

Postcolonial France: From the Colonial Fracture to Ethnic Apartheid (2005–2015)

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OVER A DECADE AGO, French philosopher Étienne Balibar wrote about a “European apartheid” as a way of distinguishing between those rights available to “citizens” as opposed to “noncitizens” residing in the European Union.¹ Similarly, back in 2005, a group of researchers in France drew attention to what they described as a “colonial fracture” in French society.² More recently, French prime minister Manuel Valls has evoked, in the aftermath of a traumatic wave of terrorist attacks, the existence of a “territorial, social, and ethnic apartheid” in France.

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¹ Étienne Balibar, *We, the People of Europe: Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*, trans. James Swenson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

² Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel, and Sandrine Lemaire, eds., *La fracture coloniale: La société française au prisme de l’héritage colonial* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2005).

The term “apartheid” is of course a loaded one, most commonly used to describe the *racial segregation* imposed by the National Party in South Africa after 1948. But the term has also been applied in a broader framework to the “colonial situation” in the British and French Empires and, of course, to forms of racial segregation found in the United States that only came to an end during the 1960s. For the French prime minister, however, recourse to this term has served, not to criticize a legal framework (as was the case in South Africa) or to target some form of official segregation (as was the case in colonial empires and in the United States), but rather to point to a “situational apartheid.” For the prime minister, this situational apartheid is the outcome of a historical amalgamation of conscious and unconscious administrative and social practices that have been at work since the process of colonial independence got under way (1954–62) and that are to be found in migration and urban policies in France since the Fifth Republic was enacted in 1958. But this apartheid is also evident in the disquieting rise of nationalist tendencies associated with a narrow interpretation of *Frenchness* and in the range of themes so dear to the Far Right—obsession with immigration from the former colonies, rejection of foreigners, focus on Islam, fear of the white population being supplanted by racial mixing—ideas that have seeped into the discourse of the traditional Right and of segments of the Left.

This political climate, along with the apparent helplessness of the state in addressing growing difficulties in urban ghettos, has resulted in large segments of the population being abandoned in housing projects. This has encouraged the gradual ethnicization of a range of problems, problems that have been compounded by the massive discrimination of which the residents are victims, resulting in their near-total separation and exclusion from the rest of society.

In the American context, affirmative action was first introduced by President Kennedy in 1961, and in the United Kingdom, Parliament established the Race Relations Act 1976 (itself an amendment of earlier parliamentary acts) and the Commission for Racial Equality, measures whose specific objective was to target discrimination on the grounds of race. However, the French Republic remains one and indivisible as enshrined in the first constitution of 1791, a principle that underscores the commitment to protecting the rights of all citizens regardless of ethnicity, religion, or other social associations. But behind this mirage of words and grand principles, the equality of citizens simply does not exist. As the Cameroonian political scientist Achille Mbembe has argued, “The perverse effect of this indifference to differences is thus a relative indifference to discrimination.”³ The truth is that ethnic discrimination has never been taken into consideration or for that matter seriously combatted in France. The wake-up call has thus been all the more brutal, and the fact remains that the vast majority of French intellectuals and scholars have refused to confront this reality, not to mention that the political elite have basically turned their attention away from this fracture that has as a consequence grown only deeper.

There has been considerable criticism of the prime minister’s recourse to the term “apartheid,” which has been deemed inappropriate given that South African apartheid was an organized system, whereas the situation in France today is the outcome of “inopportune policies.” The real question though is whether the glaring failure of integration measures is to be understood as the mere consequence of ineffective public policies or rather as the fruit of non-decolonized practices that continue to be applied to today’s postcolonial populations and yesterday’s native subjects of the empire?

³ Achille Mbembe, *Sortir de la grande nuit: Essai sur l’Afrique décolonisée* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2010), 136.

In recent years, Americans have found a number of statements made by French politicians to be particularly shocking. Among these one would have to mention former French president Nicolas Sarkozy's declaration in Dakar, Senegal, in 2007 that "[t]he tragedy of Africa is that the African has not fully entered into history" or comments made in a speech in the city of Grenoble in 2010 in which he coupled immigration with criminality as a way of stigmatizing Roma populations in Europe or even the comments of the then minister of the interior Claude Guéant in 2012, for whom "[i]n view of our republican principles, not all civilizations, practices, or cultures are equal." These kinds of positions cannot be considered exceptions and are in fact commonly overheard, widely disseminated during electoral campaigns by populist movements such as the National Front, while continuing to fuel forms of discrimination to which France remains blind.

The exclusion of postcolonial populations has been simultaneously accompanied by the consolidation of a "white" identity, exemplified in the category "people of pure French stock," for whom the presence on French soil (itself a complicated category given that the French Overseas Departments and Regions of Guadeloupe, Martinique, French Guiana, Réunion, and Mayotte are to be found in such disparate regions as South America, the Caribbean, and the Indian Ocean) of descendants of "African," "Arab," "Caribbean," or "Asian" migrants is considered illegitimate, as overwhelmingly corroborated by recent polls.

Similar conclusions are to be reached by French onlookers when it comes to American society and to considering the legacy of racial segregation. Observing recent history, it is often difficult to reconcile the election of a black president—Barack Obama—with the persistence of age-old forms of discrimination that have resulted in the overrepresentation of black Americans in prisons and in death penalty cases, in such tragic events as Hurricane Katrina (which brought racial inequality to the public's attention in a dramatic fashion), in recurring instances of police brutality and persistent "racial profiling," as well as in acts of violence as a consequence of inadequate gun control. The fundamental difference though is that Americans have learned to recognize discrimination for what it is and, accordingly, to fight against it, whereas the French continue to deny its very existence.

In the United States, the history of slavery and of racial discrimination continues to weigh heavily on race relations. Here again, Americans have worked extremely hard to confront this history and reality, as demonstrated, for example, by the films, documentaries, books, and numerous museums that have devoted their attention to these questions. In France however, colonial history has been responsible for the representation of "natives," those same people who came to constitute a significant percentage of immigrants after independence but whose history remains marginal at best and its impact on contemporary French society mostly unrecognized.

Yet the weight of this history is considerable: the colonial enterprise got under way as early as the sixteenth century, slavery and the slave trade transformed French society, and France's empire, with more than sixty million "subjects," was second only to that of the United Kingdom. Racist representations that emerged from this long historical period have persisted and have remained grafted to the skin of postcolonial immigrants, who are relegated to the peripheries of Frenchness and "white cities." Widespread discrimination in French society, the difficulties of establishing an economic and political elite with a background as "visible minorities," and the lingering effects on a society that culturally and in terms of education continues to think of itself as "white" and rejects any kind of mixed identity—all these seemingly disparate elements serve to highlight the multiple ways in which this blindness has contributed to the current stalemate.

The French case may not be the result of a “legal” apartheid, but what we have before us is a situational apartheid that has been handed down as a *heritage*. This postcolonial racism which France does not want to hear about serves to elucidate the present situation and lends credence to Manuel Valls’s declaration.

Indeed, the French prime minister’s description is in actuality perfectly apt. French society is fragmented, ethnic ghettos exist, the overseas departments have been abandoned, and all these factors have exacerbated France’s social problems. What remains crucial is that this situation impacts not just the aforementioned “territories” but rather the entire fabric of society. In this “white” France, ethnic minorities experience this gaze on a daily basis and are permanently reminded that whether they are French of foreign origin, foreigners, undocumented, refugees, exiles, and so on, they will never be a part of society; in other words, “they will never be like us.” Ethnic minorities experience this on a daily basis in this pristine “white” France, while at work, in their neighborhoods, or in the schools to which they are relegated and to which people of “pure French stock” do all they can to avoid sending their children. This fracture therefore touches upon every aspect of society, conditioning as a result a broad range of daily practices.

The terrible events that France only recently experienced have brought these matters to the fore. The choice of young jihadists to go down this path of no return is partially the result of bitterness, of resentment, and of a will to seek revenge for a rejected and stigmatized youth who, though born in France, does not feel French. This is precisely why the solutions to this situation cannot be limited to “technical” responses, to merely addressing and treating the problems associated with urban spaces, such as by renovating housing projects. Ghettos are the product not only of racial and social fractures but also of mental ones. These contribute to the building of a postcolonial society in which one learns very early on to which racial category one belongs. This is how one can be born French and yet—because of the color of one’s skin, because of one’s religion, or because of some other marker—remain a foreigner in one’s own country. The fracture is also to be found somewhere in the mind.

As Achille Mbembe has shown us, “something remains of the colonial relentlessness to divide, classify, hierarchize, and differentiate, wounds, lesions. Worse even, fault lines have emerged, persisted. Are we quite sure even today that we can entertain relations with the Negro that go beyond those that link the master to his servant? And does the latter not persist in seeing himself only in and through the prism of difference?”⁴ The persistence of these mental hierarchical categories and perceptions leads us back again to the term “apartheid,” and to paraphrase the great poet Aimé Césaire, “Are we entirely *a part* of France, or entirely *apart* from France?” (*Sommes nous des Français à part entière ou entièrement à part?*). The time has come to have the courage to call things by their name and to build a new kind of citizenry.

Research on social, urban, and educational questions must focus on these issues, and the fight against discrimination and the promotion of elites must be prioritized. A concerted effort to confront historical memory must also take place alongside these measures. France’s historical narratives remain fragmented. This battle is far from being won, and a significant portion of the French political elite does not share Mr. Valls’s assessment of the situation: notably, on the right, the term “apartheid” has been rejected, and on the left, the tendency has been to relegate all these problems to the “housing projects.”

⁴ Achille Mbembe, *La critique de la raison nègre* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2013), 19.

Our backs are up against the wall and it is no longer enough to invoke the “great values” of secularism. Concrete efforts must be made to fight against the segregation of territories and of entire segments of the French population, while at the same time standing firm in opposition to all forms of radicalism. Only then will we be able to follow the natural course of history: a common and shared history. A