Inside the "Muslim Factory": NEDJIB SIDI MOUSSA with Felix Baum

by Felix Baum
At the very moment when capital has universalized itself to the highest degree, forcing the whole of humanity under its yoke and hence into an involuntary community, knitting people together by far-reaching chains of production, the world market, the World Wide Web, and impending disasters on a global scale, universalism seems to be in decline. To be more precise: What is in decline is the universalism rooted in the Enlightenment and later reformulated as the project of universal human emancipation, to be accomplished by a “class with radical chains … which has a universal character by its universal suffering” (Karl Marx). With the decline of both the old workers’ movement and the New Left, the politics of identity has more and more marginalized this perspective. It is said to never have been anything but a smokescreen for the dominance of white men from the West, projecting their arbitrary values on the rest of the world.

In Europe today, these issues come to the fore most prominently around questions of immigration and Islam. Here, a shift of focus can be observed from immigrant workers to cultural and religious “communities.” As Kenan Malik has shown for the British case, in the 1970s “Black” was a very inclusive category relating to the social position of those parts of the working class not born in the country and forced to struggle not only against a racist state and overexploitation by the bosses, but also quite often with nationalist attitudes within the “native” working class. It had very little to do with “ethnic,” let alone religious identities, but marked a social difference to be overcome by common struggles. With the decline of workers’ struggles in the 1980s and the displacement of social issues by cultural ones, this class category slowly gave way to the creation of numerous distinct “communities,” defined by the diverse national origins of immigrants and in line with the general proliferation of identities beginning in that period. Though surely hard to swallow for conservatives at the time, this kind of multiculturalism was anything but an oppositional program; it constituted a deliberate policy by local Labor governments, fostering new middle-class “community leaders” as mediators between the state and their ethnically defined “peers” and accelerating the decomposition of the class category “Black.” As Malik notes, those on the left embracing multiculturalism no longer “argued that everyone should be treated equally, despite their racial, ethnic, religious or cultural differences,” but instead “pushed the idea that different people should be treated differently because of such differences.” Today, Britain has become multicultural to the degree of leaving certain legal matters (of certain groups) to be settled by sharia courts: a post-assimilationist self-management of supposed “communities” not exactly constituting a progress, in particular from the perspective of women.

Meanwhile in France, though often regarded as the “assimilationist” counter-model to multicultural Britain, Islam has become the main marker of difference within the population. With striking parallels to the British case, those from postcolonial Northern Africa are increasingly regarded as a “community” tied together by their supposed belief. The riots in the banlieue of 2005, debates about the veil and laicism, and, not least of all, the jihadist attacks of 2015 have given the issue enormous publicity. The more traditional left as well as radical and libertarian milieus engage in fierce arguments about the relation between anti-racism and class, the critique of religion and what some call “Islamophobia,” conflicts that sometimes even reach the point of physical confrontation—in November 2016, for example, a public meeting in Marseille defending the libertarian critique of religion was violently disrupted by “anti-racists.”
It was against this backdrop that in 2017 Nedjib Sidi Moussa published an essay on the confessionalization and racialization of the social question titled “La Fabrique du Musulman (The Muslim Factory).” Published by the small radical press Libertalia, it has found considerable resonance. In November 2017, I met the author in Paris for a conversation.

Felix Baum (Rail): In your book, you describe how in France categories such as “immigrant worker” or “North African worker” have more recently become increasingly replaced by the category “Muslim.” What are the main driving forces of this process?

Nedjib Sidi Moussa: In this small book, which is not an academic work but a political essay, I look at the last ten to fifteen years in order to demonstrate some of the mechanisms of what I call “the Muslim factory.” The main protagonists of this factory include the state and civil associations; they range from the far right to the radical left [gauche de la gauche]; there are those described as Muslims and those who stigmatize them. However, I mostly focus on the debates within the radical left, not because they are the most important protagonists in this story, but because that’s my political family. In theory, the radical left should be part of the solution and not part of the problem.

The Muslims produced by this social factory are not necessarily believers, they don’t necessarily practice Islam, go to the mosque, eat halal etc.—they are rather a kind of sub-nationality, similar to the Muslims in ex-Yugoslavia or those in Lebanon at the time of the French protectorate. They are seen as having intrinsic cultural references that set them apart from the majority population in France. Already in the 1990s, parts of the state showed an interest in creating some institution that would “represent” the supposedly Muslim population, and in 2003 the Conseil français du culte musulman (CFCM) was created. Its role is to act as an interlocutor for the state, to “manage” this group via religion. It is worth noting that in French Algeria the Muslim religion was administered by the colonial power, in total contradiction to the principle of laicism, which applied only to metropolitan France, not to the colonies. The CFCM is a new communitarian institution of representation among others (such as the Conseil représentatif des associations noires de France, CRAN) and involves a power struggle among various Muslim federations seeking to control as many mosques as possible in order to be accepted as legitimate interlocutors by the French state.

Rail: From what I’ve read it seems that many people of Maghrebin origin in France are not too religious in fact. How do they relate to this process of subsumption under the category “Muslim”?

NSM: In France, to speak of “Muslims” is also a way of talking about immigration from the Maghreb, most importantly Algeria, without saying so. It is undeniable that behind this category is hidden a vast diversity. There are those who have become more and more religious; they demonstrate their religiosity and are hence the most visible, like the Salafists. But what is most visible is not necessarily what is most pertinent or threatening. Among people of Maghrebin origin, there are also atheists, and not all of them come from atheist families—sometimes they have detached themselves from religious traditions and then they face a double exclusion: On the one hand, it is extremely difficult for them to talk to their families about their atheism, their total lack of faith and religious practice, and on the other hand, in French society at large they are associated with a religion which is no longer theirs. And then there are many who in fact believe and practice their religion, but in very different ways—they drink alcohol from time to time, for example, or don’t practice Ramadan; they maybe pray, but not in the mosque. They reject any kind of religious
authority and hence the CFCM. They don’t want to be part of this power struggle over representation.

Rail: If we compare the first generation of immigrants with today’s situation, could one say that religion has gained significance and to that extent the “Muslim factory” is also a reciprocal process, in which the construction of the “Muslim” identity is reinforced by an actual upswing of Islam?

NSM: One of the consequences of the Iranian revolution of 1979 has been to stimulate radical currents referring to Islam, which has caused a loss of influence of laicist, socialist, and nationalist forces that had so far been dominant not only in Northern Africa, but also in the European diaspora. This effort has progressively gained ground within the immigrant population, changing not only religious practices, but also political relations. So we are talking about a different immigrant population than in the 1950s or 1960s. Also in the sense that whereas their parents could still have the illusion or the actual project of returning to their country of origin, this option doesn’t really exist any longer, due to economic and political reasons, but also due to their integration. They are born in France, but not really considered as fully French, and sometimes they don’t consider themselves so. This has caused an “overinvestment” in the question of religious identity, manifesting itself in the ways people speak, consume, dress and so on.

Rail: What exactly is the role of the radical left in this story?

NSM: The radical left, which of course comprises a whole number of traditions and perspectives, plays a role via certain initiatives in the banlieue and other quartiers populaires in which we find a large population of Maghrebin origin, as well as via initiatives against police violence or against the state of emergency that was put in place after the riots in the banlieue of 2005, as well as after the terrorist attacks of 2015. In this context, certain Trotskyist, libertarian, and other militants form alliances with forces that have nothing whatsoever to do with the revolutionary tradition, but are in fact forces of reaction. However, those leftists regard them as representatives of the immigrant population, of eternal “postcolonial” subjects, with grave consequences. For instance, some representatives of leftwing organizations took part in various events against “Islamophobia” with Participation et spiritualité musulmanes (PSM) these past few years. PSM is a group linked to the largest Moroccan Islamist movement Al Adl wal Ihsane. PSM demonstrated in the French streets against same-sex marriage along with right-wing and homophobic collectives. That should disturb any French left-wing activist; the Moroccan democratic left recently reiterated that there can’t be any alliance with Al Adl wal Ihsane. What about internationalism? I give you another example illustrating the malaise of French leftists with the “Muslim Question:” Turning their backs on the traditional slogan “No gods, no masters” some libertarians published in 2016 an appeal against “Islamophobia” stating that one could be “believer, observant, or veiled AND libertarian.” As if a double standard operates depending on your background…

Rail: You devote considerable space in your book to the “Parti des Indigènes de la République,” even though you state that their real significance in immigrant neighborhoods is extremely limited. Who are these “indigènes” and why are they so important in your account?

NSM: The indigènes go back to a manifesto launched in 2005, a key year for this story, with a wave of riots in the banlieue in the autumn, and earlier that year a heated debate about efforts by the government to create a more positive portrayal of France’s colonial history—basically out of
electoral considerations, to flatter the harkis and pieds noirs, i.e. French people who had lived in colonial Algeria and relocated to France after 1962, and who form an important part of the electorate in certain regions. In addition, there was an unprecedented controversy over the ban of religious symbols in public schools, which was primarily associated with the Islamic veil. The manifesto lumps together very diverse phenomena—social issues, urban marginalization, colonial legacy, racial discriminations, conflicts in the Middle East, etc.—and is thus very confused, blending progressive with reactionary elements, which is why already back then it was criticized by the Trotskyist philosopher Daniel Bensaïd, but also by libertarians and other militants. Out of this manifesto, which received many signatures and gained quite a bit of attention within the radical left and intellectual circles, emerged the movement and finally the Parti des Indigènes de la République (PIR, created in 2010), with the more progressive elements being more and more eliminated, leaving only the reactionary individuals. The reason why I attach such an importance to them despite their lack of any social basis in the banlieue is simply their incommensurate visibility in the media; the fact that they are treated as the most radical or innovative force that is supposedly the voice of the banlieue, of immigrants, of Muslims. Significant parts of the radical left opened their journals, websites, and militant spaces to them—an alliance against nature at first glance. The book Les Blancs, les Juifs et nous (published in 2016 by Houria Bouteldja, PIR’s spokeswoman) found a disproportionate echo in these times of confusion.

Rail: What exactly are the reactionary elements of their discourse?

NSM: Their discourse has evolved over time. To give just one example, which is significant in my view: In 2003, fighting the ban on religious symbols in public schools, Bouteldja presented herself as a “non-believer” in an interview with Le Monde, even though already then she expressed her support for the Islamic scholar Tariq Ramadan. In 2016, she concludes her book with the expression “Allahu Akbar.” Whether opportunist or sincere, this is a form of Islamicization. So much for their evolution. On the other hand, since their beginnings, it has been programmatic for them to reject “mixed marriages” as detrimental to the good morals of the respective communities. So a black man should marry a black woman, an Arab another Arab—of course, we are talking about heterosexual marriages here, because the indigènes clearly seem to have a problem with homosexuality, especially for these subaltern groups. Then there are declarations which tend to confound anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism, combining a radical hostility towards Israel with a general suspicion towards Jews. And finally, a revalorization of Islamic culture and religion, of the Islamo-Arab past as cultural references, in a way that excuses machismo, for example. There is a cult of the family, of the past, of roots and identity—something that is clearly opposed to the project of emancipation, of revolution, or even the Enlightenment.

Rail: The indigènes are clearly a very extreme example, but as you show in your book, there are plenty of people on the left willing to enter rather doubtful alliances with the mosques. The standard justification for this is the presumed existence of what they call “Islamophobia.” The issue seems fairly complicated: On the one hand, there is e.g. Trump’s immigration ban and a certain kind of right-wing populism in Europe that specifically targets Islam as a religion that has no place in Europe; on the other hand Muslim clerics exploit this situation to silence any critique of their religion. Do you reject the term “Islamophobia” as such or merely its instrumentalization by reactionary clerics?
NSM: No doubt one significant part of the extreme right is now “Islamophobic” in the sense that they attack Muslims—actual and supposed ones—and are obsessed with “Islam,” which they criticize more than other religions. But there is another part of this far right which is more “Islamophile,” both today and historically. Fascism, for example, was “Islamophile,” trying to reach out to Muslims: Benito Mussolini was declared “Protector of Islam” in Italian propaganda. I devote one chapter of my book to these different currents in the French context, noting for instance how the far-right writer Alain Soral played a key role with controversial comedian Dieudonné M’Bala M’Bala.

One reason why I don’t use the term “Islamophobia” is the fact that certain religious institutions like the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) use it to exert pressure on Western governments and international organizations to criminalize any critique of their religion, as is already the case in “Muslim” countries, where the critique of religion is not only censored, but can carry the death penalty. In her book *Jeux d’ombres sur la scène de l’ONU* (2010), the French anthropologist Jeanne Favret-Saada highlights the influence of the OIC on the diplomatic scene.

The struggle of certain fractions of the radical left against “Islamophobia” is sometimes sincere, but in my view it has also led to certain confusions and misunderstandings. For some activists, it means simply fighting discriminations against actual or supposed Muslims. If that was all, it wouldn’t worry me too much, though one could ask whether hatred against Muslims or anti-Muslim racism might be more appropriate terms. However, there are also currents who engage in what the Syrian Marxist Sadiq Jalal al-ʿAzm has termed “Orientalism in reverse,” idealizing Islam and Islamic culture and refraining from any critique of its problematic aspects, since this would supposedly be against the oppressed, the proletarians, the quartiers populaires. “Maybe they are simply different from us,” that’s the idea behind it, because some of these activists consider themselves “privileged,” being white, petty-bourgeois, and educated (which is true for some in Paris, but clearly not for all radical activists in France!). They refuse to criticize Muslims or the Muslim religion in order to demarcate themselves from the extreme right, but they end up playing the game of reactionary clerics. Initiatives like the Collectif contre l’Islamophobie en France (CCIF) include in their definition of “Islamophobia” attacks not only against individuals, but also against institutions. There’s an enormous ambiguity here: Attacking a woman wearing the veil or discriminating against actual or supposed Muslims in terms of employment and housing is not at all the same as thing as criticizing religious institutions, mosques, or the religion as such.

This is why I don’t use the term. The struggle around its definition has been decided: it is in the sense I just described that it has been diffused throughout society. I regret that the useful contributions of British-Indian intellectual Kenan Malik (who criticizes the term “Islamophobia”) have not been translated into French.

Rail: But what about the state? Would you say that certain state policies, e.g. the widespread police violence, are specifically directed against Muslims? After all, those leftists and anti-racists who defend “the Muslim community,” creating the bizarre coalitions we’ve talked about, would claim that the state pursues anti-Muslim policies.

NSM: If today in France there exists a violent form of racism, it’s a racism mostly directed against workers from all backgrounds, against the poor and the jobseekers, against undocumented migrants.
One may call me a “classist,” a “workerist,” but that’s a reality one cannot mask. It is the clearest form of discrimination, of violence, in this country today because a ruthless capitalism rules the world and colonizes all aspects of life.

**Rail:** And this is also being directed against “proper,” i.e. “white” French workers?

**NSM:** Yes; skin color, presumed religion, or “culture” do not play a central role here, contrary to the opinion of some gatekeepers obsessed with identity. And it doesn’t seem sociologically accurate or politically fair to oppose the “white” workers to the others because they globally challenge the same issues and share the same fate, even though they face powerful divisive forces. Secondly, I really don’t think that in France today the Muslims—actual or supposed ones—are persecuted or discriminated against as *Muslims* by the state. I really don’t think their situation is comparable to those of the Jews in the 1930s (and anti-Semitism is still a real problem here).

**Rail:** Such a comparison would obviously be crazy.

**NSM:** Yes, but nevertheless it’s in the minds of some anti-racist and radical leftist activists. If it were true, the correct political response would be to escape from France or to wage war against the “French regime.”

**Rail:** If we leave aside such a comparison, what about the whole discourse around the veil, the attempts to ban “burkinis” and such?

**NSM:** It is undeniable that, within the general marginalization of workers, those of immigrant background—from the Maghreb and other former colonies—are specifically targeted. And since 1905, French laicism has evolved in ways that have breached the separation between the state and the church, to the benefit of the Catholic Church, which is still the dominant religion in France and has, unfortunately, not lost all its privileges. So when we talk about the “Muslim factory,” we must not forget that we do so in a Catholic or post-Catholic context. Certain measures that have been taken in the name of laicism, but in reality weren’t necessarily laicist, have fed into the convulsions around “the Muslim question,” no doubt. But at the same time, I cannot see a systematic and massive discrimination against Muslims because of their religious practice. It’s rather a question of origin. For example, studies clearly show that people of Maghreb background face more difficulties on the housing market. This kind of discrimination goes back to the colonial history, to the war in Algeria, and the labor immigration. It’s clearly not about religion.

**Rail:** One can learn a lot from your book about the social actors running the “Muslim factory,” but, as some critics have pointed out, you say less about the general transformation of society which has allowed for this whole process. In more concrete terms: Doesn’t the end of full employment, the decline of the large factory, in which there was a “mixed” workforce, and the emergence of a more family or “community” based economy among the immigrant population play a role here?

**NSM:** It’s a small book which does not claim to deal with all aspects of the problem; it focuses—maybe too much—on the “subjective” dimension, on certain discourses and practices. Of course we can’t understand the “Muslim factory” in disconnection from the economy, from the more recent mutations of capitalism. The emergence of this figure called “the Muslim” goes hand in hand with the disappearance of the figure of “the worker” from public space. But I don’t think that the working class, exploitation, wage labor, etc. have disappeared. What we have seen is factory
closures and relocations of production. In the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, the large factory could function as a factor of “integration,” by means of a common struggle against exploitation, against the boss—the same boss—by organizing within or outside the unions. This framework doesn’t seem to exist anymore, at least in France. The point is not to idealize this past. But when we read e.g. articles from Socialisme ou Barbarie from the 1950s, it is clear that the problem of racism arose in the factories (due to the nationalism of the main workers’ organizations), but this didn’t stop people from common struggles against exploitation.

I often read Guy Debord’s notes on the “immigrant question,” written in 1985 and sent to the Algerian post-situationist Mezioud Ouldamer. This very interesting text echoed the debates following the Marche pour l’égalité et contre le racisme. Debord wrote: “We have made ourselves into Americans. It’s no surprise that we should experience all the miserable problems of the U.S.A, from drugs to the mafia, ‘fast food’ and the proliferation of ethnicities.” To respond to this pessimistic but realistic analysis three decades later, and without fueling any “anti-American” resentment, I would say that the main task of revolutionary activists in New York, Algiers, Paris, Istanbul, etc. should be to revive a genuine internationalism: anti-capitalist, anticlerical, and anti-racist, definitely.


Notes

3. An English translation, complete with a preface by Harvard and Princeton professor Cornel West celebrating it as “a poignant cry of the heart for an indigenous revolutionary politics”, has recently been published: Houria Bouteldja, Whites, Jews, and Us. Toward a Politic of Revolutionary Love (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2017).
6. 1905 was the year when French parliament passed the “Law Concerning the Separation between the Churches and the State”.

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