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Strategic thinking

Dreaming as internationalist materialists

- Features -

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This text, written by five members of the editorial board of Contretemps, is a critical response to Houria Bouteldja's article 'Dreaming Together: For an Internationalist Patriotism.' [Rêver ensemble. Pour un patriotisme internationaliste](#). [1] Unlike some others who have responded, we do not believe that its author should be discredited (let alone demonized, as some have been quick to do). We believe that this text deserves to be widely debated, especially as it echoes powerful trends running through the left today, at a time of rising authoritarian nationalism. In our view, Houria Bouteldja's text is based on erroneous observations, and the ideas and proposals it defends run counter to the struggles for emancipation.

We will begin with a statement: yes, we dream, and we desire! We dream of emancipation, and we desire equality (individual, collective, between peoples).

And we are on the left, a radical and revolutionary left at that. What should be troubling us today is not changing our dreams and desires. Certainly not going poaching on the side of those opposed to us, claiming that "only the far right dreams".

A politics of emotions?

It is legitimate to be interested in emotions in politics, and in particular in "mass emotions", following the thread laid down by the Marxist psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, whom Houria Bouteldja cites as a reference. Certainly, but to what end? Not necessarily to embrace them uncritically, but to help ensure that ideas and struggles for emancipation are not powerless, that they are massive material forces and not the fantasies of a few. Not to justify strategies that, historically, whether we like it or not, most often come from the far right.

There is no concrete reality of the working classes in France, no real alliance between "rednecks and barbarians" (if such categories are relevant), between "tower blocks and small towns", and no political practice other than that of our enemies to support the proposition that "building a sentimental, emotional and ideological relationship with the victims of neoliberalism [...] can only be achieved through the mediation of patriotic sentiment". In today's France and Europe, this is above all the dream of the neo-fascists, and not only is it illusory to appropriate it in an imperialist country like France, but it would be extremely dangerous to claim to do so – such a perspective must be fought at all costs. We will return to this point later.

One might even wonder whether the far right is dreaming at all. Its leaders certainly dream of power, that is undeniable. But what about the rest? The rest is the opposite of a dream: the far right projects nothing but hatred and domination. Its stock in trade is resentment, fear, racism and exclusion.

Emotions, domination and social relations

Furthermore, distinguishing between what is an emotion and what has to do with the material dimensions of social relations is a political dead end, and in fact leads to ignoring these material dimensions, the socio-economic conditions that give social groups their reality; yet love of one's country or nation makes it possible to render social

relations invisible.

Is it really “transcendence” that drives far-right voters, or rather, as sociologist Félicien Faury has pointed out, “a series of purely material interests, where racial hostility is intertwined with economic concerns”? [\[2\]](#)

We agree that it is necessary to wrest those whom the author disparagingly refers to as “little whites” from the clutches of the far right and propose a common policy of alliance with immigrant and racialized working-class communities. To achieve this, what must mobilize us theoretically, strategically and practically is to share our desire to change the world, to make it a material reality. And if we seek to build convergences of struggles between the different sections of the working classes, white and non-white, this can only be achieved on this basis. For we are convinced that there will be no other way to push back the far right other than to advance the emancipatory left. But the left for what it is, or rather what it should be. And this must be done starting from reality, from the materiality that is its own, that is ours. While claiming – like us – to be a communist, Houria Bouteldja asserts that the “internationalist” left, the left of “human fraternity”, which she considers “too generous”, is doomed to “dream alone”. We agree with her that the legacy of the 20th century, the horrors of Stalinism and the betrayals of social democracy weigh heavily in the balance. However, no shortcuts, no patriotic “stroke of brilliance”, no abstract arguments from a vanguard that claims to have discovered the “secret” of the emotions of the working classes and their need to “become French” can replace this. This discovery is nothing but a fantasy, and its promoters run the risk of setting themselves up as self-proclaimed strategists for both non-racialized and racialized popular sectors, which they see as homogeneous, essentialized groups that are largely lost to any anti-capitalist perspective.

In reality, there is indeed a social reading in Houria Bouteldja’s text, but it is highly problematic. To dismiss the collective power of labour with a stroke of the pen is audacious from this point of view. For when the class ground gives way beneath our feet, all that remains is to fall into the void. It is certainly true that the labour market is “fragmented, divided, stratified” and that “the working class is much more heterogeneous and competitive” than in the past – but to conclude from this that there is no longer any class consciousness or possibility of class struggle is a cliché contradicted by the facts and invented by our neoliberal opponents. The triangular social consciousness described by many sociologists of the working classes, complicated by its intertwining with social relations of race and gender (incidentally, where is this central issue addressed in her text?), is a major challenge for the left and must be a basis for reflection on alliances between classes and between subordinate social sectors.

We could add that the “labour market” referred to by Houria Bouteldja is a theoretical construct that only makes sense from the point of view of capitalism. For what really exists are classes in struggle. The 300,000 jobs destroyed by the redundancy plans of recent months are a stark reminder of this. What is called the proletariat, which cannot be reduced to the industrial working class, is far from having disappeared. The fact that large concentrations of workers, all the “Billancourts” [\[3\]](#), are no longer part of the landscape is one thing (incidentally, this may be a French reality, but it is not a European one, let alone a global one). Houria Bouteldja deduces from this the inability to “experiment with collective power” in time and space. But this concentration is not a constant in the history of the proletariat: trade unionism, the labour movement itself, was invented in a network of factories and trades that were just as fragmented as today. Moreover, reserves for a fightback remain: there are strikes, and there are possibilities for organization and alternatives, no less today than in the past.

And for those who, through their work, make this society function every day, the dream of being able to withdraw from capitalist subordination at work – retirement is nothing else – is not “too small”, just as it is not a dream to want to live longer and in good health, to work less, all of us, and differently. It is quite concrete, quite material. Concrete enough to have brought out crowds of protesters, more than a million on several occasions, something no other “dream” has ever achieved. That this is not enough, that more or better action is needed, is obvious. We agree with the author and all anti-racist and decolonial activists that we must take into account all dimensions of the realities experienced by workers, the intersectional diagonal of domination, and in particular the racial and gender division of labour and systemic state racism, especially Islamophobia. Thus, the mobilization against pension reform, among

other things, shows that there is a solid and concrete basis for “collective power” in the experiences of labour – although here too, we need to take stock of what needs to be done better next time, in terms of self-organization and the participation of working-class neighbourhoods, particularly people of colour.

The “labour market”, on the other hand, is precisely conceived by neoliberals as a transcendence, something that goes beyond human will, to the point of imposing its “iron heel” – fascism.

So yes, we are materialists. We persist in believing that it is women and men – based on their real living conditions and struggles – who make history, not abstract ideas such as “patriotism” or “the Nation”.

This is why we were involved not only in the strikes in defence of our pensions, but also in the Yellow Vest protests and the march against Islamophobia in 2019. We never felt “dirty”, and we strongly reject this contemptuous conception of the “dirty little people”. Not that we think we are more virtuous than others or unconcerned by the sad passions of a period marked by nationalism, masculinism, racism, hatred and wars. But rather than calling in an incantatory fashion for people to “get dirty” in this swamp in an attempt to overturn the equation, we believe that we must respond by fostering solidarity and encouraging participation in real social struggles (anti-capitalist, anti-racist, feminist, environmentalist, internationalist, etc.) as tens of thousands of activists, including trade unionists, collectives and neighbourhood associations, are already doing on a daily basis – yet this is not mentioned once in this text, which is supposed to address the question of “how can we dream together?”

A “patriotic” left... in the imperialist France of 2025?

Once again, there is a lot of exaggeration and caricature in Houria Bouteldja’s opposition, this time to the radical left. For our part, we were not at all “horried” by the presence of French flags in the Yellow Vest protests or in the march against Islamophobia, well aware of their simple meaning for those who were waving them at the time: “we are also this country!” Moreover, these flags were not the rallying point for these movements: the yellow vest was the physical symbol and rallying cry for one, while the rejection of racist and Islamophobic hatred was the driving force for the other.

Nevertheless, what a surprising – and dangerous – idea it is to want to make the blue, white and red and the homeland a strategic banner in the context of France in 2025. For it is in this light that we must discuss the issue: the trajectory leading us to the possibility of fascism in France, as in Europe, is clear. We believe that there is, at least, common ground on this point. Chauvinistic nationalism, racist policies and nauseating rhetoric are already in power, and we are supposed to add to this by seeking to mobilize “patriotic” sentiments? We cannot help but think of Daniel Guérin’s warning:

“In France [in the second half of the 1930s], we saw neo-socialists successively place the nation at the forefront of their credo, while our communist comrades shouted themselves hoarse about “loving their country”. But most “patriots”, thus stimulated in their chauvinistic hysteria, but still distrustful of the left, felt that fascism was better qualified than the left to embody nationalism.” [\[4\]](#)

We will not be among those who, here – in the heart of a Western capitalist imperialist country – and now – in a context of fascism and widespread rearmament – make the national flag and the homeland a rallying point for our social camp.

Houria Bouteldja, a long-time decolonial activist, seems “disturbed” by the “patriotic” Houria Bouteldja, when she nevertheless insists on quoting Césaire and explaining why “France is indefensible”: after the Code Noir, the colonial massacres, Françafrique and the neocolonial continuum in the four corners of the globe (from Mayotte to Kanaky via French Guiana)... And, of course, we are aware that the revolutionary homeland of 1792 or the Paris Commune is not that of the counter-revolutionary nation, of the slaughter in Verdun or Sétif. We even claim to be part of “the France of struggles and dreams”, of the great strikes, of the youth and working-class uprisings, of the “zones à défendre” (areas to be defended), of the conquest of rights, of feminisms, etc. [5] But it is also in France that, for a long time now, nationalist-patriotic discourse has been dominated by conservatives and sovereignists of all stripes, making us take bladders for lanterns and the BBR [bleu, blanc, rouge: blue, white, red] flag for a sign of democratic or “republican” rallying. As Daniel Bensaïd wrote:

“As early as 1848, the Communist Manifesto put its overcoming [of the nation state] on the agenda: “Workers of all countries, unite!”. Class solidarity thus opposes the sacred union and the national Holy Alliance between opposing classes. This youthful internationalism responds to senile nationalism, for which the nation no longer represents a step towards global citizenship, but becomes an end in itself, rooted in the romantic quest for origins, roots, land and the dead.” [6]

This nationalism is even more poisonous today, and there is no need to add to it. Nevertheless, it is true that, despite the globalization of capital (and because of it too), the scale of the nation state remains, in many cases, a fundamental scale for the construction of the politics of the oppressed, popular sovereignty and the struggle of the subaltern for hegemony. We experience this in practice every day. It is at this level that major ruptures could occur again in the future, that those at the bottom could rise to the forefront and even raise the question of political power. We do not forget this aspect of things, nor do we take refuge in a kind of abstract or disembodied internationalism. In the magazine *Nous* no. 3 published by QG Décolonial, Stathis Kouvélakis (also a comrade of Contretemps Web) defends the strategic options of the author of *Beaufs et Barbares* (Rednecks and Barbarians) to “dialectize our relationship with the nation state”, while supporting Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s calls for a “new France”. [7] Stathis thus emphasises that “the only concrete internationalism is that which assumes the mediation of the nation”, citing Marx and Engels (who called on the proletariat to “set itself up as the ruling class of the nation”). But it would be more accurate to say that this is one of the mediations, because many experiences of transnational struggles and recent “grassroots” internationalism show, at the same time, more complex dynamics, which can, for example, combine several levels and territories (local, national, multinational). Think of the strength of the “intergalactic” Zapatista movement or the alterglobalization movement in the 1990s and 2000s in the reconstruction of a new internationalism, to the dynamics of the trans-Andean and even transatlantic feminist strikes since 2016, to the Arab Spring of 2011 or the popular uprisings in 2019 in Latin America (Chile, Colombia, Ecuador), to trade union and youth solidarity with the resistance struggles of the peoples of Palestine and Ukraine, to Kurdish resistance movements in various national territories, etc.

This is not to deny the existence of class struggles and internationalist solidarity at various levels, including of course the national level, nor to deny the importance of the imaginary, symbolic and identity-based communities that nation states represent for millions of individuals. Rather, it is a question of criticizing a strategy of unifying the working classes which, instead of establishing hegemony through struggle and the defence of an anti-racist and anti-capitalist front, seeks shortcuts, for want of anything better, through the glorification of patriotic France (and therefore of its state), which would be transformed – by magic? – the imperial and chauvinist stigmata: from a shrivelled pumpkin, it would become an internationalist fairy.

In this respect, it remains essential to make the distinction, following the theorists and activists of anti-colonial struggles, between nationalism in dominant, imperialist countries and nationalism in dominated and/or colonized countries. The Palestinian flag in Gaza symbolizes national liberation struggles. The French flag is in the hands of Zemmour, Le Pen and Retailleau. However, Houria Bouteldja’s patriotic transcendence and “return to the nation” reproduce the prevailing political confusion and disarm us in the face of the far-right discourse that portrays the

“French nation” as the victim of the “great replacement”, the “globalist conspiracy”, “Europeanism” – a word that the text adopts – etc.

In the game of “who is the most patriotic” (“the so-called patriotic far right only has the confidence of the ruling classes on condition that it submits to Europeanism and therefore betrays the nation”), we always lose, and Houria Bouteldja diverts the more than legitimate criticism of neoliberal Europe and its necessary deconstruction by thinking she can use patriotic sentiment to rally the victims of neoliberalism. Apart from the fact that the most violent forms of capitalism can easily accommodate the most acute chauvinistic sentiments, there is an additional shift here: we are moving from a perspective of breaking with the European Union as a tactic at a given moment in the face of neoliberalism, to break a link in the chain in situations imposed by the EU (Greece, etc.), to a nationally centred perspective of “Frexit”, which is not justified by the need to break with the rules of free and undistorted competition, but by the need to “reclaim national-popular sovereignty”.

However, without denying the imperialist nature of Fortress Europe, which must be fought, the problem is that in reality, “Frexit” or not, it is often the French state, its bourgeoisie and the Fifth Republic that are responsible for the dispossession of all democratic sovereignty in France. The construction of a “decolonial Frexit” once again appears rather risky at a time when white and non-white working classes are being unified, without breaking with the bourgeois nation-state itself, combined with another European construction.

A patriotic and internationalist transcendence?

But what is the theory, what is the strategy, what are the militant practices that flow from a statement such as this: “This transcendence has a name. It is called France.”? We are, at best, perplexed, at worst appalled, and in any case opposed to the conclusions that can be drawn from it. All the more so since nothing in the text clarifies the meaning of the concepts and references. The notions of homeland, nation and state are mixed up and muddled, leaving us unable to see clearly. The historical references are sometimes flawed – the Paris Commune did not defend any kind of “progressive patriotism”; on the contrary, internationalists were active within it – and sometimes downright dubious – the quote from Otto Strasser inspires nothing but deep disgust: we know that it was W. Reich himself who referred to it in *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* and that this same reference is taken up by Selim Nadi in the magazine *Nous.*, in an article which, incidentally, seeks to show the connections between Bouteldja... and Wilhem Reich. But Houria Bouteldja’s column merely repeats this reference without explaining it, and the man was certainly not “left-wing” (even with quotation marks), but a Nazi, albeit opposed to the line embodied by Hitler. For if we follow the analogy, should we now speak of a “Le Penist left” or a “Trumpist left”? That is nonsense.

All this to defend, moreover, a banal idea in the labour movement, namely that the emotions, desires and thoughts of the working classes must be taken into account. Defend the “left hand of the state”, as Bourdieu called it, yes. Public services, yes again – to which, incidentally, the entire working class is attached. But ultimately, that is not the “Fatherland”!

Despite its claim to be much more realistic than the radical left, Houria Bouteldja’s proposal appears in material terms for what it is: out of touch with reality. But after all, what else can we expect from “transcendence”?

Historical precedents should alert us, however: the French Section of the Communist International became the “French” Communist Party. During the Cold War, the PCF exalted the flag, presenting the French “Fatherland” as being in danger from US imperialism and painting France as a dominated, almost colonized country. This confusion did not help it to take the side of the independence of colonized peoples when it was necessary, while others did. It is

a confusion that leads to a narrow, impoverished view of the world.

To save her proposal, Houria Bouteldja attempts the oxymoron of “internationalist patriotism”. Without putting them on the same level in any way, we can say that National Socialism was another form of this and had absolutely nothing socialist about it, contrary to what Musk claims. For when two terms are opposed, one devours the other.

We therefore do not see where internationalism really lies in this proposal. There is no future for patriotism other than retreating into the nation in the countries of the imperialist centres. Unfortunately, this pseudo-internationalism, which is both patriotic and decolonial, is already systemic in the author, but also in other fringes of the left, with a statist campism that situates solidarity essentially at the level of nation states (and hemiplegic geopolitical readings) rather than on the side of all oppressed and colonized peoples, foremost among them today the Palestinian and Ukrainian peoples. Here again, it is difficult to see where internationalism lies if one refuses to condemn the authoritarian regimes of Putin, Bashar al-Assad, Maduro or Iran (in the name of their anti-Atlanticism or their embodiment of a multipolar world), but we clearly see a one-sided “anti-Western” anti-imperialism that rejects any strategy for grassroots emancipation in these countries.

Continuing to invent communism

If something needs to be (re)invented – and it desperately does – our approach cannot be that of missionaries of transcendence. Perhaps that fits with a narrow and paternalistic avant-gardism, directing and supervising (to use the terms of the text) peoples and social movements. This is definitely not our approach.

For we are not missionaries, but activists. And even more so, activists of self-organization. Our communism, or our ecosocialism, for that is what it is, is not just an “idea” or a “dream”; it is both the goal and the movement itself. We want it to be both imaginary and practical. This does not prevent us from asking ourselves multiple strategic questions at a time when the far right is gaining power, a new neo-fascist international is emerging, and alliances between neoliberals and reactionaries are forming at the national level, particularly in France. It does not prevent us from recognizing the urgency of the moment and our limitations – and a thousand contradictions – in the face of imminent danger. We also agree that we must find ways to break the colour line that divides our class and unify it. Real social struggles are our compass and an essential vehicle in this sense. They alone allow us to truly raise the other strategic questions that need to be debated: that of the state, the need to build solid political organizations, whether or not to participate in elections or institutions, our projects for society, etc.

Revitalizing the democracy of movements is the guarantee of the vitality of tomorrow’s resistance and victories. Cultivating a concrete internationalism, against our own imperialisms, in support of migrants and all peoples in struggle, is what we believe must be done immediately. Trade unionists at the beginning of the 20th century spoke of strikes as “revolutionary gymnastics”. It is up to us to find new warm-ups, movements and exercises for the (bad) times we are living in. Everywhere in the world, without a homeland or borders.

10 March 2025

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[1] For an English expression of Bouteldja's thinking see *Rednecks and Barbarians Uniting the White and Racialized Working Class* published by [Pluto Books](#).

[2] Félicien Faury, *Des électeurs ordinaires. Enquête sur la normalisation de l'extrême droite* [Ordinary Voters: An Investigation into the Normalization of the Far Right] Seuil, 2024.

[3] Often described as a "workers' fortress", the Renault factory in Billancourt in the outskirts of Paris was one of the largest car plants in France.

[4] *Quand le fascisme nous avançait* [When fascism got ahead of us], Marcel Rivière, 1955 – reprinted in the introduction to the reissue of *Fascisme et grand capital*, Libertalia, 2014.

[5] Michelle Zancarini-Fournel, *Les luttes et les rêves – Une histoire populaire de la France de 1685 à nos jours* [Struggles and Dreams – A People's History of France from 1685 to the Present Day], La Découverte, Paris, 2016.

[6] Daniel Bensaïd, *Le Nouvel internationalisme. Contre les guerres impériales et la privatisation du monde* [The New Internationalism: Against Imperial Wars and the Privatization of the World], Textuel, Paris, 2003.

[7] There is much to be said about Mélenchon's "new France" (which continues to claim that France is a power present "on all five continents"!).