Anti-Colonial Struggles in Metropolitan France: Indigènes, Subaltern Knowledges and The Politics of Decolonization

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Introduction

On October 2005, the death of Zyad Benna and Bouna Traoré, French youth of colour, at Clichy-sous-Bois, while running from the police, provoked weeks of rioting that spread from the Parisian quartiers populaires[1] to the rest of France (Hajjat 2006: 27). Violence was concentrated in the banlieus of the larger cities resulting in arrests, cars torched, and buildings burned down (Kipfer 2007). The conservative government lead by Jacques Chirac reactivated a state of emergency law first introduced in 1955 in response to the anticolonial revolt in Algeria (Kipfer 2011). Former president Nicolas Sarkozy, then minister of the interior, came out in 'defense of the nation' by threatening the deportation of the youth, as if most of them had not been French citizens (El-Tayeb 2008: 661). Soon, diverging analyses of the events emerged. While these proposed different explanations they all shared a certain anxiety when it came to making sense of the identities of the rioters: Where they Arab? African? Muslim? Migrants? Little was said of the fact that the large majority of the youth involved were actually French citizens (Boubeker 2013, Blanchard et. al.: 2005). Political discourse and media coverage proved to be symptomatic in its homogenizing of a heterogeneous population, externalizing the youth of the banlieues as a foreign, hostile other and reinforcing the narrative of a distinct, separate non-European 'culture of poverty' dominating communities of color in France (El-Tayeb 2008, 2011, Boubeker and Hajjat et. al.: 2008). More sympathetic analyses were also present. This criticized integration policies and accused the French state of failing the so-called 'second generation'. However, like their counterparts, these analyses naturalized this largely French citizens as foreigner with no

[1] Quartiers populaires refers to socially mixed and racially stigmatized social spaces inhabited by working class people, particularly racialized communities (Kipfer 2011). This has been the privileged territory of the political struggles of these communities in France (Khiari 2009: 212-213). I use this notion interchangeably with another the notion 'banlieues', another term referring to these spaces.

rights nor claims upon the nation-states in which they were born (Grewal 2009, Gueye 2011, Khiari 2006, 2009).

Contrary to the culturalist framework through which the riots came to be interpreted – identifying radical Islam, hip-hop gangs, a lack of 'integration' and a 'culture of poverty' as culprits – the causes of the riots are socio-economic and political (Hajjat 2005, 2006). The banlieues are spaces symptomatic of the European postindustrial condition of spatial segregation producing structurally neglected, isolated neighborhoods (El-Tayeb 2008: 662, Kipfer 2007, 2011). Police brutality in these spaces is not the exception, but the norm. Its inhabitants experience daily rounds of identity checks and systemic arrests, which might explain why Zyad and Bouna ran away (Khiari 2006, 2009). The massive de-industrialization of Europe since the 1980's has especially affected working class communities of color living in these spaces (Gueye 2011). The consequence of this process has been the creation of a 'multiethnic underclass', which has not only deepened the *racialization of class*, but also its *de-nationalization*. The riots rather than being the product of 'culture', can be interpreted as the outcome of processes of socio-economic marginalization and subalternization of racialized working class communities (El-Tayeb 2006: 664, El-Tayeb 2011).

Another characteristic of the way the riots were framed was by emptying them of their political content and of their connections to the histories of political struggles of communities of color. Without analyzing the riots through these connections, they are framed as having no clear political horizon, thus reinforcing the view that in the banlieues only a political dessert exists (Hajjat 2006: 28). However, in contrast to some of the dominant views of politicians, the media and academics, the riots have a history of more than 50 years of political experiences (Boubeker and Hajjat et. al.: 2008). As such, this article examines the political struggles of racialized communities in France. My point of departure is 'the Parti des Indigènes de la République' (PIR), a political party composed of different activist of African, Arab-Muslim and Caribbean ancestry engaged in 'the luttes de l'immigration'[2]. Their appearance in 2005 produced an

[2] In the French context, this notion is used to refer to the larger assemblage of political engagements of activist and movements heralded by racialized communities. Like with other notions throughout the thesis, such as quartiers populaires and banlieues, I have decided to leave the French version, because of the political meaning and implications they have had in a French context.

upheaval of the political field, as they pointed out to the persistence of forms of domination rooted in colonial histories used against racialized communities (Khiari 2006: 20). In engaging with the PIR's political praxis, the paper focuses on what postcolonial and de-colonial theorists have conceptualized as *subaltern knowledges* (Guha and Spivak et. al.: 1988, Bogues 2003, Walsh 2005, Suárez-Krabbe 2015, Nelson Maldonado-Torres 2007). These are ways of knowing that emerge from the lives, struggles and perspectives of marginalized populations (Berger 2016: 215): theorizations and analyses that are trivialized by hegemonic Eurocentric epistemologies (Walsh 2015, Santos 2014, Suárez-Krabbe 2014). By engaging with the PIR's subaltern knowledges, I explore how they conceptualize questions of race and colonialism, identity and politics, as well as resistance and decolonization.

Subalternity, Knowledge and Politics

Questions of race and colonialism have been of particular scholarly interests in the French context. In recent years, it has been addressed in the latest wave of scholarship on postcoloniality, partly explained by current debates on Islam and terrorism, national identity and migration, and the legacies of colonial history and slavery (Bancel, Blanchard and Lemaire 2005, Boubeker and Hajjat et. al.: 2008, Kipfer 2011: 1156). However, very few studies explored these issues from the perspectives of political movements and their subaltern knowledges - as forms of 'valid' critical thinking and political theorizing (Icaza and Vasquez 2013, Kelley 2002). This reflects a wider trend within the social sciences whereby people, particularly 'Others', are studied as 'objects' of knowledge, people whose ideas can be extracted and used as 'data' that researchers, the 'subject' of knowledge production, can produce 'theory', or make authoritative 'scientific' statements about (cf. Smith 1999: 1, Brown and Strega et. al.: 2005, Tuck 2009). By studying people as objects, devoid of any epistemic authority (Shilliam 2015: 377), a certain blindness accrues to researchers, a failure to acknowledge the "theorizing developed by the people [researchers] are concerns with" (Suarez-Krabbe 2009: 4).

To counter these tendencies, I draw inspiration from postcolonial and decolonial theorizations of subalternity, knowledge and the political. 'Subalternity' was a notion articulated by Gramsci (2000[1988]) to interrogate the possibilities of the emergence of political critique in the lived

consciousness of the oppressed (Chari 2012: 503, 507). As the concept travelled to South Asia, it gained a new life (Shilliam 2016: 5, Guha and Spivak et. al.: 1988). Postcolonial theorists used it to challenge colonial historiography and *to think from* the 'small voices of history', those of colonized subjects (Guha 1983, 1996). While colonizers had dominated India, they had not managed to establish hegemony, as the colonized had resisted colonialism through their own 'subaltern' forms of political consciousness (Shilliam 2016: 4-7). Subaltern subjects produced their own forms of knowledge, which informed the kind of politics they engaged in (Maldonado-Torres 2008, Dussel 2000, Bogues 2003, Al-Hardan 2014): their own "readings and knowings of the dominant" (Mohanty 1996: 68), analyses of power and the powerful. As such, I argue that the struggles of the PIR are not only political and social, but also as *epistemic* (Icaza and Vásquez 2013). Political movements are incubators of new knowledge (Kelley 2002: 9). They raise new questions and produce alternative conceptualizations of the problems and power structures we study (Casas-Cortés et. al.: 2008). Consequently, my approach resonates with Suárez-Krabbe's (2014) endeavour to 'pluriversalize Europe', to "understand the struggles of [racialized] populations in relation to European history" and ask "what insights do we get concerning contemporary Europe when taking these movements analysis of reality seriously..." (2014: 155). My article is based on research carried out in 2015. It engages with the extensive political archive of the PIR. Since its inception, the PIR has published extensively, including articles in their website, as well as a monthly magazine. My analysis draws on this. I also focus on the critical thinking of two founding members: Sadri Khiari, a Tunisian exile and Houria Bouteldja, French woman of Algerian descent, co-founder and main initiator of the Appel of 2005.

We Are the Natives of the Republique!

The PIR's origins can be traced to early 2005, as several anti-racist activists sent out the 'Appel des Indigènes de la République', a manifesto outlining their political perspective. This was sent out in a conjuncture of sharpening political conflict with girls wearing hijabs being thrown out of school, and racialized youth rising up in the banlieues. A context in which Nicolas Sarkozy could openly deny colonial legacies in Senegal by arguing that the problems of the continent, the 'drama of Africa', as he put it, was explained by the fact that 'African Man' has not left the state of nature and entered the 'course of history' (Kipfer 2011: 1155-1156). The Appel was a reminder that any discussion of our colonial present (Gregory 2004) is of utmost political

importance in contemporary France. As such, the PIR constitutes a response to postcolonial conditions, where racialized communities are excluded from political spaces, segregated and confined to the banlieu. Theirs is a 'postcolonial anti-colonial' politics based on a materialist analysis of the 'postcolonial situation': the rearticulation of forms of domination deployed against colonial migrants and their descendants, through which they are relegated to the status of the 'indigène' (Khiari 2006: 20). As I argue below, indigène refers to colonized subjects under French colonialism (Coquery-Vidrovitch 2011). By using this, the PIR traces the parallels between the fate of colonial peoples and the situation of those who migrated to France from the colonies (Kipfer 2011: 1158). In their words:

> "Discriminated from employment, housing, healthcare, education... the peoples coming from the colonies, old or current, and from post-colonial migration are the first victims of social exclusion... Independently of their actual origins, the population from the 'quartiers' are 'indigenized', relegated to the margins of society. The figure of l'indigène continue to haunt political, administrative and judicial action; it is imbricated to other logics of social oppression, discrimination and exploitation" (MIR 2005).

As part of the issuing of the Appel, the PIR lead the 'March of the Indigènes of the République', gathering up to eight thousand people who marched in Paris from the Place de la République to Saint-Bernard church. African, Caribbean and Asian peoples, part of France's colonial and postcolonial populations, gathered to protest "against the colonial, postcolonial and neo-colonial politics of France" and "remembered that the anticolonial struggle is far from achieved… it continues in France against the discrimination, police brutality, racism and inequalities" that racialized communities face (Khiari 2005: 59-61). The date of the march and the spaces where it began and ended were both political and symbolic: The Place de la République represented "The republic of inequality", and Saint Bernard church represented "the center of a major struggle for equality" (Khiari 2005: 60), a place occupied by 300 sans-papier (paperless migrants) in 1996, demanding equality, dignity and 'papers'. The date represented both the re-establishment of the République after Nazi occupation in 1945, a day celebrated all over France; and the same day that the République sent its army to massacre rebel Algerians in Setif, Guelma and Kherrata. It marked "the contradictions of the Republique of yesterday and of today, a racial and unjust

Republique" (Boutelja 2012: 27). The march represented the irruption of the 'colony within the Metropole' (Guye 2011) re-vindicating their own concerns and priorities. For the PIR, it was to state bluntly that "equality is a myth" (MIR 2005: 21). Significantly, the march inscribed itself in the long history of political struggles of communities of color in France. It was also important in that it marked the emergence, or re-appropriation, of ''indigène' as a political identity and an analysis of the French State in terms what Bhambra (2015) has called 'our connected histories of colonialism and empire'.

France was a colonial state, France continues to be a colonial state!

Despite a re-emergence in recent years of debates regarding French colonial legacies, a silence over this and its postcolonial manifestations has predominated in both political discourse and historiography. Through this absence, the national narrative is amputated of the 'zone of nonbeing' (Fanon), 'the colonial parenthesis' (Gueye 2011: 3) that was central in the inception and development of the French nation-state (Khiari 2006, Coquery-Vidrovitch 2011). Colonial history puts into question the ways in which national history is narrated: "the mythologies of an assumed specificity of 'the French genius', composed of revolutionary values and a universal mission, Republican righteousness and undifferentiated tolerance towards the other" (Blancel, Blanchard and Lemaire 2005: 10). By silencing the colonial question, national narratives not only amputate French history of its colonial underside (Dussel 1996), but also of "those whose contribution to the sustainability of the national formation is decisive" (Gueye 2011: 3): colonial subjects and racialized communities. It is this history, and its articulation with other social relations in the present, that gives meaning to a political identity such as 'indigène'. This identity would not exist if the juridical texts under the name of 'the Code de l'Indigenat', regulating and controlling the lives of colonial subjects in the French colonies, would not have preceded them (Blanchard and Bancel 1998, Grewal 2009, Coquery-Vidrovitch, 2011: 23). To understand the political and symbolic significance of this notion, it is important to historicize it and located in French colonial history. This history gives indigène a two-fold meaning: as a racialized socio-political status and as a political identity.

The Code de l'Indigenat, invented in Kabyle in 1874 following the great insurrection of the colonized in 1871, was the legal architecture through which French colonial power was

maintained. Formally established on June 28th 1881, the Code established a legal difference between citizens (colonizers) and French subjects or 'indigènes', who were people subjected to a special juridical system (Blanchard and Bancel 1998, Gueye 2011). Legally, this system of institutionalized inequality was designed to 'maintain order' in the colonies. Politically, it consisted of rules that enabled colonial administrators to impose fines and prison sentences, as well as curfews and forced labor, to indigènes (Coquery-Vidrovitch 2011: 23). More broadly, l'indigenat constituted statutory groups demarked in terms of race. The relations between these groups were hierarchical. The existence of an individual came to be determined by their racial status, by their belonging to one of the groups delimited as a superior or inferior race (Khiari 2009: 23). Despite its official abolition, according to the PIR, a fraction of the population living and working in France, remains deprived of citizenship, and thus treated as second-class citizens, in much the same way as colonial subjects under the Code. This includes both "immigrants who remain attached to their nationalities of origin" (Khiari 2006: 53-54) who continue, because of their status as foreign, to be excluded from rights; as well as their children, who despite their status as French nationals, are "discriminated against in housing, health, schools" and remain "the first victims of social exclusion and precarisation" (MIR 2005: 19). Thus, for the PIR, l'indigenat constitutes *a structure* not an event (Wolf 2016). It persists, as Khiari (2009: 23) argues, as "the mechanism of differentiation and hierarchization of humanity between one pole endowed, in terms of race, of privileges, invisible or manifest, and another racial pole whose submission to all sorts of violence, invisible or manifest, guaranties the privilege of the dominant" *(ibid*).

The treatment of the peoples descended from colonization extends, without limitation, colonial politics. Not only is the principle of equality before the law not respected, but also the law itself is not always the same for everyone... The figure of the "indigenous" continues to haunt political, administrative and judicial actions; it innervates and imbricates other logics of oppression, discrimination and social exploitation (MIR, 2005).

Underlying this process of indigenization is the return of a 'colonial ideological framework' visible in the social and political treatment of the 'problem' of the banlieues (El-Tayeb 2011). Through this framework, the banlieues are framed in political discourse and the media, as zones that escape the control of the République, and thus that must be 'reconquered'. The response to

the progressive 'ghettoization' of the banlieues is to 'civilize' the 'problematic', 'dangerous' bodies and spaces of racialized communities (Bancel and Blanchard 1998: 149-161). Here, we find the meaning of indigène, as a racialized socio-political status ascribed to communities and people by virtue of their ancestry, culture, religion or skin color. Bouteldja (in Kipfer 2011: 1158), puts it as follows:

> "When they refuse to accept us as French citizens, they deny us equality. We need to name this reality; we cannot be French, so we are indigène. We are second-class citizens; ours is a lumpen-citizenship, just as at the time of the colonies. This imagery linked to colonization and the history of slavery continues to determine how they perceive us, for the body of the indigenous was constructed in the colonial era. As long as this imaginary is alive, we remain Native".

For Bouteldja, 'indigène' is constituted through socio-political relations of force. That is, there is no indigène outside of the relations of force that constitutes them as subaltern vis-a-vis the 'citizen'. These relations posit the indigène as exterior, non-citizen, from the social formation where they live. By defining themselves as indigènes, the PIR reveals the absences that the colonial Republique produces, as well as *the politics of emergence* that their struggle reveals: "the community of political interests", composed of "all those that originate from the colonies or the ex-colonies" (Khiari 2007: 237). By using indigène, the PIR does not want to equate the present situation with the colonial experience, but rather to characterize both the ruptures produced by formal decolonization, as well as the continuities produced by a complex colonial heritage (Héricord, Khiari and Lévy 2005: 39). Thus, Khiari (2006: 20) proposes to understand the racialization of the indigène through the notion of postcolonialism: the *recomposition, re-inscription* and *articulation* of colonial legacies with other social, economic and political relations. In his words,

> "The notion postcolonialism indicates that the historical rupture with colonialism is far from being achieved. It points out to this continuity and… the recompositions of forms of domination and their goals, the persistence and reproduction these procedures of domination inherited from the colonial period and deployed against postcolonial immigrant populations. These are not

> simple residues nor the expression of an un-finished postcolonial transition... [It] designates the entanglement of this forms of domination to other relations of oppression and exploitation" (Khiari 2006: 20).

The postcolonial situation is no simple replication of colonialism in the metropole, but the transformation and re-inscription of colonial modes of domination in Northern societies. These forms of domination are also entangled with other relations of oppression and exploitation. In this sense, the PIR conceptualizes postcolonial relations as multiform, ideological, hierarchical, cultural, social, political and economic simultaneously (Kipfer 2011: 1159). Through this notion, the PIR builds from, and recasts insights from previous movements. For instance, the slogan of the sans-papiers that occupied Saint-Bernard church in the 90's was "Hier mort pour la France, demain morts pour des papiers?" (Yesterday dying for France, tomorrow for papers?), making a reference to the Senegalese Tirailleurs, the colonial infantry recruited by the French colonial empire in its African colonies, in the nineteenth and twentieth century (Héricord, Khiari and Lévy 2005: 41). Similarly, the Mouvement pour L'immigration et la Banlieues (MIB) used the slogan "colonial management of the planet, colonial management of the neighbourhood" to make reference to the interconnections between the post-9/11 offensive led by Western powers (and Israel) in the Middle East and the backlash of this offensive in the banlieues: racial profiling, surveillance, police brutality (Héricord, Khiari and Lévy 2005: 41, Khiari 2009: 208-209). The re-inscription of colonial legacies in the metropole was also invoked to conceptualize the infamous law on secularism in public education passed in February 2004 (Kipfer 2007: 701-702). Activists opposing the law emphasized its colonial dimensions, by drawing on the history of the public unveiling of colonized women by French Authorities in Algeria, as a counter-insurgency method to debilitate the resistance.

Thus, when the PIR argues that French society is colonial they are trying to grasp it as the space where the relation of force that produce the indigène as subaltern is deployed, the relation that opposes a (racially) privileged pole from a subaltern pole:

> "Those that, in one way or another, endure the direct or indirect consequences of racial oppression, and that resist, even without realising it, and those that benefit, in one way or

another, of the consequences of racial oppression and that contribute to its reproduction, without realising it" (Khiari 2007: 238).

Constituting a movement and then a political party was part of trying to give a political incarnation to this bipolar relation of force that the Indigenat reproduces.

Conclusion

The PIR constitutes an example of a process that has been long in the making not in France and all over Europe: the emergence of multicultural communities in European urban centers, living in spaces characterized by precarious material conditions. These communities continue to be excluded, through racialized understandings of what constitutes proper 'Europeanness'. The perception of so-called 'visible minorities' in European public discourse is largely determined by racialized concepts of national, and by extension, European, identity that posit these communities as Other. While present for decades, they continue to be perceived as 'foreign matter': individuals born in a European nation, of parents born and raised there as well, are systematically identified through notions such as 'third generation migrants' that emphasize their position as outsiders to the national community (El-Tayeb 2008: 650 – 653, 2011: xii-xiii).

As a result, European urban centers have witness they irruption of the 'colony within the Metropole' (Guye 2011), movements and organizations based on the experiences of ethnically diverse people faced with demands to 'integrate' that are in blatant contrast with their lived experiences (El-Tayeb 2011: xiii). My paper explored the emergence of one of these movements, their modes of resistance and their analyses. Through the subaltern knowledges of the PIR, I addressed issues of race, identity, resistance and colonization/decolonization. Although I focused on France, further research could explore how the conceptualizations of the PIR can in fact help us understand the realities of communities of color in other European nations. Particularly relevant for this is the PIR's conceptualization of the 'indigène'. As a racialized socio-political status, it could help us understand how communities of color are 'indigenized', racialized as 'problematic' and inferior – a practice that is arguably not restricted to the French context. As a political identity, it points out to alternatives forms of constructing political subjectivities that go beyond the exclusionary frameworks and analyses of state organizations and leftist movements.

These are grounded in experiences of systematic racism and exclusion, in the memories of political struggles of past generations, and in the potentialities of anticolonial struggle.

The notion of the indigène delinks territorial occupation from that of the subordination of peoples living there. While these are connected in many contexts around the world, they are far from exhausting the meaning of contemporary colonialism (Khiari 2015: 65-66). Dominant leftist paradigms tend think of the colonial phenomenon as an opposition between hegemonic countries in the center, and subaltern countries in the periphery (Grosfoguel 2008). While this is certainly accurate, the PIR's analysis reveal how colonialism also proceeds through the deployment of racial hierarchies *within* nationalized spaces in both metropolises and 'ex-colonies' (Maldonado Torres 2008: 63 – 65). Their critical thinking and anti-colonial politics remind us that decolonization is no longer a notion making reference to political processes of the past. It has acquired new meanings through the struggles of the present (Maldonado Torres 2008: 63-66).

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