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France

Open Letter: the threat of academic authoritarianism – international solidarity with antiracist academics in France

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A critical response to the Manifesto signed by over 100 French academics and published in the newspaper *Le Monde* on 2 November 2020, after the assassination of the school teacher, Samuel Paty.

At a time of mounting racism, white supremacy, antisemitism and violent far-right extremism, academic freedom has come under attack. The freedom to teach and research the roots and trajectories of race and racism are being perversely blamed for the very phenomena they seek to better understand. Such is the contention of a manifesto signed by over 100 French academics and published in the newspaper *Le Monde* on 2 November 2020 [1]. Its signatories state their agreement with French Minister of Education, Jean-Michel Blanquer, that 'indigenist, racist, and "decolonial" ideologies,' imported from North America, were responsible for 'conditioning' the violent extremist who assassinated school teacher, Samuel Paty, on 16 October 2020.

This claim is deeply disingenuous, and in a context where academics associated with critical race and decolonial research have recently received death threats, it is also profoundly dangerous. The scholars involved in this manifesto have readily sacrificed their credibility in order to further a manifestly false conflation between the study of racism in France and a politics of 'Islamism' and 'anti-white hate'. They have launched it in a context where academic freedom in France is subject to open political interference, following a Senate amendment that redefines and limits it to being 'exercised with respect for the values of the Republic' [2].

The manifesto proposes nothing short of a McCarthyist process to be led by the French Ministry for Higher Education, Research and Innovation to weed out 'Islamist currents' within universities, to take a clear position on the 'ideologies that underpin them', and to 'engage universities in a struggle for secularism and the Republic' by establishing a body responsible for dealing with cases that oppose 'Republican principles and academic freedom'. The 'Islamogauchiste' tag (which conflates the words 'Islam' and 'leftists') is now widely used by members of the government, large sections of the media and hostile academics. It is reminiscent of the antisemitic 'Judeo-Bolshevism' accusation in the 1930s which blamed the spread of communism on Jews. The 'Islamogauchiste' notion is particularly pernicious as it voluntarily confuses Islam (and Muslims) with Jihadist Islamists. In other words, academics who point out racism against the Muslim minority in France are branded allies of Islamist terrorists and enemies of the nation.

This is not the only contradiction that shapes this manifesto. Its signatories appear oblivious to how its feverish tone is redolent of the antisemitic witch-hunts against so-called 'Cultural Marxists' that portrayed Jewish intellectuals as enemies of the state. Today's enemies are Muslims, political antiracists, and decolonial thinkers, as well as anyone who stands with them against rampant state racism and Islamophobia.

Further, when seen in a global context, the question of who is in fact 'importing' ideas from North America is worth considering. The manifesto comes on the back of the Trump administration's executive order 'on Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping' which effectively bans federal government contractors or subcontractors from engaging what are characterised as ideologies that portray the United States as 'fundamentally racist or sexist'. [3] Quick on Trump's heels, the British Conservative Party moved to malign Critical Race Theory as a separatist ideology that, if taught in schools, would be 'breaking the law' [4].

We are concerned about the clear double standards regarding academic freedom in the attack on critical race and decolonial scholarship mounted by the manifesto. In opposition to the actual tenets of academic freedom, the demands it makes portray any teaching and research into the history or sociology of French colonialism and

institutionalised racism as an attack on academic freedom. In contrast, falsely and dangerously linking these scholarly endeavours to Islamic extremism and holding scholars responsible for brutal acts of murder, as do the signatories of the Manifesto, is presented as consistent with academic freedom.

This is part of a global trend in which racism is protected as freedom of speech, while to express antiracist views is regarded as a violation of it. For the signatories of the manifesto – as for Donald Trump – only sanitised accounts of national histories that omit the truth about colonialism, slavery, and genocide can be antiracist. In this perverse and ahistorical vision, to engage in critical research and teaching in the interests of learning from past injustices is to engage in ‘anti-white racism’, a view that reduces racism to the thoughts of individuals, disconnecting it from the actions, laws and policies of states and institutions in societies in which racial socioeconomic inequality remains rife.

In such an atmosphere, intellectual debate is made impossible, as any critical questioning of the role played by France in colonialism or in the current geopolitics of the Middle East or Africa, not to mention domestic state racism, is dismissed as a legitimisation of Islamist violence and ‘separatism’. Under these terms, the role of political and economic elites in perpetuating racism both locally and on a global scale remains unquestioned, while those who suffer are teachers and activists attempting to improve conditions for ordinary people on the ground.

In the interests of a real freedom, of speech and of conscience, we stand with French educators under threat from this ideologically-driven attack by politicians, commentators and select academics. It is grounded in the whitewashing of the history of race and colonialism and an Islamophobic worldview that conflates all Muslims with violence and all their defenders with so-called ‘leftist Islamism’. True academic freedom must include the right to critique the national past in the interests of securing a common future. At a time of deep polarization, spurred by elites in thrall to white supremacy, defending this freedom is more vital than ever.

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[1] See "[Le Manifeste des 100](#)".

[2] openDemocracy, 2 November 2020 "[Academic freedom in the context of France's new approach to 'separatism'](#)".

[3] White House, 22 September 2020 "[Executive Order on Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping](#)".

[4] *The Independent*, 22 October 2020 "[The government has no intention of taking racism seriously – and it is using MPs of colour to avoid criticism](#)".