

France: A colonialist offensive and The “benefits” of colonialism

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For Alain Ruscio, historian of colonialism, the rehabilitation of France’s colonial past is fraught with danger for the cohesion of French society.

Huma: Many historians and teachers have expressed their indignation in relation to Article 4 of the Law of 23 February 2005 which sings the praises of colonialism’s “positive role”.

How do you judge this law which seeks to dictate an official history?

Alain Ruscio: Indignation, yes, at the very least. I feel enraged in the face of this offensive from colonialist dinosaurs who are now deliberately flirting with the themes of the extreme right. As a researcher, I find it unacceptable that a political power should decree the truth, then ask us to follow its lead. As an historian, the very notion of a “positive” balance sheet is for me inadmissible. The fundamental crime of colonialism is to have severed the historical development of peoples who had asked for nothing and to have denied them the right to national existence, whether actual or potential. It is this that brought the violence which always, to varying degrees, accompanied the system. Colonialism was measured in deaths. The burnings which accompanied the conquest of Algeria, the blood-soaked columns of Tonkin, the use of air-power against civilian populations in 1914 (in Morocco), the guillotines set up everywhere, like a bloody shadow of the French flag... Details? Paulo-Condor, Haiphong, Rif, Sétif, Madagascar... forgotten places?

As for “a little” violence, it was expressed daily in the form of an insulting vocabulary, the use of patronising forms of address, slaps or kicks up the behind suffered by boys or ‘coolies’. In an attempt to balance this, they cite the roads built, hospitals, schools... Yes, ‘France’ built roads... But it was always the ‘natives’ who did the work and, most often, paid for them. Yes, the devotion of colonial doctors, of nuns, often reduced the incidence of certain diseases, but others, such as tuberculosis, appeared. Yes, hundreds of thousands of children were educated, but millions were left illiterate.

As a citizen, I think of how much the arrogance of the French right feeds these tensions, these hatreds. Unfortunately the timid reaction - which is strictly parliamentary - of the left, including the PCF, seems inadequate. I read, from the pen of a UMP deputy, that the “youth of the estates” would not be reading the text of this law. Subtext? Why upset them? Eternal contempt of the well-off! More serious is the inability to understand something that is not a matter of words, or even perhaps of rational thought, but intensely lived! If these young people abhor a certain France, it’s not, as the sad Finkelkraut thinks, because of goodness knows what innate instinct. It’s because France treated their grandparents badly, called them “nigger” or other racist epithets... If they whistle and boo at the Marseillaise, it’s because the experience of their parents, and now their own experience, leaves them feeling that perhaps, when all’s said and done, the “impure blood” denounced in its lyrics is

their own. And now those who run the country find nothing better to do than to glorify this period. This is, at best, an irresponsible gesture towards the hundreds of thousands of French people whose names are Mohamed, Diallo or Nguyen, and at worst a deliberate attack. In either case, this goes further than simply the indignation of historians. It's the future of France, neither more nor less, that is at stake.

Huma: How do you explain the ubiquitous references, implicit or symbolic, to the Algerian war (such as, recently, the digging up of the law of 1955 establishing the state of emergency) more than 40 years after independence?

Alain Ruscio: It is because this diabolical colonial history embarrasses the political powers. The French left does not emerge from this history with entirely clean hands. The PS has too often allowed its actions to be guided, from Moutet to Mollet, by repression alone. And Mitterrandism happily followed the lead of Gaullism's foreign policy in Africa. If the PCF has added its name to the principal anticolonialist protests, it has sometimes hesitated to express its internationalism (Sétif, 1945) or privileged the resolution of metropolitan problems above the struggle against colonial war (special powers, 1956). It is in any case now too weak to hope to be the motor of protest.

As for the French right, it holds on to a nostalgia for the colonial past. It is this right wing that has continually sustained the idea of, as well as justifying, France's "civilising mission." De Gaulle, though he was a realist in 1960 to 1962, was most certainly an enthusiast for colonialism - though a reformed colonialism - in the preceding years. The right's current deputies are betraying neither Gaullism nor "liberalism", they are prolonging both. Few commentators have understood this significant fact: it is two ministers of the Republic, Michèle Alliot-Marie and Philippe Douste-Blazy, who are the authors of this law. Final factor: the activism of lobbies of what is more-or-less the extreme right. The operation to rehabilitate France's colonial past goes a great deal further than the "official" extreme right. Historical magazines, radio programmes, Internet sites, and associations are conducting a real attempt to dig away at elected representatives, politicians, intellectuals. This planned law and the commentaries which have accompanied it are the glaring demonstration of the numerous close relationships between the thinking of the right and the extreme right. This has a name: "negationism". We are living through difficult times. Critical history has just suffered a clear defeat. But in this domain, as in others, only the inactive and the lukewarm are beaten."

The "benefits" of colonialism

Slavery

14 million Africans were transported to the New World between the 16th Century and the beginning of the 19th Century. The descendants of these slaves, black or of mixed ancestry, now number some 200 million. The slave trade caused the deaths of as many as 13 million men and women, of whom 2 million died at sea (Statistics taken from Marc Ferro, Robert Laffont (eds.) *Le Livre noir du colonialisme* - The black book of colonialism)

Algeria in 1962

More than 80% of its population illiterate. Fewer than 10% educated in colonial schools Only one Algerian veterinarian, two Algerian engineers, five Algerian architects. 30,000 lycée students (15-18)

and fewer than 2,000 Algerians attending the sole university (in Algiers) and the Polytechnic school

In the Algerian war

8,000 villages were destroyed by napalm. 5 million Algerians were displaced 1 million Algerians were forced into relocation camps. More than a million Algerians died in eight years. 25,000 young Algerians died in the capital alone between 1955 and 1957 during what historians call the Battle of Algiers

Some dates

1802 In Guadeloupe, 10,000 perish during the re-establishment of slavery

16 March 1871 An insurrection breaks out in Kabylie. The repression is pitiless, costing the lives of 20,000 insurgents. Entire villages are destroyed, families decimated or made homeless. Land is confiscated and distributed to newly-arrived colonists from Alsace. Thousands of insurgents are deported to the penal colonies of Cayenne and New Caledonia. Others are forcibly enrolled in the Madagascan campaign. A fine of 36 million gold francs is imposed on the region.

January 1927 Inspector of Colonies (Third Class) Gayet, in a report on the administration of Cochinchine, speaks of a “veritable servitude”.

1928 A report of the local director of health in Cambodia describes the infirmary of a concession as Kantroei, belonging to the Indochinese Society for Plantations of Mimot, as a “place of miracles”.

30 March 1947 An insurrection breaks out in Madagascar. It is bloodily repressed by the French army : 90,000 dead.

8 May 1945 The French army suppresses the demonstration for Algerian independence at Sétif. The events turn into a riot and the whole of the east of Algeria flares up : 45,000 dead.

P.S.

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