

The hate factory: xenophobia and racism in Europe

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Racism and xenophobia are not the residues of a “past which does not want to fade away”, archaisms which survive the disappearance of the conditions which generated them. The cataclysms of the 20th century have not vaccinated us against the temptation to stigmatize, the practice of exclusion and sometimes the pleasure of hating diversity. From this point of view, contemporary xenophobia is profoundly linked to the history of racism, substratum of a modernity which has modified its morphology but not its function. So it is necessary to situate the racist fabrication of otherness in its historical context in order to understand how it perpetuates itself today.

Too often racism is regarded as a kind of pathology rather than as a *norm* of modernity. We must understand that, in order to fight it, it is necessary to call into question a social order and a model of civilization, not just one of its deformations or distortions. It would then be necessary to start from the reality that the success of racism and xenophobia is not due to their veracity or their ability to describe reality objectively (to which they would possibly bring answers that were false or unacceptable from an ethical point of view, according to an old commonplace) but to their effectiveness, to their operational character.

Racism and xenophobia are a process of symbolic construction of the enemy - invented as a negative figure - aimed at satisfying a search for identity, a desire to belong, a need for security and protection. To reveal their mechanisms and to denounce their lies is certainly necessary, but insufficient (and often useless), because their influence is based neither on cognitive virtues nor on rational arguments - even when they are presented in the form of an “objective” discourse - but on a different method, on the search for a scapegoat.

Appearing towards the end of the eighteenth century, then entering into symbiosis with modern colonialism and nationalism, racism reached its apogee in the last century, when the encounter between fascism and anti-Semitism led in Nazi Germany to an epilogue of extermination. According to an intuition formulated at one time by Pierre-André Taguieff - who has today gone over, lock, stock and barrel to the neo-conservative Right - the contemporary racist discourse has undergone a veritable metamorphosis, giving up its hierarchical and “racialist” orientation (according to the old model of Gobineau, Chamberlain, Vacher de Lapouge or Lombroso) to become differentialist and culturalist. In other words, it has slid from the “science of races” to ethnocentrism [1]. These changes, however, do not modify the old mechanism of social rejection and moral exclusion that Erving Goffman summarized by the concept of *stigma* [2].

During the 1990s, racism reappeared with force in Europe, by no means constrained by the diffusion of the official liturgies which ritually led the political and religious authorities and nuns to conduct ceremonies around the “duty to remember”, and sent the teenagers of our colleges to visit the sites of the Nazi death camps. If racism has moved back on to centre stage it is not “because of immigration”, according to a well-known stereotype, but because it belongs, as Alberto Burgio

wrote, to the “genetic code of European modernity [3].

But racism perpetuates itself by taking on a new skin and by adding new chapters to its inexhaustible “file” of exclusion and hatred. The tangled web of racism and fascism, nationalism and anti-Semitism which manifested itself in Europe during the first half of the twentieth century no longer exists. Nationalism and anti-Semitism still proliferate among the new member states of the European Union, where they can renew with a history that was interrupted in 1945 and nourish resentments accumulated during four decades of “really existing socialism”. In that part of the continent, they claim descent from the dictatorships of the 1930s, like Jobbik in Hungary, which takes up the heritage of the Arrow Cross and cultivates the memory of Marshal Horthy, or exhume an old revanchist and expansionist mythology, like the Greater Romania Party or the Croatian Rights Party (HSP), continuator of the Ustashi movement of Ante Pavelic.

In Western Europe, however, fascism is practically non-existent, as an organized political force, in the countries which were its historical cradle. In Germany, the influence of neo-Nazi movements on public opinion is almost nil. In Spain, where the legacy of Francoism was taken up by the Popular Party, national-catholic and conservative, the Falangists are an endangered species. In Italy, we have seen a paradoxical phenomenon: the rehabilitation of fascism in public discourse and even in the historical consciousness of a significant segment of the population - antifascism was the genetic code of the “First Republic”, not of the Italy of Berlusconi - coincided with a major metamorphosis of the heirs of Mussolini. Future and Freedom, the party which their leader, Gianfranco Fini, has just launched is presented in the form of a liberal, reformist and “progressive” Right which attacks the political conservatism of Berlusconi and the cultural obscurantism of the Northern League.

While situating itself more to the right in the French political spectrum, the National Front is trying, driven forward by Marine Le Pen, to free itself from the traditional image of a far Right consisting of partisans of the National Revolution [4], fundamentalist Catholics and those who are nostalgic for French Algeria. Although there remains within it a fascistic component, today it is not hegemonic. During its last congress, the National Front embarked on an unprecedented exercise of renewal of its language, adopting a republican rhetoric which is not part of its tradition. If Marine Le Pen replacing her father shows a desire for continuity, taking the form of a dynastic succession, it also testifies to an indisputable desire for renovation: no classic fascist movement ever entrusted its leadership to a woman.

However, the decline of the fascist tradition is giving way to the rise of a far Right of a new kind, whose ideology takes on board the changes of the twenty-first century. The political economist Jean-Yves Camus was one of the first to grasp their new features: the abandonment of the cult of the state in favour of a vision of the neo-liberal world centred on the criticism of the Welfare State, the tax revolt, economic deregulation and the valorisation of individual freedoms, opposed to any official interference [5]. The refusal of democracy - or its interpretation in a plebiscitary and authoritative sense - is not always accompanied by nationalism, which, in certain cases, is exchanged for forms of ethnocentrism calling into question the model of the nation-state, as the Northern League in Italy or the Flemish far Right demonstrate.

Elsewhere, nationalism takes the form of a defence of the West, threatened by globalization and the shock of civilizations. The singular cocktail of xenophobia, individualism, defence of women’s rights and open homosexuality that Pim Fortuyn had concocted in the Netherlands in 2002, was the key to a lasting electoral opening. Similar features characterize other political movements in Northern Europe, such as Vlaams Belang in Belgium, the Danish Popular Party and the Swedish far Right, which has just made its entry into Parliament in Stockholm. But we also find them - although mixed with more traditionalist stereotypes - in the Austrian Liberal Party (whose charismatic leader was Jörg Haider) which imposed itself, in the elections last October, as the second political force in

Vienna (27 per cent of the vote).

The theme that federates this new far Right is xenophobia, expressed as a violent rejection of immigrants. The migrant of today is the heir to the “dangerous classes” of the nineteenth century, depicted by the positivist social sciences of the time as a receptacle of all social pathologies, from alcoholism to criminality and prostitution, including even epidemics like cholera [6]. These stereotypes - often condensed in a representation of the foreigner with well-defined psychic and physical features - flow from an Orientalist and colonial mindset that has always made it possible to define, negatively, uncertain and fragile identities, based on the fear of the “other”, always perceived as the “invader” and the “enemy”.

In Europe today, the migrant takes on primarily the features of the Muslim. Islamophobia plays today, for the new racism, the role that was formerly played by anti-Semitism for nationalisms and fascisms before the Second World War. The memory of the Shoah - a historical perception of anti-Semitism through the prism of its genocidal outcome - tends to obscure these analogies, which are, however, obvious. The portrait of the Arabo-Muslim painted by contemporary xenophobia does not differ much from that of the Jew constructed by anti-Semitism at the beginning of the twentieth century. The beards, tefillin and caftans of the immigrant Jews of Central and Eastern Europe in former times correspond to the beards and veils of the Muslims of today.

In both cases, the religious, cultural, dress and food practices of a minority have been mobilized in order to build the negative stereotype of a foreign body that is inassimilable to the national community. Judaism and Islam thus function as negative metaphors of otherness: a century ago, the Jew as depicted by popular iconography inevitably had a hooked nose and protruding ears, just as today Islam is identified with the burqa, even though 99.99 per cent of Muslim women living in Europe do not fully cover their bodies. On the political level, the spectre of Islamist terrorism has replaced that of Judeo-Bolshevism.

Today, anti-Semitism remains a distinctive feature of the nationalisms of Central Europe, where Islam is almost non-existent, and the turning-point of 1989 has revitalized the old demons (still present, even where there are no more Jews), but it has almost disappeared from the discourse of the Western far Right (which sometimes declares its sympathies with regard to Israel). In the Netherlands, Geert Wilders has made the fight against “Islamofascism” his central theme. Consulted by referendum, 57 per cent of Swiss electors voted on November 28 2010 for the prohibition of minarets. Until now, only four mosques out of 150 in the Swiss confederation had a minaret: this threshold will now remain impassable.

In Italy and in France, several voices have proposed similar measures, showing that, far from being a whim of the xenophobic and populist Right in Switzerland, the desire to stigmatize Islam concerns Europe as a whole. Shlomo Sand is right to stress that Islamophobia constitutes today the cement of Europe - whose “Judeo-Christian” matrix should never be forgotten - just as anti-Semitism played a fundamental role, in the nineteenth century, in the process of construction of national states [7]. So this new “defascistized” far Right takes the form of populism. The concept, as everyone knows, is vague, elastic, ambiguous, and even hateful when it is used to affirm aristocratic contempt for the people. Nevertheless, the frequent electoral breakthroughs of this new far Right prove its ability to find a consensus among the working classes and the poorest layers in society. The populism of the Right - Ernesto Laclau has underlined it well [8] - feeds on the distress of people who have been abandoned by the Left, whose task it should be to organize and represent them. Populism, finally, is a transversal category which indicates a porous border between the Right and the far Right.

If anyone had doubts on this subject, Sarkozy has undertaken to dissipate them since his election, initially by creating a Ministry for Immigration and National Identity, then by launching a campaign

against the Roms, who were raided and expelled on the basis of an ethno-racial census, generating the enthusiastic approval of many representatives of the European Right, in the first place in Italy. At bottom, the fight for equal rights - avoiding the sterile conflicts between republican nationalism and communitarist multiculturalism - is coming back onto the agenda, in this beginning of the twenty-first century, as it was in the nineteenth century, when the rising liberal middle-class opposed democracy by restricting the vote through strong barriers of class, gender and race.

Today, in spite of the laws promulgated in several countries, women are still under-represented within our institutions; the popular classes are deserting the ballot box, more and more indifferent towards a political system which they perceive as foreign, even hostile; the migrant populations, finally, remain excluded from any rights. Those are the outstanding features of our "happy globalization".

The metamorphoses of racism and xenophobia cannot remain without political consequences. If antifascism is obviously a combat of today in the new countries of the European Union, where we are seeing today the rise of an extreme nationalist Right, anti-Semitic and fascistic, the situation is quite different in the West. Admittedly, in a continent which has experienced Mussolini, Hitler and Franco, antifascism should be part of the genetic code of democracy, as a component of our historical consciousness. To fight against the new forms of racism and xenophobia in the name of antifascism is however likely to appear as a rearguard action.

Antifascism fulfilled its role - as an organized political movement - in the 1980s and 1990s, when, in particular in France, it was confronted with the emergence of a far Right with a fascistic matrix (even though the general context was no longer that of the 1930s). But it is not a question, today, of defending a threatened democracy. Racism and xenophobia present two faces, altogether complementary: on the one hand, that of new "republican" far-right organizations (protective of "rights" delimited on ethnic, national or religious bases); on the other, that of government policies (detention camps for undocumented migrants, planned expulsions, laws aiming to stigmatize and discriminate against ethnic or religious minorities).

This new racism accommodates itself to representative democracy, remodelling it from within. It is thus democracy itself which has to be redefined, as well as the concepts of equal rights and citizenship, in order to give a fresh impulse to antiracism.

P.S.

* Translation International Viewpoint.

Footnotes

[1] Pierre-André Taguieff, *La Force du préjugé*, La Découverte, Paris, 1988

[2] Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Prentice-Hall, Upper Saddle River, New Jersey, 1963

[3] Alberto Burgio, *Nonostante Auschwitz. Il « ritorno » del razzismo in Europa*, Derive Approdi, Rome, 2010.

[4] The ideology of the regime presided over by Marshal Petain from 1940-44

[5] Jean-Yves Camus, « Du fascisme au national-populisme. Métamorphoses de l'extrême droite

en Europe », *Le Monde diplomatique*, May 2002.

[6] Louis Chevalier, *Classes laborieuses et classes dangereuses*, Perrin, Paris, 2007 (original edition 1958).

[7] Shlomo Sand, "From Judeophobia to Islamophobia. Nation-building and the construction of Europe", *Jewish Quarterly*, 2010, note 215.

[8] Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (Verso, London, 2005