current debate on the Taubira law, there is the strong suggestion that the desire to study the history of slavery may well be legitimate, but the desire to commemorate it points to a neurotic attachment to the past, even a confusing of past and present, and a desire to manipulate history. Such claims show no understanding whatsoever of that history. They also deliberately neglect, for revisionist purposes, scholarly contributions that enhance our knowledge and are campaigning for scientific research.

So all those historians who attack the Taubira law choose to ignore the report by the Committee for the Commemoration of Slavery, available online since May 2005 and published as a book at the end of 2005. They repeatedly raise the issue of the demands made in early 2005 by the *Comité des Antillais, Guyanais et Réunionnais* * for legal proceedings to be brought against Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau, author of *Les traites négrières*, published by Gallimard. Immediately hailed by the critics and awarded several prizes, the book has been lauded ever since as "a work unanimously praised by [Pétré-Grenouilleau's] peers" as soon as it is mentioned and has been repeatedly endorsed as a result. (The case was withdrawn at the beginning of 2006). While I in no way agree with this type of indictment and want to analyse the conditions allowing a juridicization of history to develop, I am also interested in the manner in which the history of this incident has been recorded and the way it has since become established as "truth". This mirror effect, by which a "communitarian" association fuels the historians' righteous indignation, has prevented any critical reading of the book, which after all deserved it. All the more so since a reading of Lord Hugh Thomas's book *La Traite des Noirs*, finally translated in 2006, allows Pétré-Grenouilleau's work to be put in its proper place in the long historiography of the transatlantic slave trade. Once

again, it is a matter of understanding how a field of legitimation has been constructed around the colonial past, then examining the conditions of its production.

In official French historiography, the end of colonial slavery is presented as an inevitable point in history when France finally fulfils her role as the birthplace of human rights. The French abolitionists play a central role in this teleological narrative, where everything is organized according to a script whose political consequences are only now becoming apparent. In 1848, France turns its back on its pro-slavery past. In the interests of a national narrative in which France must not lose face, an entire segment of history is swept aside in this way.

Now the conversion of slavery into a history which took shape "over there", "overseas", without any connection with France's national history has induced in many historians and sociologists a certain blindness to the emergence of cultural and social demands currently being articulated in public debate. The conception of two temporalities and two spaces, which are supposedly mutually exclusive, joins a territorialized conception of national history; its geography is one whose borders date back to the 18th century. The national narrative respects the territory and geographical boundaries of the kingdoms and revolutionary wars of Europe, but never those of "overseas France". It is one of the reasons why the colonial is omitted from the national, indeed systematically excluded from it. Let me be absolutely clear on this point*: the colony is present*, it is the bonds between the colonial and the national which are marginalized.

Taking these comments as our point of departure, we cannot speak of the colonial (both during and after the era of slavery) and the postcolonial (greatly misunderstood in France) without

acknowledging the need to draw these narratives and perspectives together and have them intersect. To quote Homi Bhabha, "the tangible legacy of this suppressed history is the return to the French metropolis of her former colonized subjects. Their actual presence transforms the politics, cultural ideologies and intellectual traditions of Metropolitan France: having suffered the experience of colonization, they upset some of the metropolitan centre's great narratives on progress and public order, and they challenge the authority and authenticity of these narratives".[4]

This perspective is by no means a shared one and is even perceived as a threat to the republic or the class struggle. According to the historian Daniel Lefeuvre, the "Repentants" – a sort of sect eluding precise definition -- consign "France's social divide to the scrapheap", forget "the class struggle" and use the colonial past as the only analytical grid through which to read the present.[5] The cost-benefit argument on which Lefeuvre relies heavily to expose the weakness in the Repentants' position is in fact a counter-argument which does more to undermine his own demonstration, something he fails to grasp. He argues that the colony contributed nothing to France in economic terms, that it was indeed more of a financial burden. "It could be argued," writes Lefeuvre, quoting the economist Paul Bairoch, "that the colonial enterprise damaged France's economic development far more than it benefited it."[6] So France gained nothing from the colonies and, if her armies committed a few atrocities, the progress she brought about swiftly compensated for them.[7] Now if France has gained nothing economically from the colonies (which is highly debatable), it's precisely because she *profited* from colonialism in other ways; the advantages she gained were as much psychological, cultural and political as they were economic.

In his book *La France perd la mémoire*, Jean-Pierre Rioux presents another analysis of the phenomenon. "The divide or the hiatus," he writes, "that we experience today on the subject of colonization and slavery within the French collective memory is the product of lapses in the memory of Metropolitan France, memory lapses too on the part of the victims' descendants. The memories summoned up by these topics are often confused and disparate, sometimes reconstructed, always exacting and even vindictive, but they do not add up to a memory."[8] While he acknowledges that the descendants of slaves can legitimately demand the right "to assert their collective pride; to proclaim the communal warmth they long for or wish to retrieve; to debate the increased social and cultural autonomy which the republic could grant them", Rioux still draws the conclusion that "it is unnecessary for precedence to be given to a past which we should in fact be thinking of laying to rest some day." Such precedence is dangerous because the "colonial past is an argument and a "cloak" which can be used to undermine the host country or its nationality."[9] Rieux contests the use of the past as a means to explain the present, but this questioning is a "cloak" (to reuse the term) which hides the development of another argument. That argument is designed to construct a narrative in which the excesses are openly acknowledged in order to play down their consequences just as swiftly. Slavery should *certainly* be condemned; still, it must be said that the Africans and the Muslims were responsible for far worse! Is that a crime against humanity? Can one justifiably talk about a past from which there are no survivors? *Certainly* atrocities were carried out in the colony, but once they had receded into the past, didn't colonization bring progress?

The vocabulary of the colonial ideal of education, of an inherent goodness in the colonizing mission had convinced the colonizer of

his superiority. His language was the language of civilization and order. But the colonized couldn't resist using irony or ridicule to turn the colonizer's own language against him, exposing its limits, its gaps and its dark side to him. The long history of colonial monolingualism, aloof from of all contact with other languages and rejecting creolization, should not obscure the history of appropriation and transformation of the Other's language by the slave, the colonized. Nor should it obscure the history of how words meaning liberty and equality were translated in the colonial context.

What did the slave and the colonized make of the French they heard? They understood it the way a foreigner in the process of forging his own language, Creole, understood it; they appropriated French to turn the oppressor's own words against him, showing him just how much his actions contradicted his principles, his vocabulary and his claim to universality. The slavery laws allowed a slave's tongue to be ripped out as a punishment; he could be gagged, muzzled, forbidden to speak publicly. Clearly, he could not be permitted to speak since he would undoubtedly have cursed his master and denounced the abuse. Yet slaves and colonized alike would in time take possession of the French language and "denationalize" it. French has become a transcontinental, transnational, deracialized language rejecting any linkage between language and the right to citizenship. It is not simply a matter of "tropicalizing" terms but of reclaiming them and freeing them from the ethnicization which colonial discourse imposes by creating analogies between "White" and "free", "White" and "citizen".

The colonized have seized the vocabulary of the French Revolution and the Enlightenment in order to attack the outrageous privileges of the wealthy. The colonized use the republican vocabulary by *denationalizing* it, giving it back its universal character. But today,

the republican ideal is somewhat threadbare. It hasn't delivered on its promises; above all, its limitations are once again obvious in the light of recent social, economic and cultural changes. There is still this love of principles and contempt for pragmatism, this abstract universalism and suspicion of difference.

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[1] Polture and Culitics. On political prospects of cultural translation, Paris, 12-14 October 2006 http://translate.eipcp.net/Actions/discursive/paris2006

[2] Sandro Mezzadra,"Temps historique et sémantique politique dans la critique post-coloniale", *Multitudes*, Automne 2006 : 26 : pp.75-94, p. 84.

[3] On this topic, see also Françoise Vergès, *La Mémoire enchaînée. Questions sur l'esclavage*. Paris : Albin Michel, 2006 and Michel Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past. Power and the Production of History*. New York: Beacon Press, 1995.

*Tr.'s Note: organization representing the interests of citizens originally from French overseas territories.

[4] Homi Bhabha « Le tiers-espace. Entretiens avec Jonathan Rutheford » *Multitudes*, Automne 2006, pp.95-108, p.104

[5] Daniel Lefeuvre, *Pour en finir avec la repentance coloniale*. Paris : Flammarion, 2006, p.219.

[6] Ibid, p.134

[7] (cf pages 64-65 and 169-170).

[8] Jean-Pierre Rioux, *La France perd la mémoire*. Paris : Perrin, 2006, p.141.

[9] Ibid, p. 147