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France, racism and police violence

Step up the mobilization against racism and police violence

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A tremendous political acceleration. This is how we can describe what we have seen in France for the last ten days around the issue of racism and police violence. You would have to be very perceptive to have anticipated two weeks ago that these themes would occupy a central place in public debate, to the point that Assa Traoré was invited on set on BFM-TV and Interior Minister Christophe Castaner was forced into making announcements which were very badly received by the police unions.

The death of George Floyd in the USA, and the mobilizations that followed, obviously played a role in triggering the sequence we are going through today. However, it would be particularly wrong to consider, as some editorialists and politicians do, that the major demonstrations that have taken place in France in recent days are only a form of mimicry of what is happening in the USA. In France as elsewhere, there are common issues at the international level and specific issues linked to national histories.

Structural racism

The argument that “France is not the United States”, aimed at disqualifying the denunciation of structural racism in France, has, as such, as much consistency as the argument “Israel is not South Africa”, brandished against those who call Israel an apartheid state. There is never a strict equivalence between two historical and/or national situations, which does not prevent us from identifying similar processes and grouping situations under a common “label”. Would anyone say that we cannot speak of representative democracy in France and in the USA on the pretext that “France is not the United States”?

The collective denials that have appeared in the mainstream media in the face of the systemic nature of racism is, moreover, precisely part of the mechanics of ... systemic racism, one of the conditions for reproduction of which is its “self-negation” through its dilution in denouncing individual “bad behaviour”. Note that this phenomenon echoes the discourse claiming that there are “sexist men” and “sexist behaviour” but denying the structural nature of the oppression of women. In recent days, this attitude towards racism has been pushed to the point of caricature, with the ad nauseam repetition of the formula “There are racist police officers but there is no racism in the police”.

“Something” is happening

The anti-racist mobilizations of the past two weeks are not a flash in the pan, and reflect dynamics deeply rooted in society. When, on 30 May, thousands of undocumented migrants and their supporters marched through the streets of Paris despite a prefectural ban, “something” happened. When, on 2 June tens of thousands of people, mostly young, even very young, racialized, from working-class neighbourhoods, gathered before the Paris Appeal Court around particularly radical slogans, again despite a prefectural ban, “something” is happening.

Yes, there is institutional racism in France, which is expressed as much in the criminal policies with regard to migrants and undocumented migrants as in the systematic practice of facial checks, which are often at the origin of police crimes. And it is against this institutional racism that tens of thousands of people, at the forefront those “first concerned”, are rising up today in France, rather than against dangerous ideas or intolerable individual behaviour.

A relationship of forces is created

In recent days, the question of racism and police violence has been raised in public debate on a scale unprecedented in France. The febrility of the government is palpable, given its dependence on good relations with the cops and their organizations, to the point that Castaner was forced to make announcements (end of the use of the choke key, suspension of police officers guilty of racism) and that Macron himself intervened with the Minister of Justice Nicole Belloubet so that she would look into the case of Adama Traoré as soon as possible.

The Adama Committee's response was stinging, with the refusal to meet the minister and the call for a new day of mobilization on Saturday 13 June, while the Marche des Solidarités has called for mobilization on 20 June with undocumented migrants. A relationship of forces has been created, that we should continue to build, rejecting all diversions, whether they come from the government or from a certain "left" which has for many years has been distinguished only by its absence in struggles against racism and police violence, when it has not itself been the legitimate target of these struggles when it was in power. A relationship of forces which has, moreover, already begun to contribute to changing the global social and political climate, giving an explosive character to the emergence from lockdown and encouraging all kinds of mobilisations.

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