

The New French *Question Noire*: Slavery Legacy in a Post-Conflict Society Medias Contribution

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Abstract

Concerning history of slavery in France, memory-work is a slow process because of the violence of the phenomenon, but also because of the organized oblivion of its history just after the abolition in 1848. History of slavery constitutes a double trauma and memory of slavery a fault line for French identity. In that perspective, French society is a post-conflict society. What national and republican history took care to forgive reappeared with social disorders in 2005. Then, French Medias revealed a *Question Noire* for the Nation to face. In 2006, for the first national commemoration of the slavery, slave trade and their abolition, as an echo to the State official discourse, the French public television organized a special programs whose study reveals that this commemoration is less the fruit of a will to enlighten the history of slavery than a way to affirm the integration tradition of the French Republic when it is questioned.

This approach of the *Question Noire* challenges us about the nature of the concepts of national history and national identity when their definitions are hardened in the political field. It requires a multidisciplinary approach borrowing as well from the history, historiography and sociology than from political philosophy.

Introduction

The French society does not keep an alleviated relation with its history and the various social groups which constitute it do not succeed in making their memories coexist. In this context, History became a factor for the construction of the social identity. Nevertheless, the French Nation presents itself as a nation whose identity is based on common principles. The question of overseas population identity is essential in the debate on French cultural identity. Remote territories, out of the metropolitan borders, it is firstly with overseas departments that France discovers its diversity.

The claims concerning the history of slavery, mainly from the French overseas population, and the recurrence in the public space of integration and discrimination topics are deriving from a special context during which the Medias have raised a new problem for the

French Nation: they called it the *Question Noire*¹. As far as in modern times, image has become one of the main vectors in the writing of history, audiovisual sources constitute effective tools to work on the theme of identity, along with those of representation and visibility.

After a paradigmatic definition of the *Question Noire*, we will be able to determine how the history of slavery constitutes a double trauma and the memory of slavery a fault line for the French identity. What the national and republican history took care of forgetting reappeared with the social disorders in 2005. In that perspective, the French society is a post-conflict society.

I. Emergence of a new *Question Noire* in France

The idea according to which there would be a specific problem concerning the presence of a black population in the post-slave societies is not an innovation. It was formalized in various ways since the slavery abolition till nowadays.

-From a *Question Noire* to one another

While, in the American context, W.E.B. Dubois (1898) uses the expression the “negro problems”, Frank Louis Schoell (1923) prefers that of “questions des noirs”. James Baldwin, which characteristic is to be an American writer in France, uses in the nineteen sixties, the formula “question noire” without knowing of what it was exactly².

For as much, if the use of expressions like “black question” and “black problems” is not really innovative, the recent and repeated exploitation by the media of the expression *Question Noire* imposed it as an objective concept and as a political and social data. It has drawn up the fiction of a common understanding of it.

Only few scientific publications dealt with this subject (Cottias 2007; N’Diaye 2008) but instead of circumscribing the theme, they reveal - at the opposite - the magnitude of what

¹ Literally the “black issue” in English, but it won’t be translated as far as it is used as a concept. The expression was used on France 2 channel by the journalist David Pujadas during the news on September 30th, 2006. He announces that May 10th was chosen by Jacques Chirac to celebrate the slavery abolition: “when the *Question noire* becomes essential in the public debate. The President of the Republic wishes to honoured the memory of the millions Africans victims of the slave trade”. (All the translations are from the author). The expression was also used to name documentaries (*Noir, l’identité au coeur de la question noire*, Directed by Arnaud N’Gatcha, France 5, May 7th, 2006), and TV programs (“Thema evening”, *Y a-t-il une Question Noire?*, Arte, January 24th, 2006).

² It couldn’t be different as far as he wrote: “Humanly, personally, the color does not exist. Politically it exists. But it is there a distinction so subtle which the West was not able yet to make it.” in *The Fire Next Time*, 1963. For further informations and a theoretical approaches of the *Question Noire* since the nineteenth century see GENESTE Elsa, “Question Noire”, in Pierre André Taguieff (ed.), *Dictionnaire du racisme*, to be published

appears to be a true “research field” needing a multidisciplinary research to get understood. In fact, the lack of any consensus among the scientists and the experts concerning the definition of the *Question Noire* raises the fact that this expression is not a scientific concept, but belongs to the political language

It is within this diversified research framework that Elsa Geneste³ proposes a paradigmatic and global definition according to which the *Question Noire* is “that of the solutions to be brought to the problems arising from the position(s) and/or the condition(s), real or imagined, of a category of people designated (or indicating themselves) like Black, within a society organized (or about to organize itself) on the principle of the modern political equality”.

From this definition we propose to consider the French *Question Noire* revealed by the Medias in 2005 as a New *Question Noire* which persists in post-slavery and democratic society when – political and juridical equalities once obtained – remains the questioning of the contemporary version of democratic identity. This approach challenges us on the nature of the national history and national identity concepts precisely when their definitions are hardened in the political field.

-Political and social context:

The indication context of the emergence of the “Question Noire” in 2005 is tough and heterogeneous. It literally shaped the understanding of it.

The years 2005 and 2006 were highlighted by violent events described by the media as “the ghettos sickness⁴”. Violence surfaced on the front page of the papers when students demonstrations against a government reform degenerated into riots in the very centre of Paris (on the 8 of March). The media interpreted that as the proof of an anti-white racism. The “Nouvel Obs”, a French weekly, illustrates⁵ the makeover from a social problem into a racial one when titling: “the racial gap” – a reference to Jacques Chirac formula “the social gap⁶”. The political speech had a significant influence on the coverage of those events, to the extent it was an emanation of the security focused speech during the 2002 presidential campaign. A year later, on October 2006, riots have started in Clichy-sous-bois. The disorders were widely

³ Op. Cit.

⁴ The translation of the words from the *Question Noire* lexical is very delicate. Here, to translate “banlieue”, the term “ghetto” instead of “suburb” was chosen in order to transcribe the social stake, more than the geographical one.

⁵ In march 16th 2005.

⁶ This expression was first used in: GAUCHET Marcel, 1990, ‘Les mauvaises surprises d’une oubliée: la lutte des classes’, *Le Débat*, n° 60.

relayed by the press and the popular news paper “France Soir” did not hesitate to title⁷ “Ghettos in civil wars”.

Besides this very particular social context, it is necessary to take into account the addition of the memorial laws effect. The first of its kind was the Gayssot Act of July 13th 1990 to punish racist and xenophobic acts. On February 23rd, 2005 a law stipulated “school programs recognize the positive role of the French presence overseas”⁸. Among the overseas populations concerned by the law, the Caribbean reacted very violently because of what constituted the starting point of their society: the slave trade. According to them there is no word less inadequate than positive to consider it.

When appeared the *Question Noire* there were many claims for the history of slavery supported by Caribbean and metropolitan associations. Since 1983 and the Act of June 30th and the adoption of a date for each overseas department to commemorate the abolition of slavery, until 2001 and the adoption of the Taubira Act recognizing slavery as crime against humanity, the associations have worked to enhance the history of slavery from a familial memory status to a metropolitan and national recognition of it as a system to which France has participated. Thus, on January the 30 2006, the president Jacques Chirac formalized the choice of may 10 as a day of national commemoration of slavery, slave trade and their abolition, following the recommendation of the Committee for the memory of slavery, instituted by the Taubira Act and mainly constituted with associations members.

II. From oblivion to memory.

The first steps of the rediscovery by the Republic and the French hexagon of the slave past ended the amnesia concerning this part of the French history.

- A double trauma:

The abolition of slavery by the second Republic with the decree of April 27th, 1848 was presented like a gift from France. Myriam Cottias (1998), specialist of slavery matters, by analyzing how “old colonies” handled their memories after the abolitions, describes it as an “oblivion policy”. The first celebrations of abolition reveal the political ambiguities and the dual requirements to celebrate freedom but also to maintain the colonial statute as well as a racialized social order⁹.

⁷ On October 29th 2005.

⁸ Finally this article was decommissioned by the Constitutional Council, on January 2006.

⁹ Thus, abolition was celebrated as a “Labor day” for many years.

With the ideological revival of the third Republic, the oblivion became a republican prescription as developed by Ernest Renan (1882), who meant to allow “the brothers slaves to enter the national big family”. The immediate effect was to root the oblivion of slavery in the national narrative by ignoring the experience of this history of slavery.

The anthropologist Francis Affergan (2006, p.11), underlines that the “social and cultural traces of slavery continue to mark the conduits”. The legacies of slavery are transmitted to the families. According to Françoise Vergès (2006, p.50), “Evening gathering, whose ritual is in the center of the social life, give the opportunity to remind collectively a genealogy, to recognize the ancestor, whose name is transmitted while at the same time the world refused to him an ancestry”.

In order to hang down exclusively family memories, it was necessary to wait the nineteen sixties for the cultural activities to belong to political and identity claims¹⁰.

Memory-work concerning the history of slavery is a slow process because of the violence of the phenomenon, but also because of the organized oblivion of its history just after abolition. It constitutes a double trauma.

-Media recognitions:

In a lifetime, different processes of socialization provide each person with several models of identity. The Medias are involved in these processes. This fact has been acknowledged by the institutions¹¹.

In his speech during the official ceremony on May 10th, 2006, the French Republic President Jacques Chirac announces that the happening will be covered by the Public television channels. The goal is to make the promotion of the event. The educational range, which belongs to values of the French public television¹², seems to have here its role to play.

¹⁰ The regional cultures are officially recognized by the decree of 1982 on the missions of the Culture ministry one year only before the vote of the adoption for each overseas department of a date to commemorate the abolition of slavery.

¹¹ In 2004 the High Council for Integration gave a report to the Prime Minister intituled «Cultural diversity and common culture of Audiovisual », requesting a better visibility for racial diversity and culture on the French public television. In spring 2004, the High council with Integration (HCI) returned a report to the Prime Minister entitled “Cultural diversity and common culture in the audiovisual”. A work group on television, chaired by Blandine Kriegel, proposes solutions for a better visibility of the French human and cultural diversity. It recovers the ideas of the conference carried out by the HCI, on April 26th, 2004, in partnership with the Superior Council for Audiovisual (CSA) and the Funds of social action for integration and the fight against discriminations (FASILD) on the topic: “Pale screens”? Cultural diversity and common culture in the audiovisual “. Inspired by those reports one official rules of French public TV stated “ In accordance with the Principe of equal treatment and the recommendations’ of the Superior Audiovisual Council, the company care for its product to offer a testimony of the diversity of cultures that make up French society”.

¹² In 1964, the French broadcasting-television office (ORTF), assigned four main missions: “to inform, distract, educate and cultivate”.

To reinforce the political scope of May 10th, the public channels arrange a special program from May 6th to May 12th, 2006¹³. Its study offers a way to determine the editorial position of the *France Televisions* Group about this commemoration and to confront the official speech with what is used to illustrate it. The media treatment of this official day exemplifies also an answer to associations for the memory of slavery's requests and one of the recommendations of the Committee for the Memory of Slavery for a better visibility of this history¹⁴.

III. Memory and politic

The commemoration is an official ceremony organized to preserve national conscience about an event of the collective history. Thus, it concerns individuals as well as State.

-Common remembrance

A commemoration permits to associate the individual with the group through history but also through identity. On this subject, Sonia Livingstone (2004, pp.17-55) proposes to enrich audiovisual landscape by a new figure: the "civic culture" which is intercalated half way from audience and public. It is like an additional action between individual identity and collective action.

The original French overseas population motivation, relayed by the Committee for the Memory of Slavery was above all to integrate their personal, familial, intimate history, to the national one. The program of French public TV had to make it visible. The role of Medias is essential in the recognition process (Beaud, 1984)¹⁵. Consequently, may the 10, is supposed to be both a day of national and intimate recognition, and a political action that reveals the capacity for integration of French republic.

From a social point of view, the economy of the Benedict Anderson (1991) approach can not be made. He insists on the value of forgetfulness in the process of community building. He maintains that those events in a nation that set communities off against one another must be tacitly forgotten by all. Even so, this implicit agreement between the

¹³ This program is made of documentaries, reports and magazine. It concerns the channels France 2, France 3, France 5 and France Ô. After screening, sequencing, analysing on this program, this paper is delivering to you insight into the conclusions. FAUSTINIEN, Adèle, « Lorsque la France commémore l'abolition de l'esclavage », Master II, directed by TSIKOUNAS Myriam, Paris I Panthéon Sorbonne, 2007.

¹⁴ The report of the Committee for the Memory of Slavery is returned to the Prime Minister on April 12th, 2005. It focuses on four points which are: the need for an official date of commemoration, a greater place of this history in school programs, an acceleration of the research as well as the cultural promotion of this history.

¹⁵ Paul Béaud (1984) wrote on this specific point: "mass communication is designed to build and legitimize the image that the society gives itself".

communities guarantees that on the occasion of a commemoration, for example, the forgotten events need only be recalled in order for the communities to share common knowledge of this past. In the case of slavery, this unspoken acknowledgment never took place. Deemed problematic by the State, their entire history was replaced by that of the French Nation. As a result, the foundation for a collective memory shared by the French and by the descendants from slavery was never laid (Reinhardt, 2006).

-The politic nature of remembrance:

In 1998, for the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery, the purpose of the official discourse was to celebrate “the French model of integration¹⁶” and it is in reaction to this reducing approach of the history of slavery that several movements¹⁷ were created which led to the drafting of the Taubira Act in 2001 and the advent of May 10th. 2006 had to be, in an editorial point of view, the contrary to 1998. However, the elements of the history of slavery which are proposed in this French public television programs are those already integrated into national history. In this unit, the more evoked is Victor Schoelcher who personifies the “Rescuer Republic”¹⁸ and is a part of the Republic Mythology (Schmidt, 2009).

An archive dating from 1953 is very interesting to illustrate this fact. It was written by the prefect in charge at the Direction of Algeria and Overseas Departments Services about a will to commemorate the abolition of slavery. He writes: “It is already of habit in these departments, and particularly in the Guadeloupe, not to work on July 21st, date of the birthday of Victor Schoelcher, promoter of the abolition of slavery. As well as I do not ignore the historical importance of dated April 27th, 1848, I estimate that it is not necessary to commemorate the same event, twice during a year¹⁹”. There is no ambiguity: for the French State, Victor Schoelcher is the personification of abolition of slavery .

More astonishing, the audiovisual sources of the 2006 commemoration reveal what Pierre Sorlin (1977) calls the society’s lapses, which is to say the inconsistencies between social status in one hand and its political understanding in the other.

¹⁶ Jacques Chirac official speech for the 150th anniversary of the slavery abolition. April 23rd, 1998. Abstract : “ To commemorate the abolition of slavery in France, it is to speak about humanity and Republican values”.

¹⁷ The most meaning one is the silent walk on March 28th that brought together forty thousand people in Paris.

¹⁸ This exclusive link between Victor Schoelcher and the history of slavery started to be suggested while he was still alive.

¹⁹ Dated August 14th, 1953. Archives Nationales de Fontainebleau, 940180 article 259.

The Euzhan Palcy's documentary « Life of dissidents²⁰» dealing with history of the French Antilles during the second world war, one of the main element of the official program is meaningful to illustrate the matter. It is absolutely not dealing with slavery. The broadcasting of this documentary is a way of affirming the assimilation of the already assimilated overseas territories. Behind the guise of slavery, it is the political territorial situation of the French overseas territories that is referred to.

Conclusion

The program of the French public television organized for the first national commemoration of the slavery, slave trade and their abolition, as an echo to the state official discourse reveals that this commemoration is less the fruit of a will to enlighten the history of slavery than to affirm the integration tradition of the French Republic when it is questioned.

The lapses reveal an identity problem for the French Universalist Republic. The political tendency, with the creation of the Ministry for the national identity²¹, is that of a communitarian definition of national identity which is to say the development of common cultural elements (BOURDON, 1999)²². In the same order of idea, considering national identity according to Maurice Barrès (1902) principles, that France is the fruit of a common history and that collective past created the “national feeling”, then the rejection of the history of slavery is a refusal to integrate the populations which results from it in the national identity. However, within the framework of mediatisation of the new *Question Noire*, it is the communitarian peril which was held up, with the ghettos riots and the transnational black identity built on the discrimination experience. Thus, rather than to lead to a recognition of the history of the French citizens, these French must recognize their-selves in an already written national history. To reinforce the feeling of membership of the same community to all French citizens, the Republic would need, paradoxically, to work on a more liberal definition of national identity.

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²⁰ Broadcasted on may 7th, 2006 on France 3, it was promoted by a whole page published on the magazine of the Channel France 3. Its pitch, as it was edited in the FTV official announcement is “In the French Antilles, the Charles de Gaulle call of 18 June has awakened the conscience of those for who Vichy versifies with slavery. Thousands of young people from Martinique and Guadeloupe chose the dissidence”.

²¹ Immigration, integration, national identity and sustainable development Ministry created in june 1st, 2007.

²² For the multicultural ideas see: BOURDON N., 1995, *Multicultural Citizenship. A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.

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