

# Give a dog a bad name

(what Islamo-leftism signifies)

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The exercise of colonial possession proceeds from an act of re-naming. The colonial name always comes *on top of* another name, another history, an epistemology that speaks of other relations to the world. It is a way of imposing an origin, marking ownership, of saying that the thing begins to exist as an object or subject from the moment a name calls it forth from the void into a scene of dignity and *at the same time* into a market(place) that attributes a value to it – of transaction or of horror as the case may be. For this colonial mouth, everything that existed before the name it pronounces can only be inarticulate savagery, valueless obscurity, vain and non-productive beliefs. This tendency to *name over* is thus an act of appropriation, but also of concealment and erasure that disintegrates genealogies, alliances, attachments and generally obfuscates history. An act that separates and makes relations impracticable.

The prefix “*Islamo*” in the French term “Islam-leftism” is thus firstly a way of naming without naming political anti-racism. Thanks to many years of struggle and the recent dynamic set in motion by the Black Lives Matter movement in France, the sensitivities, words, and grip of the anti-racist movement have vastly and abruptly widened their audience. Police violence has mobilized people more than ever, systemic racism has suddenly seemed – even if only briefly – an obvious fact which has even invited itself onto radio and television programmes during prime-time hours. The party was short-lived. It couldn’t last. But anti-racism cannot be countered on its own territory, except by demanding legitimacy for being racist – which Donald Trump constantly did during his mandate as President *of the largest democracy in the world*. The least we can say is that no one expected the success of this approach, which smashes the negotiating table with an axe and destroys any debate of ideas. The method exhausts through the transparency and outright avowal of its violence. It has served as an inspiration. What is inconvenient is that it makes a confession that certain European leaders refuse to do themselves: it recognizes privilege and domination and even the impunity of white patriarchy. Where Donald is at ease, others are not yet comfortable. Not yet. But in France, the government has a few aces up its sleeve. It is arriving at the same place by way of a shortcut indicated to it thanks to a few choice guests: indigenous Muslims.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I borrow this expression from the Parti des Indigènes de la République (PIR), considered in France as an one of the most influential organization of political anti-racism. Here the term “indigenous” is related to specific colonial law named the “Code de l’indigénat”, which was adopted on 28 June 1881. In 1887 the French government imposed it on all its colonies. In general, this code made the natives and immigrant workers subject to forced labour, to the ban on overnight travel, to requisitions, to capitation taxes on reserves and to a set of other equally degrading measures. It was a collection of discretionary measures designed to rule the “good

This forces us to redefine in a situated manner – rather than finding a translation for it – what “Blackness” means in the particular context of French postcolonial society. Because a *political Black Matter* has erupted into French postcolonial society and is being attacked there and because the only available French term, “*négritude*”, is not sufficient to designate this disturbing apparition.

To get back to our subject, it is clear that the prefix “Islam” is a mark of infamy here, an adjuvant of terror. It aims at producing shame and fear. It is also in this way that the expression, which hangs on all the ministerial lips in the government, participates in what are called politics of respectability. On the one hand, the announcement of social and economic putting to death when it is not a question of acts of even more direct violence. We’ll call this the “Islam” function. The first blade. And on the other hand, offers of service in the name of the diversity we will speak of later, but which are part and parcel of the same practice, ordered by the Masters, of toeing the line.

In the French context therefore, it is possible to counter anti-racism by not naming it, or rather by renaming it with the prefix “Islam” which includes an accompanying odour of explosives. A paradoxical umbrella beneath which huddle a crowd of personalities, some of whom, very clearly, have abject feelings for the term, defenders as they are of an unfailingly republican secularism. It doesn’t matter, we are way past that now. The other aspect that helps make this clever “Islam” invisible – as much as its “leftist” friend – is the existence of intersectional feminist struggles that also raise the hackles of conservative French academics who have run off to wipe their whining tears on the President’s coat-tails. Because in this attack the idea, you will have understood, is not to signify a danger, but to protect certain privileges at a time when the figure of the white Master wavers in affair after affair, so much so that we could almost be tempted to imagine him with the traits of an incestuous criminal who remains above the law. With his friends. Unthinkable! To sum up, theories of gender, even more so when they dare cook up a scheme in the camp of the anti-racists and don’t use the young Arab man as their only bogeyman, necessarily become Islamo-something-or-other. Obviously. Inexorably. In other circumstances, we would have laughed.

Another vast territory is contained in this portmanteau term (which contains so many meanings it’s more like a long baggage carousel). “Leftism” as the historic enemy of the government, especially when the latter delves into the

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colonial order”, based on the institutionalization of inequality and justice. The code was constantly “improved” in order to adapt the interests of the settlers to the “realities of the country”. The Code de l’indigénat distinguished two categories of citizens: French citizens (of metropolitan origin) and French subjects, that is, black Africans, Malagasy, Algerians, West Indians, Melanesians, etc., as well as immigrant workers. French subjects subject to the Code de l’indigénat were deprived of most of their freedom and political rights; they retained only their personal, religious, or customary status at the civil level. After the law of 7 April 1946 abolishing the Code, the “natives” (in New Caledonia, Madagascar, Algeria, etc.) were able to move freely again, day and night, and recover the right to reside where they wanted and to work freely. However, the French authorities managed to prolong this Code in Algeria until Independence (1962)

brownest of mud. In this context “leftism”, like its neighbour “Islamism”, designates several things at the same time. We could initially understand it as a synonym for “articulate”. Because what surprised, and then angered, at the highest levels of the government, was to suddenly hear the force of an anti-racist thought formulated in the street, on the radio, in the well-guarded fortresses that television recording studios are. There is a stupefied reaction in response to the beautiful democratic promise of emancipation when it takes an unexpected path. It’s the confession that no one thought possible: that those who suffered from so much violence and destruction, the vast Islamism-working class populations of France, could permit themselves to respond by anything other than inarticulate shouting. Because emancipation can only be a republican invention and recompense. It cannot be imagined any other way than as an elevation towards the Enlightenment(s) of the Masters, an imperfect mimicry of their delicate morals and reasonable thoughts. A rejection of obscurantism – in other words, a negation of self for the ignorant masses. If the government targets universities today, it is to signal to taxpayers that it is with their money that this horror is disseminated into the feeble minds at the peripheries of the Empire. We know that there are many other hotbeds of political anti-racism in France, as numerous as they are precarious. It is to be expected that the milieu of associations, charities and civil societies will be next on the list of victims, and that government grants and subsidies will only be paid out upon the signatories’ promise of refusing to do anything that could resemble this infamy.

The other translation of “leftism” is more obvious: anti-capitalism, time and time again. But what terrifies is the idea that anti-capitalism could find a new impetus, a new voice in its frequenting of “Islamism”-anti-racism – for whoever isn’t playing football that day.<sup>2</sup> New alliances and spaces for criticism learn how to cohabit, using the colonial project as one of the primitive scenes for neoliberal capitalism, by revealing its tendency towards ecocide and extractivism, as well as its sexist, racist, and patriarchal roots.

So this is what the government’s Islamism-leftism designates: the possibility of an anti-racist, decolonial fight characterized by multiple sensitivities which is also an inclusive anti-capitalism. And it is perhaps this last point which is targeted by the viciousness of the term. It serves to prepare a space for policies of consent to diversity capitalism. The marketing of minority niches, which is the only solution, if potential policies and uncontrollable hopes for emancipation are destroyed, in the shrewd pursuit of a system whose central body is still the white Master who whines *at the same time* as he kills, who caresses *at the same time* as he punishes.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> François Ruffin, politician and media figure from La France Insoumise (a political party on the left that could be translated as “Rebellious France”, or “Unsubmissive France”) said that he wouldn’t go to the demonstration against Islamophobia on 10 November 2019 because he would be playing football that day (“Le dimanche, je joue au foot”). His declaration shows how much the question of Islamophobia – and more widely, the question of systemic racism – cleaves the radical left apart, as other leaders of the party, including Jean-Luc Mélenchon, called for participation in the demonstration.

<sup>3</sup> Here I underline the famous expression by the French President Emmanuel Macron, *en même temps* (“at the same time”), which became a real political statement and strategy by

This is why we must learn how to name ourselves, within the diversity of our sensitivities, for we must preserve what links us together, amid divergences and tensions, without allowing ourselves to be separated or organized in accordance with a protocol for dignity invented for the comfort of a Body that is not ours.<sup>4</sup> And no longer endure names that hide our urgent need to create and live other lives, to breathe air that is something other than the farts of national death.

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simultaneously doing/saying something *and* its contrary. This tendency renders his political position hard to catch and to counter, especially for the anti-racist movement.

<sup>4</sup> I developed the notion of “White Body of Reference” in several on my past texts to try to identify the colour-blind Body of the French institutions inherited from the colonial infrastructures and their traces in the national unconscious.