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France

Racism: an outpouring of Islamophobia

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Since the attack against *Charlie Hebdo*, France has been the scene of a veritable outpouring of Islamophobia: accusations of culpability, amalgams, violence. But the least that can be said is that the ground had been largely prepared.

An Islamophobia that was already present

We could almost have forgotten, in fact, that on the morning of January 7, a few hours before the attack against *Charlie Hebdo*, the "special guest" on the morning programme of France Inter was Michel Houellebecq, author of a "novel of anticipation" in which a Muslim party comes to power in France in 2022: women sent back to the home, polygamy, the flight of the narrator's girlfriend, who is Jewish, to Israel, to avoid persecution, etc. No cliché is lacking to describe an "Islamized" French society, a victim of the "great replacement" fantasized by part of the far right and by the ideologue Renaud Camus.

We could almost have forgotten that a few weeks earlier, it was not Houellebecq's book that was "front page news" in the press and in television and radio broadcasts, but one by another unsavoury character, Eric Zemmour, who has long made Islamophobia one of his principal trademarks and the "Islamization of France" one of his main battle cries.

Zemmour has the right to think whatever he wants, and Houellebecq has the right to write paranoid and stigmatizing novels. The problem is the echo their works receive and the way they are treated by the media, in other words, the normalization, the rendering banal of ideas, which though they are directly inspired by the Islamophobic far right, acquire the status of legitimate debate in society. All of this in a France that is gangrened by Islamophobia in action, with, according to the annual report of the Collective against Islamophobia in France (CCIF), 691 Islamophobic acts in 2013 (cases of discrimination, attacks against places of worship, assaults against persons etc.), which represents an increase of 47 per cent compared to 2012.

They are Muslims, so they must be a bit guilty...

The attack against *Charlie Hebdo* has therefore not contributed to awakening a slumbering Islamophobia: it has amplified a phenomenon that was already well in evidence, and which affects all spheres of society. Hours after the attack, unpleasant political-media music was heard: since the killers acted in the name of Islam, Muslims should condemn them and "dissociate themselves from solidarity" with them, individually and collectively. However, this injunction to refuse to be in solidarity with them is not only outrageous, but it is also particularly perverse: it is scandalous because it de facto amalgamates millions of believers with a few assassins; it is perverse because it casts collective suspicion on those millions of believers and implies that those who do not declare that they are not in solidarity with the assassins... must be in solidarity with them.

There are multiple examples of these injunctions to dissociate from solidarity, but the most exemplary of them is probably that of Ivan Rioufol, a leader writer for *Figaro*, who on RTL, the day after the attack, demanded that the activist and author Rokhaya Diallo declare loud and clear that she dissociated herself from any solidarity with the assassins of *Charlie Hebdo*.

Has anyone ever asked Protestants to "dissociate themselves from solidarity" with the Ku Klux Klan and its white supremacist ideas, which are theorized around a certain reading of Genesis? At the time of the massacre perpetrated in Norway on July 22, 2011 by Anders Breivik, who claimed to be acting to preserve Christianity in the face of multiculturalism, did anyone ask priests and believers to account for themselves? Obviously, and fortunately, no. But Muslims in the France in 2015 are always "a bit" guilty.

More and more Islamophobic acts

It is no surprise, then, that in such a context and with such amalgams, there have been more and more examples of Islamophobia in action. In the five days after the attack against Charlie Hebdo, there were sixty Islamophobic acts recorded: shots fired at a prayer room in Port-la-Nouvelle and on mosques in Saint-Juéry, Vendôme, Soissons; an attack with training grenades on a mosque in Le Mans; graffiti on mosques in Poitiers ("death to Arabs"), Bischwiller ("Ich bin Charlie"), Bayonne ("charliberty", "murderers," "dirty Arabs"), Louviers (swastikas); a boar's head and entrails found hanging on the door of a prayer room in Corte; and many cases of verbal and physical abuse, which are for the moment impossible to count.

This is the moment that Nicolas Sarkozy chose to publish on his Twitter account on January 12 this singular appeal for calm: "the questions of immigration and Islam are clearly posed. They should be asked calmly and by involving everyone"... And the embarrassed reactions of Socialist leaders who were asked about this statement give cause for concern.

In other words, the fight against racist and Islamophobic amalgams and the violence that accompanies them is just beginning.

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