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## THE “INDIGÈNES DE LA RÉPUBLIQUE” AND POLITICAL MOBILIZATION STRATEGIES IN POSTCOLONIAL FRANCE

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**Abstract:** I discuss the debate on the controversial petition “Nous sommes les Indigènes de la République!” (We are the Indigenous of the Republic) published in 2005 by a group of intellectuals and activists working in the field of immigration issues in France. It critically scrutinizes the idea that the petition could be understood as a new political mobilization strategy emphasizing ethnic, religious or racial differences. While recognizing the salience of this argument, I address its implicit conclusions concerning the supposedly depoliticizing and essentializing consequences of such a move. Placing the petition in its historical context and analysing its content, I contend that, referring to colonial regimes of segregation, the self-identification “indigènes” fundamentally concerns the denial of full citizen’s rights through religious, ethnic or racial categories rather than the entrenching of difference. Drawing parallels with a dominant trend in the appraisal of post-colonial studies in France, I conclude that academic thought on the petition reflects a general tendency of failing to come to terms with difference without falling back on an opposition between political universalism and apolitical communitarianism.

**Keywords:** Indigènes de la République, postcolonialism, republicanism, immigration, political mobilization, identity.

On the 19<sup>th</sup> of January 2005 a group of intellectuals, most of whom had a second generation immigrant background, published a petition entitled “Nous sommes les Indigènes de la République!” (We are the indigenous of the Republic), referred to here as PIR, on the internet (AAVV, 2005). The petition called for a foundation meeting of “postcolonial anti-colonialism” and announced a march to be held on the sixtieth anniversary of the massacres of Setif on the 8<sup>th</sup> of May 1945.<sup>1</sup> As the title of the text suggests, its specificity lies in the use of the term “indigènes”, a legal category designating

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<sup>1</sup> The massacres of Setif, Guelma and Khessala in the Algerian Department of Constantine refer to the repression of nationalist riots, which were triggered by the killing of a participant in a peaceful march commemorating the victory of the allied forces while making patriotic demands. An estimate of about 100 European casualties is made, however the exact number of colonial subjects killed in the incidents remains subject to considerable divergences ranging from between 6000 and 8000 up to 45000 (Benot, 2001: 31).

the subjects of colonial domination, within the context of the contemporary French political order. In this respect the persistence of a “colonial logic” marginalizing people associated with “postcolonial immigration” is related to various forms of political, legal, social, cultural and religious discrimination, including the non-recognition of the memories of the colonized, but also their articulation with other forms of oppression arising from neo-liberalism and neo-conservative foreign policies.

The PIR was signed by roughly 1000 people in one month and was generally disqualified as form of anti-republican “communitarianism”. Two controversial events that also took place in 2005 have given the petition a larger and more lasting impact: the vote of a law<sup>2</sup> on the recognition of the positive role of the French colonial presence in Northern Africa, on the one hand, and an uprising of marginalized youth in the suburbs of major French cities set off by police violence and the discriminatory discourse of the government, on the other. These events gave rise to an unprecedented discussion on the postcolonial nature of inequality and discrimination of immigrants and their offspring in France, as well as a broader scientific discussion on the relevance of postcolonial theory.<sup>3</sup>

This paper focuses on a particular aspect of the debate surrounding what subsequently was institutionalized as the “mouvement des indigènes de la République”, or MIR.<sup>4</sup> It concerns the idea that the discourse employed by the MIR could be understood as a new form of “framing” in which ethnic, religious or racial difference is used as means of political mobilization, “be it as determinant of voting, vector of representation or style of representation”<sup>5</sup> (Escafré-Dublet and Simon, 2009: 128). In this respect, the invention of a new group-identity associated with the term “indigènes” can be understood as the key innovation involved in this strategy. Relating to a colonial legal order separating non-assimilated colonized populations or subjects from full rights-bearing citizens (Guilleaume, 1991; Mamdani, 1996), the category of “indigène” is unambiguously a discriminatory term of exclusion. It thus clearly differs from the adjective “indigenous” used for the identification of autochthonous peoples within the rights seeking approach supported by the 2007 United Nations Declaration on Rights of Indigenous Peoples where, to the contrary, positive recognition is at stake. As a consequence, Smaïn Laacher’s discussion

<sup>2</sup> Law 2005-158 (23-02-2005) “portant reconnaissance de la Nation et contribution nationale en faveur des Français rapatriés”.

<sup>3</sup> Here I conceive of the term “postcolonial” in a broad sense as the exploration of the relation between the structures of various forms of colonial domination and the political, cultural, social and economical dynamics within the contemporary world. For a brief discussion of the word and its relationship to the field of Anglophone postcolonial studies, see Ashcroft *et al.* (2000: 186-192). Achille Mbembe provides an excellent introduction to “postcolonial thought” as engagement with alterity in an interview for the Journal *Esprit* (2000).

<sup>4</sup> This article represents the outcome of a preliminary study based exclusively on the use of available written sources. Focusing on the early history of the *Indigènes*, it does not seek to provide an exhaustive treatment of the phenomenon both in terms of the variety of issues raised by it and its historical trajectory up to the present.

<sup>5</sup> Unless indicated otherwise, all translations are by the author, while the italics in citations are from the original.

of the PIR foregrounds a reality of exclusion and segregation in a political space that previously was characterized by an ideal of inclusion:

Twenty years ago, a political interpellation of the same nature as the one of the Call of the indigènes de la République would have been, strictly speaking, *unthinkable*. Because a bit more than twenty years ago politics could still exist as forced and massive institutional entry of the dominated or ‘those without a share’, liable to come and contest the order of domination which refuses to share (...). This is no longer the case. Today, in spite of all feigned or sincere denegation, the categories of the national, the religious and of ethnic belonging, seem to be the interpretative categories dominating social and political relations. (2005: 122)

The argument presented here seeks to bring more complexity into the hypothesis of the PIR being the expression of a new racial or ethnic mobilization strategy in politics. It posits that while the movement can effectively be understood as the expression of “new tactical grammars” (Bertrand interviewed in Cohen *et al.*, 2006: 10), the use of the self-identification “indigènes” fundamentally points at a denial of full citizen’s rights through religious, ethnic or racial identifications. At stake here are the forms of exclusion resulting from a Republican universalism stipulating the absence of discrimination through the non-recognition of social difference (Dine, 2008; Mbembe, 2005). Such a perspective draws attention to the implicit racial and cultural presuppositions of Republican ideology and suggests the need for a paradigm within which the access to equal rights does not preclude difference.

I start out by presenting the context of the petition relating it both to other events which occurred later in 2005 and to the broader issue of the historical emergence of a postcolonial question in France. I then move on to discuss the contents of the petition and the debate it provoked. I use this discussion in order to question the idea of a new, difference-based form of political mobilization of which the PIR is held to be an expression. Finally, I show that the argument of the emergence of new essentialist political mobilization strategies can be relocated within assessments of postcolonial studies in France and explore the reasons for this convergence.

## **THE EVENTS OF 2005 AND THE EMERGENCE OF A POSTCOLONIAL QUESTION IN FRANCE**

This section deals with the way the issues raised by the petition of the *Indigènes* and their reception point both at a series of past paradigmatic moments and movements, as well as at the ensuing events of 2005. As mentioned earlier, the latter have become closely related to the law of February 23, 2005 “concerning the recognition of the Nation and

national contribution in favor of repatriated French". The law was voted by the conservative majority in order to forbid the defence of crimes committed against the *harkis*,<sup>6</sup> who had fought alongside the French colonial army in the war of Algeria, protect them against abuse and allow for the payment of indemnities. It also contained a clause, known as article 4, which dealt with the recognition of the "positive achievements" of the French presence and the sacrifices of the North African combatants of the French army. In this respect, school curricula were to be adapted to the task, while scientific research should give the history of the overseas presence of the French in North Africa the place it merits. Shortly after, six historians published a petition in the newspaper *Le Monde*, which was signed by more than a thousand academics. It demanded the immediate abrogation of the law in the name of the respect due to the necessary independence of historians from an "official history" or a form of "national communitarianism" (Manceron and Nadiras, 2006: 62-67; Dufoix, 2005: 4). While article 4 was finally suppressed after prolonged parliamentary debates, article 1 of the law expressing the "gratitude" of the nation towards those who participated in the "work accomplished by France" in its former colonies was kept.

The signification of the year 2005 as a moment at which, for the first time since the end of the war with Algeria in 1962, French colonialism and its sequels were the subject of broad public debate, received a further interpretative layer, when in November riots broke out in the *banlieus* (suburbs) of Paris. The initial uprising was spurred by the death of two young men during a police pursuit and the fact that the victims had apparently committed no crime whatsoever. It was further kindled by a declaration of the Minister Home Affaires Nicholas Sarkozy, stating that the northern suburb of *La Courneuve* would be "cleaned with a Kärcher" (a brand of high pressure water jet cleaner). The revolt extended to other French cities and lasted for weeks, thus becoming unique not only in France, but also on a European scale. The burning of about 10 000 cars, the destruction of public buildings, such as bus-stops, buses, gymnasiums, libraries and schools, the arrest of about 5000 people, 3 casualties and about 200 injured policemen (Mauger, 2006: 52; Muccielli and Goaziou, 2006: 9) were brought to an end by a state of emergency. Here the same legal disposition that had been created in 1955 to suppress the struggle for independence in Algeria was used. Along with the stigmatizing discourse of the right-wing government, this parallel with the repression of anti-colonial movements supported the assertion made by

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<sup>6</sup> Generally in Northern Africa the term *harki* signifies a *militia* recruited by a religious or political authority. More specifically, it pertains to the Northern African soldiers that were integrated into the *harkas* (literally meaning "military operation" or "expedition"), or indigenous troupes of the French colonial army during the war of Algeria between 1957 and 1962. In Algeria the word *harki* is used as a synonym of traitor. After the end of the colonial war, thousands of *harki* and their families were killed in Algeria, while the French State refused to provide them with a specific status giving them priority in repatriation operations (for a discussion of the case, see Besnaci-Lancou and Manceron, 2008).

the PIR concerning the relationship between colonial violence and the violence of the contemporary State.

Meanwhile, the PIR's claim towards a public memory of the colonized represented by the commemoration of the massacres in Algeria, seems to have found its counterpart in the government's emphasis on the recognition of the experience of the *harkis* within the colonial project. The ensuing discussion on the recognition of traumatic memories and the denunciation of the instrumentalization of historians by the State related these issues to previous controversies. Within a postcolonial problematic two debates were particularly relevant (Jean-Luc Bonniol interviewed in Cohen *et al.*, *op.cit.*). A first case involved the commemoration of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the abolition of slavery and the opening of a museum for the national history of migration. The commemoration of abolition gave rise to a movement of migrants coming from of the French overseas territories, who pointed out the fact that the slaves' political action and mobilisation for their own liberation had been largely obliterated by the official policy of commemoration. This position was expressed during a march organized on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of May 1998. In 2001 a law in which the State officially took responsibility in relation to the slave trade, qualifying it as "crime against humanity", was elaborated by the deputy of Guyane Christiane Taubira. Three years later, in April 2004 this was followed by the recommendation of the Commission on the memory of slavery to create a national day of commemoration. The second case concerning the public recognition of the role of migrants in national history, began with the announcement made in 2004 by the conservative Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin that in 2007 the museum *Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration* (National Centre for the History of Immigration) would be opened in the former museum of the colonies. In May 2007, however, shortly after the museum's inauguration, eight historians and demographers belonging to its scientific board resigned following the creation of a "Ministry for immigration and national identity" by the re-elected right-wing government. Here the celebration of the diversity of memories within the nation was clearly at odds with the tightening of restrictive immigration policies, the criminalization of non-European foreigners living in France without papers and the difficulty of republican ideology to come to terms with cultural and religious heterogeneity.

In this respect, one of the most prominent arguments of the PIR concerns state-sponsored forms of discrimination of immigrants and their offspring in relation to religious difference and, in particular, Islam. This is closely related to the fact that over the last three decades, the issues of difference and integration have come to be symbolized by the "affair of the veil" and its various stages, beginning in 1989 and leading up to a law in March 2004 forbidding the use of ostensible religious signs in public schools. A movement of resistance against this law called "Une école pour toutes et tous (A school for all

[females and males])” was created. Its existence is relevant to what Romain Bertrand (interviewed in Cohen *et al.*, 2007: 10) calls the appearance of agents with new “tactical grammars”, some of whom were to become authors and signatories of the PIR.

Understanding their positioning and responding to the question why the PIR called for a foundation meeting regarding the discrimination of postcolonial immigrants also requires taking into account the history of the political movements of second generation immigrants in France and particularly the descendants of people coming from Algeria, referred to as *Beurs*. Confronting the rise of the xenophobic discourse of the *Front National* party and the restriction of immigration, which began in 1974, a highly symbolic event took place in 1983 referred to as the “March of the *Beurs*”. This initiative was followed by a series of similar events, which according to Jeremy Robine (2006: 137) ended up creating a structural cleavage between “pro-communitarians” and “inter-culturalists”. The latter faction became dominant with the founding of the antiracist movement SOS Racism, which through its support to the presidential campaign of François Mitterand in 1988 was associated with the Socialist Party. Robine argues that, confronted with the subsequent lack of support for anti-racist policies by the socialists, the continuation of restrictive immigration policies and the progressive deterioration of economic and social conditions in the *banlieus*, the legitimacy of the antiracist movement declined in favour of religious groups referred to as “islamist”, but also the emergence of “autonomist” organizations. Robine concludes that while “autonomists” such as the “Mouvement de l’immigration et des banlieus” (Movement of Immigration and of the Suburbs) base their legitimacy on their local rootedness in migrant areas, the MIR adopted a broader stance denouncing the confluence of racism and anti-Muslim policies in the Republic. This position is understood as a reaction to the new context of islamophobia generated by the attacks against the World Trade Centre on the 11<sup>th</sup> of September 2001.

Finally, three other public events are frequently cited in discussions on the relationship between the Republic, immigration and racism, among which the third one involving the supposed anti-Semitism of Black and Arab immigrants was particularly relevant for the authors of the PIR (Robine, *op.cit.*, 124-125). While the victory of the multiracial French football team in the World Cup of 1998 was seen as a demonstration of the success of the ideal of Republican integration, three years later, during the first ever game between France and Algeria, spectators from the suburbs whistled at the French national anthem and interrupted the match by storming the soccer field. In 2004 the degree to which the association of crime, race and Muslim anti-Semitism had become common sense was demonstrated by the “affair of the RER D”. A young woman travelling with her baby claimed to have been molested by six youths who uttered anti-Semitic insults and drew a swastika on her stomach with a black marker. Although the story turned out to be an



invention, the French media considered the case to be plausible in a context of Black and Arab anti-Semitism, while the right wing newspaper *Figaro* related the case to the menace of uncontrolled immigration to national cohesion (Robine, *ibidem*).

### THE PETITION OF THE *INDIGÈNES* AND ITS READINGS

Let us now look more closely at the arguments made in the PIR, the background of its authors, the public reactions and the academic readings it stimulated. While, with the exception of the transatlantic slave trade, the postcolonial frame of reference presented so far refers to events spanning the three decades since the end of the post-war economic miracle, the beginning of migration control and the implementation of neo-liberal policies in Europe, the petition “Nous sommes les Indigènes de la République!” (*op.cit.*, 2005) expands the perspective by explicitly relating the late colonial period to the present. As argued earlier on, this becomes immediately apparent when we consider that the petition begins by characterizing people living in the “neighborhoods” as “indigenicized”, referring to the fact that they are pushed to the margins of society and placed within “no-rights zones”, which the Republic is held to “re-conquer”. The text goes on to denounce discrimination against those that have acquired French nationality, but are subject to systematic police violence, a lack of recognition for the sacrifices of the parent generation, segregation – as in the case of the *harkis*, and to a law of exception concerning the wearing of the veil. The petition continues by evoking the denial of entry to North African and Sub-Saharan African migrants, the atrocities committed by the colonial state and the continuities of “a politics of domination” in some former colonies. Returning to the issue of the unequal treatment of people of (North-) African origin before the law, but also to the creation of laws of exception, as in the case of the interdiction of the veil and the forced repatriation of immigrants convicted for a crime, the text concludes that “the figure of the ‘indigène’ continues to haunt political, administrative and judicial action”, while “being embedded in other logics of oppression, discrimination and social exploitation”. In this later respect the authors of the text discuss the impact of neo-liberalism, the American neoconservatives and the conflict in the Middle East, and argue that French progressive intellectuals use the paradigm of a “shock of civilizations” when referring to a conflict between the “Republic” and “communitarianism”. In this context, when associating young people from the suburbs with anti-semitism and integrism, secularism, citizenship and feminism are used fraudulently and the spirits of progressives are stricken by “colonial gangrene”. Therefore “colonial ideology continues transversally with respect to the grand currents of ideas which compose the French political field”. As a consequence, the final part of the petition calls for a “decolonization of the Republic” by engaging critically with the Enlightenment and a nationalism hiding behind a “chauvinism of the universal” held to



“civilize’ savages”, as well as promoting “radical measures of justice and equality” against discrimination. Its last paragraphs establish a “WE” made up of the descendants of the victims of slavery, the colonised and immigrants. This category also includes the heritage of the French who fought against Nazism, all those nationals and non-nationals “fighting against oppression and discrimination within the ‘postcolonial Republic’”, and makes reference to all peoples fighting for their emancipation from “imperialist, colonial or neo-colonial forms of domination”. Here a common combat of all oppressed and exploited “for a truly egalitarian and universal social democracy” is envisioned. The text concludes by calling for a “foundation meeting of anti-colonialism” in view of contributing to the emergence of “an autonomous dynamic” which may challenge the political system, as well as French society as a whole. As mentioned in the introduction, it also announces a march commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the massacres of Setif on the 8<sup>th</sup> of May 1945. For the authors of the petition these violent events evoke “the paradoxes of the Republic” due to the fact that they took place on the very day of liberation from Nazism.

As Robine stresses (*op.cit.*: 119-120 and 141), it is significant that the petition was written by a collective predominantly made up of activists possessing university diplomas. This applies to the first conveners of the petition, Houria Bouteldja and Youssef Boussoumah. The former is a member of the above mentioned organization “*Une école pour toutes et tous* (A school for all [females and males])”, and founder of the feminist collective “Les Blédardes”<sup>7</sup>, while the latter teaches geography and history in a secondary school in the northern suburbs of Paris and is involved in the pro-Palestinian movement. They were joined by Saïd Bouamama, a prominent sociologist in migration studies, who was involved in the immigrant-rights marches of the 1980s, and he is, among other things, a member of the “Collectif des musulmans de France – Collective of Muslims in France” and a doctoral student and activist of the “Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (LCR) – Communist revolutionary league”. The profile of the authors of the petition is reflected in the characteristics of the signatories: representatives of the radical left, ecologists and NGO activists, belonging to organizations who mostly distanced themselves from the text (Communist Party, Ecologists, LCR, *Mouvement contre le racisme et pour l’amitié entre les peuples* – MRAP – Movement against Racism and for Friendship among Peoples), but also members of Muslim and communitarian organizations (M.F., 2005). According to three signatories of the PIR, by February 25 more than 1000 people had signed the

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<sup>7</sup> The term *Blédard* is used to refer to people coming from the North African ex-colonies. Derived from the word *Bléd*, meaning village it presents the ex-colony as a synonym of the backwoods. The movement *Les Blédards* was formed as a critique of the organization Ni-Putes-Ni-Soumises (Neither prostitutes, nor submitted), which promotes the liberation of Muslim women and girls with respect to the pressure exerted by their families in general and, in particular, their older brothers. In contrast with the idea of Republican integration promoted by Ni-Putes-Ni-Soumises, *Les Blédards* defend the right to emancipation along with the right to cultural difference and self-determination (Bouteldja 2006).

petition (Héricord, Lévy and Khiari, 2005). Interviewed by Jeremy Robine, Saïd Bouamama claims that a majority of those who signed represent well educated members of the second generation, who now find themselves blocked in the perspectives for their social promotion and draws a parallel to the independence movement, which was also led by members of an incipient middle class (Robine, *op.cit.*: 141). However, Robine argues that although the authors privilege a political reading of the term indigène, the “WE” of the petition attracted many Algerian signatories, some of them would see a “communitarian dimension” in it, to the detriment of people with Sub-Saharan African or Asian origins (*ibidem*: 145). The communitarian argument clearly was publically reinforced by the signature of the Muslim intellectual and activist Tarik Ramadan, who many in the French political class associate with fundamentalism and anti-Semitism (M.F., *op.cit.*).

The reactions of the press further confirm this reading by associating the petition with the anti-Semitism of the black comedian Dieudonné (*Le Monde*), a “true secession of interior indigenous who have nothing in common with those autochthonous French who were and ‘remain’ intrinsically colonizers, or slave-holders” and the rise of a “reactionary, anti-Republican, clerical, anti-secular communitarian and ethnicist Left” (*Marianne*) (Gèze, 2005: 124). As François Gèze (*ibidem*) observes, in the best of cases the bottom line of media arguments in support of the petition followed the rationale that “racial discrimination is ‘indeed real’, but the text is nothing other than a call to ‘communitarianism’, certainly underpinned by anti-Zionism, or anti-Semitism.” However, Gèze concludes that for the first time in these “politically correct” media one can also find entire pages dedicated to the hidden tragedy of the colonial massacres of Constantine in 1945, which the PIR had rightly highlighted (*ibidem*).

In spite of their effort to engage in a nuanced criticism of the petition, which also involved interpreting it through other statements made by the members of the movement, academic readings seem to have subtly echoed the media’s position. Both Laacher and Robine stress the essentializing nature of the “WE” of the call. The latter concludes his study arguing that “the force of pre-existing identities (...), but also the choice to denounce discriminations and other injustices as related to the ethnic group, the religion or the national origin of the victims, seem to combine and compel the political “we” to deviate towards the ethnical” (*op.cit.*: 145). While the author recognizes that the application of the designation “communitarian” contributed to this trend, he sees the main responsibility in the discourse of the organizers themselves. Here the critique of racial discrimination leaves no doubt about the “ethnic consistency of the ‘we’”, which maybe is not North African, but certainly not “white” (*ibidem*: 145-146). Similarly, Laacher argues that in the last instance the discourse of the petition is nothing else “than a supplementary discourse (...) coming to legitimate the figure of the immigrant Arab (...) as *ideal-typical figure* of the

speechless eternal victim” (*op.cit.*: 121). Oscillating between the stereotypes of the immigrant as social being possessing “unsuspected and positive cultural potentialities” and the “figure of misfortune and suffering”, it expresses a form of ethnocentrism in which all immigrants are associated with a “same economic and ontological condition” ultimately supporting the denial of the “political nature” of immigration (*ibidem*).

Regarding these readings it is clear that the strategy of the petition, which establishes relations among a great number of social, religious and economic discriminations, associated with different historical and geographical scales, may produce an essentializing effect reinforced by the use of the “we”. Reflecting the different sensibilities and interests of its authors, one could perceive the petition as an example of the composite and often contradictory makeup of unifying political ideologies so productively stressed by Gramsci. However, one may also agree with the point made in a written response to the critiques of the petition that “the expansive use of the first person plural since the 1970s in the struggles for emancipation has allowed complex political subjects to emerge of which we do not understand why the ‘indigènes’ would be excluded” (Héricord *et al.*, 2005). Moreover, several traits of the petition’s discourse and its political context point beyond such strategic essentialism. The inclusion of the French which fought against Nazism in a common heritage, the denunciation of the “communitarianist” versus “Republican” dichotomy as a prolonged effect of an un-reflected colonial order, the call for a decolonization of the Republic, the reference to an egalitarian and universal democratic order, as well as the evocation of a plurality of logics responsible for political, social and economic inequalities clearly indicate the presence of a political agenda transcending issues of collective identity.

In the last instance Robine’s proposal to analyse the discourse of the MIR as the sign of a “fracture which appears between the nation and a part of itself, coming from the former colonies” (*op.cit.*: 119) could be understood as the expression of a national bias involving the author himself. First of all, when Robine (*ibidem*: 131) uses the expression “the Republic of equality is a myth” to highlight a paradox between the movement’s claim to inclusion and the rejection of the only political means fit to guarantee it independently of social and religious differences, he seems to confound the critique of the “postcolonial Republic” with a rejection of the Republican idea as such. Secondly and more importantly, Robine adopts a theoretical position according to which the Republic as historical experience creating a form of belonging is indistinguishable from the nation. Therefore the petition’s authors criticism of a discriminatory Republicanism holding a hidden nationalist agenda is presented as incongruent, and what actually is at stake is a “strong demand of recognition addressed to the nation, including on the cultural and identity levels” (*ibidem*: 134). Laacher appears to present a similar argument when he points at the presence of a

powerful ambivalence between “a barely dissimulated hate of the West for the wrongs inflicted on the colonized” on the one hand, and a “powerful desire for recognition and equality”, on the other hand (*op.cit.*: 121). However, a distinctive position echoing the petition’s argument is outlined when Laacher indicates that “sharing a wrong that one holds as common to refuse the separation (or the “ghetto”, or segregation, etc.) of two worlds, the one of “natural members” and those considered as not belonging, means “*existing politically as national*, as any national, and not as object of law”. What clearly emerges here is the horizon of dissociating a necessary congruence between the state as principle of political inclusion and the norm of national belonging. Accordingly, in their response to critiques, three of the signatories stress their rejection of the theme of integration/assimilation, arguing that for them the “aim of ‘living together’ does not involve the “normalization of each and everyone” (Héricord *et al.*, *op.cit.*). “The claim to equality, essential for us, does not pass through uniformity” (*ibidem*).

#### **POSTCOLONIALISM IN FRANCE AND THE ESSENTIALIST ARGUMENT**

In the final part of this paper I would like to prolong the discussion of the critique of essentialism by exploring how it relates to what I have already identified as the major innovative move made by the petition concerning the existence of continuity between colonial norms and practices and contemporary forms of discrimination. This perspective is represented through the terms “indigène” and “indigénisé”, which are used as analytical instruments to understand the segregated and discriminated status of immigrants and their offspring living in the suburbs, as well as a situation in which special laws are wielded in order to control these populations. Without it being explicitly stated, the term “*indigène*” thus plays on the idea of “indigénat”, which designates the special legal regime which from the 1870s up to 1946 subjected the yet unassimilated colonized to forced labor and the payment of head-tax. It also relates to what Mahmood Mamdani (1996) has discussed as “bifurcate state”, a form of apartheid in which full rights holding metropolitan citizens are distinguished from the indigenous subjects of colonial authority. The colonial order exemplified by the “indigénat” is related to two broader notions: on the one hand, the idea of “colonial ideology” serves as a means to describe the dichotomy between community/communitarianism and Republican universalism used by contemporary French political elites; on the other hand, the expression “politics of domination” in former colonies implicitly makes reference to a geopolitical order known as “Franceafrique” concerning the privileged relationship between authoritarian regimes of the former French colonies and presidential power in the ex-metropole (Dozon, 2002). In the PIR all of these instances are ultimately related to a lack of reflection and the need for a radical critical return to the

“colonial past-present”, while the heritage of anti-colonial resistance may offer a model for contemporary struggles for equal rights.

According to Stéphane Dufoix these arguments are “emblematic of a use of the past uniquely focused on the present and basing itself on the existence of a continuum – meaning the absence of rupture – between slavery and colonial practices and the current practices of keeping out foreigners and the children of immigrants” (2005: 148). Here the “amalgam and confusion of the status of victims” are held to be exemplary of a regime of historicity designated as “presentism”. Referring to the work of the historian François Hartog (2003), the term designates a contemporary social condition in which the present is only understood in terms of its past and future, and thus paradoxically remains “immediate” due to the fact that it is under-analyzed in terms of its own empirical scope. Dufoix uses this idea to comment on the clarification provided by signatories of the petition that the “whole interest of the foundation meeting [of postcolonial anti-colonialism] is to avoid separating the crimes of the past from the injustices of the present” (Héricord *et al.*, *op.cit.*: 149). Broadly speaking, this critique is taken up by Laacher when he affirms that from his point of view there can be “no historical, logical and chronological relation” between the defeat of the French colonial army in Indochina at Dien Bien Phu and the veil, the same as there is no mechanical relation between “the fact of approving the law of the veil and the fact of being racist” (Laacher, *op.cit.*: 120).

While such criticism seems justified from a methodological point of view, it fails to grasp that the PIR’s discourse explicitly stresses colonial structures being “enmeshed with other logics of oppression, discrimination and social exploitation” (AAVV, 2005). Moreover, beyond the dimension of recognition, the colonial past-present can be understood as the result of a refusal to engage in an analysis of the past which would allow avoiding the reproduction of its structural characteristics in the present. In this respect, the positioning of the PIR can be considered to be the expression of a critical turning point comparable to the belated reflection on French collaboration with the German Nazi occupants (Hargreaves, 2007: 28). This turning point has become associated with the book *La Fracture coloniale. La société française au prisme de l'héritage colonial* (The colonial Fracture. French society through the prism of the colonial heritage) edited in 2005 by Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard and Sandrine Lemaire. Such an approach means coming to terms with evidence that the elaboration of the project of colonial rule and its associated forms of discrimination is closely linked to French liberal anti-abolitionist thought and the establishment of the progressive Third Republic during the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Manchuelle, 1988). Likewise, as Géze stresses, the systematic dissimulation during the contemporary Fifth Republic of the violence and discrimination perpetrated for more than a century in the Algerian settler colony has

produced continuing effects (*op.cit.*: 125). Here one could refer once again to the laws of exception which reproduce the logic of the *Indigénat* Code, but also to the continuing impact of policies that were set up since the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, first in Algeria and then in sub-Saharan Africa, separating a dangerous political Islam from moderate forms.

Within the French intellectual landscape, such arguments remain subject to widespread criticism. While it is not the object of this article to engage in a discussion of the postcolonial question in French academia, there is recurrent point made by critics which parallels the idea that the PIR represents a turn towards the ethnicization or essentialization of political languages. The contribution of the political scientist Jean-François Bayart (2007) to the debate can be seen as representative of this point of view, as far as it contains two recurrent strategic moves. The first one consists of conceding the usefulness of postcolonial approaches, while observing that other authors have already treated these questions without making their methodological errors. The second argument, which is central to my rationale, consists of stating that “Postcolonial studies are politically dangerous. In the current discussion, they tend to ethnicize social questions and through this, they maybe participate in the reconstitution of indirect rule and they convey a culturalist engineering of political domination” (*ibidem*: 271).

Bayart rightly points out the danger of reifying social realities by conceiving them through a form of coloniality which hides the differences among colonial and postcolonial situations and obfuscates forms of agency that cut across simplistic dichotomies depicting victims and perpetrators, dominators and dominated. However, considering that the critique of binary logics of exclusion is central to the postcolonial perspective, it remains unclear why academics exploring the structural continuities between the colonial past and the postcolonial present could not take on board such a form of epistemic and methodological vigilance. What remains striking is the difficulty of a predominant outlook in French academia to come to terms with the idea that a critique of essentialism and hidden ethnocentrism within standard ideas of universalism, is compatible with an approach insisting on “the fact that identity has its origin within multiplicity and dispersion; that autoreferentiality is only possible within an in-between (...), in co-constitution” (Mbembe, 2006: 119).

## CONCLUSION

In this text I have attempted to address the issue of the emergence of what may be designated as a new form of “framing” or “tactical grammar” in processes of political mobilization. Using the petition “Nous sommes les Indigènes de la République!” as a case reference, the idea was both to relate it to the conditions of the emergence of a debate on the postcolonial in France and to explore the characteristics of its discourse of



mobilization along with some of the critical appraisals it has been subject to. In the latter respect it is argued that the strategy of linking a lack of reflection on the consequences of colonial structures of power to the continuity of contemporary norms and practices of discrimination has been overshadowed by the claim that it entrenches cultural differences to the detriment of political liberties. I show that the arguments of academic critics of the PIR and the appraisal of the body of work referred to as postcolonial studies have a tendency to hold in common an inability to consider the problem of difference without falling back on an opposition between political universalism and apolitical communitarianism.

Meanwhile, I do not deny that the movement which developed from the PIR may be prone to encourage anti-democratic and essentializing tendencies. The process of forming a movement rather than maintaining a loose group of people supporting the concerns of the “indigenous of the Republic” apparently did lead to a scission. In a release distributed over the mailing list of the signatories of the petition in mid February 2006 (MCE, 2006) several supporters restate the basic political principle of a struggle for equality which excludes essentializing the ‘other’. They denounce a takeover of the movement by a restricted number of activists and a radicalization in the sense of creating an essentializing opposition between those struggling for decolonization and French society and its political system in general. Furthermore, the authors of the communiqué point out the tendency of this group to produce media effects rather than seeking to articulate the movement with the problems encountered in popular neighborhoods. Through its institutionalization the discourse of the MIR may thus have come to mirror the nationalist rhetoric of the right wing government which conflates the nation and the Republic.

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