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France and police violence

**“The Adama Committee has a
clear objective: to force the
question of police violence
into public debate”**

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Adama Traoré was killed on 19 July 2016 in police custody. Contested autopsies have finally revealed that he died of asphyxiation from sustained pressure. The Truth and Justice for Adama Committee, led by Assa Traore his sister, has been campaigning since 2016 for the truth about his death to be revealed and for those responsible to be brought to justice.

Why, in your opinion, in France, it is easier to denounce racist police violence in the USA than racist police violence ... in France?

I think first there is the question of distance. It's always easier to talk about what's going on far away than to talk about what's going on here. And the fact of talking a lot about the United States, of saturating the media with images of what is happening in the United States, is part of the screed that has descended on racist police violence and the revolts in France.

Secondly, in France we have a so-called “universalist” discourse: in France, we don't see colours, in France, everyone is the same,; in France, there are only citizens, races do not exist and so on. So obviously, yes, biological races do not exist but, very concretely, France has constructed a racial discourse in order to be able to dominate the planet. It did so during the colonial period, to justify its domination over other peoples on earth. We can for example quote the speech of Jules Ferry [in 1885] where he explained this burden of the white man, this “duty to civilize the lower races” in Africa. It is therefore the West, Europe and especially France, which has constructed a racial discourse, and it is not those who denounce racial discourse and racialization who are racializing.

It shouldn't be reversed, but this is what some people are trying to do in France.

This is, moreover, the trial that we are trying to make at the Adama Committee, when we say that there are similarities between the situation in the United States and the situation in France. There are historical similarities, France also has a history of slavery, there are cities in France which were built on slavery, I think for example of Bordeaux, or Nantes, cities which have were built on the operation of the slave trade. And there is of course colonial history, France was the second biggest colonial power in the world, it colonized Africa and a large part of Asia. There is therefore a history vis-À-vis these populations, vis-À-vis the black and North African populations, and the situation today, police violence, does not come from nowhere: this violence which in the overwhelming majority of cases, is aimed at the so-called “racialized” populations, that is to say black and Arabs, comes from this history.

So in total, the comparison between France and the United States is relevant, although obviously we have to say that everything is not the same, that in the United States there are specific questions and problems, notably related to the phenomenon of the deportation of African populations to the American continent.

Obviously we have to speak about the demonstration on Tuesday, 2 June before the Paris Appeal Court: tens of thousands of people demanding justice for Adama and denouncing racist police violence. Can you tell us about it and what it means politically for you?

For us it's a turning point. We have reached an unprecedented level of mobilization. With the Adama Committee, this is not our first attempt, but there has been a real rise in strength over four years. We organized several significant political events, which are linked to a strategy that has been established for four years vis-À-vis different sectors of society, with a guideline, a clear objective: to force the issue of police violence into public debate, to impose it on

leftist movements, especially those which have a perspective of winning power.

Regarding the latter, it is clear that these questions annoy them, in the sense that, from their point of view, it is not very “bankable”, it would not gain a votes. They therefore have a discourse that is entitled, we must not inconvenience the police unions, which are very powerful in France, we must not inconvenience people who think that the police protect them, while the police serve to contain the poor populations of the working-class districts, the black and Arab populations, to prevent them from rebelling against their fate.

With the demonstration [of 2 June], we have reached a new milestone, it is a show of force. When even BFM-TV calls this demonstration a “show of force”, it is good that something is happening. We never doubted it, we knew there was this mobilization capacity, this huge mobilization potential in the poorer neighbourhoods. For the past four years, we have been going to the neighbourhoods, we have always primarily addressed the popular neighbourhoods, we have always moved, for each of the Adama marches, upstream, we first go to neighbourhoods, everywhere in the Île-de-France, to chat with people, to do politics with them. We always knew that one day it would be massive. This is what happened on 2 June: a show of force of what the popular neighbourhoods can do. When there is a clear political leadership, a clear discourse, it works, and that is what is expected in the neighbourhoods. Our watchword was “Revolt against the denial of justice”, many would have said to us “We must not say revolt, otherwise they will burn everything, and so on”. On the contrary! “Revolt” is what everyone should say today. Because when a young man dies, on the day of his 24th birthday, killed by gendarmes, or when others, on motorbikes, are struck, and end up crushed ... everyone should revolt, and that should be the slogan of all organizations, politicians, unions, associations and so on.

But unfortunately, and this also demonstrates our capacity for mobilization because we organized this rally alone, which I note, and here I am not talking about the NPA, which is always there, nor the groups we are used to seeing, but people like Jean-Luc Mélenchon, François Ruffin and so on, talking about the rally afterwards, because there is the relationship of forces, but they did not speak before. And that leaves a bitter taste. Things were clear: this is organized by the Adama Committee, there will be no recuperation, and in fact I think that is why they did not speak, because there was no possibility of recuperation, and I find it lamentable. But I think that there, with the success of the rally, they took on a little pressure.

What was striking during the rally, beyond the number of people, is the impressive number of young people, from the neighbourhoods, racialized, with in particular many young women ...

A lot of young women yes, and that is explained by a very simple thing: today, Assa Traoré has become a figure in the fight against police violence, who embodies justice and dignity. She has become a powerful motor of identification for these young women. When the populations of lower-income neighbourhoods feel represented, by someone who says what they want to hear, direct, radical, frank, uncompromising, it works, people come onto the streets, mobilize. It is also a response to those who said that working-class neighbourhoods are resigned, that there is no politics in the neighbourhoods: Tuesday [2 June] was the demonstration of the opposite.

3 June 2020

PS:

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