

Les indigènes de la République: Postcolonial Studies à la française

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The literary and postmodern roots of postcolonial studies have often haunted it in terms of its political potential, with some relegating it to the ivory towers of the academy. Yet in the context of France it is not the academy that has embraced the concept of postcoloniality. Rather, 'les études postcoloniales' have been promoted as a critical tool through grassroots political activism. Moreover these activists have made interesting use of the term 'indigène': while traditionally a colonial designator for natives in the colonised space, in this case it is being invoked by those who are in fact living at the heart of the metropole. Instead of identifying themselves as 'immigrants' or another label that would imply a 'coming from elsewhere', these activists are claiming an indigeneity in the centre of the Empire. This may reflect something specific about the French colonial project. But within these activists' literature it is also utilised as a point of solidarity with other not-so-post colonial parts of the world. The articulation of a shared 'indigène' identity seems here to be proposed as an alternative to the new forms of imperialism associated with dominant globalizing forces. By exploring this recent French form of postcolonial studies, I ask what this might mean for the future of postcolonialism: A shift from theory to praxis? And what might be the implications this new de-territorialised concept of indigeneity?

Introduction

The relevance of postcolonial studies has frequently been debated and after a fairly short life it is already sometimes seen as passé (surpassed by 'diaspora studies', transcultural or transnational studies) or restricted to its relationship with postmodernism and poststructuralism (both of which have also seen a backlash within the academy in various parts of the world) therefore not having relevance to the 'real world'. Not only do many who have been labelled 'postcolonial theorists' disavow that term (Young 1998), various sections of the former (still?) colonised world have rejected its relevance to their own struggles (eg. Indigenous movements: see Daring, Yudicé on Latin America; France: see Houteldji 1998, Grewal 2009) or questioned its own colonising tendencies by taking the Anglophone/British experience and universalising it (Coronil 1992).

This paper is a defence of the field even as it is a call for a revisiting and re-fashioning of it in precisely the ways Coronil and others have called for: greater attention to the specificities of different national, colonial and postcolonial contexts and histories (see Coronil 1992 in *Public Culture* critiquing Membe for his failure to do this). In particular, by focussing on a French activist movement, this paper seeks to argue that while much of the criticism levelled at post-colonial studies has been its overly abstract theorising (eg notions of hybridity, celebrations of diaspora), *les Indigènes de la République* not only actively identify with the notion of the postcolonial but do it as a means of developing an activist strategy that is far from abstract. In this way, not only is this an attempt to move beyond the 'holy trinity' of postcolonial studies (Said, Bhabha, Spivak: see Coronil 1992: 277), by expanding the use of concepts of postcoloniality from the literary to the overtly social and political, it also provides an enriching engagement for a potentially new wave of postcolonial studies by also breaking down of the division Robert Young draws between the political aspects of anticolonialism in the colonies and the critical theoretical challenges to knowledge production located in the metropole (2001: 65).

L'exception (coloniale) française

While for Coronil the field of postcolonial studies has been too focused on universalising not only the Anglo-American but also the Northern European experience of colonisation, decolonisation and neo-colonialism (1992: 103), I would argue that it is more specific than that. In fact, even as French thinkers (Fanon, Césaire, Memmi, Membe, Glissant: although NB the latter's place within the US academy) have been influential in the development of the field, the experience which has been universalised has largely been that of British colonialism in a way that fails to recognise the very specific differences between the British and French imperial discourses and endeavours.

For example, it is too easy to underplay the significance of the civilising mission as a cynical attempt to justify a primarily economic relationship of domination but that is to be too focused on the ways in which British colonial authorities sought to transform their relationship with colonies such as India. In the French case, the civilising mission must be understood as much more central to the logic of imperial domination (see Clancy-Smith 1999). This is significant not as a *laissez-passez* for the French on the basis that they were misguided but well meaning. Rather, it is to argue that without this understanding of how *la mission civilisatrice* operated as a founding myth of the French colonial enterprise fails to recognise why the contemporary French academic and political spheres are able to so easily dismiss both the thinking of postcolonialism and the politics of multiculturalism. It also fails to recognise the ways in which the specific logic of British imperialism and the forms of British colonial ordering actually created the possibility for debates about race, ethnicity, culture to emerge as sites of central concern not only for reinforcing imperial order but also for resisting it.

Indeed as various French scholars have pointed out, there *has* been work done within the French academy to talk about issues of race, class and oppression but the language of identity politics just does not work within the context of French Republicanism – they are not just being slow to catch on! At

the same time is this rejection of – and insistence on - postcolonialism another example of old imperial rivalries? It is precisely for this reason, the recent attention that has been paid to postcolonial studies in France has attempted to focus on ‘localising postcolonial studies’ (Aymes 2006). But this localising has not come first and foremost from within the academy.

Le mouvement des indigènes de la République (MIR)

MIR emerged as a movement in early 2005 with the publishing of an online *appel*. While academics, politicians and journalists continued to debate the extent to which the malaise in the *banlieues* could be remedied by the restoration of Republican order, MIR’s agenda left little doubt where it stood on the rhetoric of Republicanism:

Decolonisation of the Republic remains the order of the day. The Republic of Equality is a myth. The state and society needs to take a radical look back at their colonial past-present. It is time for France to interrogate its Enlightenment, that the egalitarian universalism affirmed during the Revolution has created a nationalism based on a ‘universal chauvinism’ intended to ‘civilise’ the savages. It is urgent to promote radical measures for justice and equality which directly address racial discrimination in access to work, accommodation, culture and citizenship. It is necessary to put an end to institutions which keep formerly colonised populations in a status of subhumanity. (cited in Grewal 2011: 235).

This express rejection of ‘*les Lumières*’ and the reference to the ongoing significance of France’s colonial past was in sharp contrast to the earlier anti-racist (*Beur*¹) movement’s appeal to Republican values to counter the racism and social exclusion they experienced.

¹ A slang term originally used in the 1980s by young people of North African origin to describe themselves (an inverted form of the derogatory label, ‘Arabe’ frequently used within French popular discourse).

MIR has also sought to confront its 'otherness' head on: while many of the 1980s *Beur* activists were at pains to stress their commitment to secularism – something that is still evident in the discourse of the well known 'banlieue feminist' association *Ni Putes Ni Soumises*² – MIR spokesperson Houria Bouteldja has openly called herself a Muslim. This is significant not because of Bouteldja's personal religious conviction but the fact that the descriptor "Muslim" has a specific ideological meaning in France. As MIR point out, the term "Muslim" has been used as a conflated ethnic, religious and political label that has all too often been invoked – both during colonial times and in contemporary France – as a justification for exclusion or marginalization.

During the colonial period, the Muslim beliefs of colonized peoples justified their denial of French citizenship rights,³ while in contemporary French discourses the construction of 'hereditary Muslims' has justified the claim that certain immigrant (generally North African) populations are simply un-integratable into French society (House 1996: 224). Some prominent *Beur* figures have found themselves caught between their own personal lack of religious affiliation and their presentation in dominant public discourse as 'Muslim representatives'. This has particularly been the case with young *Beur* women whose statements against the patriarchal and sometimes abusive environments within which they have been raised has all too easily conformed to the dominant French understanding of Islam as an inherently misogynistic and barbaric religion.⁴

In this context Bouteldja's open declaration of herself as a Muslim (irrespective of her personal faith) provides a powerful counter-discourse. For one, her status as an independent, articulate and assertive woman rebuts the

² For more on this association see Grewal 2007, 2009.

³ While Jewish Algerians were granted full citizenship in 1870 under the Crémieux Decree, *Décret n° 136, 24 October 1870* Muslim Algerians retained the status of "subjects" and were required to apply to be 'naturalised' upon demonstrating a "French way of life" (Weil 2003: 6-7).

⁴ For example while most of the spokespeople of the *banlieue* feminist organization *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* have been openly critical of Islam and declared their own lack of religious belief, a discussion on Muslim women's sexuality on the French television channel *Arte* on 8 February 2005 featured representatives from *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* as representatives of "young Muslim women in France". For more on this see Grewal 2007.

traditional presumption within mainstream French discourses that Muslim women are downtrodden, passive victims of their culture. Added to this she reclaims an aspect of her identity that has frequently been deployed in dominant French discourses as part of the process of “Othering” those of North African origin. If she is to be constructed as always ‘already Muslim’ by virtue of her ethnic origin, why should she not choose how this label is applied? For similar reasons, while she does not wear the *hijab*, she is frequently photographed wearing a headscarf traditional to Algerian Berber women, which she teams up with trendy, modern ‘French’ clothing.

This bold assertion of an Algerian identity, in light of the problematised nature of Algerians in France is intentionally provocative. So too, in selecting 8 May 2005 as the date of the movement’s first march, MIR directly sought to reopen the unhealed wound of the Algerian War in French public discourse. In fact 8 May 2005 marked the 60th anniversary of a date MIR argued was illuminative of France’s Republican paradoxes: while 8th May 1945 has traditionally been celebrated in France as the day of liberation from German occupation, it also marked the massacres at Sétif and Guelma in Algeria, events which historian Mohammed Harbi describes as “the real beginning of Algeria’s war of independence” (Harbi 2005: np). In marking the anniversary of these two events, MIR has sought to once again highlight the inter-relationship between French discourses of freedom, equality and humanist universalism and the reality of its colonial violence.

Meanwhile, the (unfortunately shortlived) feminist arm of the movement, *Les féministes indigènes*, drawing on and contributing to the new (and exciting) body of postcolonial feminist scholarship which was also emerging in France, sought to further complicate the links between racism, class discrimination and sexism in their 2007 manifesto. Declaring themselves daughters of Solitude (one of the leaders of the French Caribbean slave insurgents) and Algerian war hero Jamila Bouharid, *les féministes indigènes* affirmed that they had both inherited the benefits of French feminism but also that western feminism did not have a monopoly on resistance to domination.

As I have written about in detail elsewhere (Grewal 2009), in making this statement, *les féministes indigènes* noted the paradoxical status of French Republican feminism within the colonial period: while French women struggled to assert their rights (as the 1990s *Parité* campaign for equal political representation demonstrated), the language of feminism *had* been deployed all too frequently to justify the denial of full citizenship rights to colonized peoples. In many ways this provided a public reminder of what scholars such as Julia Clancy-Smith had documented regarding the situation of colonized women within the *mission civilisatrice*:

By 1900 issues of sex and gender, particularly the status of Arab women, came to be privileged in debates over Algerian male suffrage. Manipulated as a political and rhetorical strategy, female status was marshalled to refute the notion that the Arabs' assimilation to France was desirable or even possible. (Clancy-Smith 1999: 155-156)

Moreover, metropolitan French feminists were frequently critical of the colonial administrators during this period, not for their racist attitudes but rather for their failure to fully enact the civilizing mission. These feminists themselves frequently employed highly racist and imperialist discourses in their description of the plight of their colonized counterparts.⁵ As a result, *les féministes indigènes* called for a new form of feminism: one which recognized the intersecting and mutually reinforcing nature of race and gender discrimination.

This public call for social activism was paralleled by an increased academic interest in the area. In a special edition of the journal *Nouvelles Questions Féministes* (linked to *les féministes indigènes* webpage), the editors

⁵ For further discussion of this paradoxical relationship between French metropolitan feminist activism and the colonized female population see Julia Clancy-Smith and Frances Gouda (eds) (1999) *Domesticating the Empire: Race, Gender and Family Life in French and Dutch Colonialism*, Virginia University Press, Charlottesville USA and London UK. See also Sara Kimble (2006) "Emancipation through Secularization: French Feminist Views of Muslim Women's Condition in Interwar Algeria" *French Colonial History*, Vol. 7, pp109-128 and Kiran Grewal, 2009, " 'Va t'faire intégrer!': The *appel des féministes indigènes* and the challenge to 'Republican values' in Postcolonial France" *Contemporary French Civilization*, Vol. 33, No. 2, pp105-133.

noted the need for a deeper feminist interrogation into the structural relationship between forms of sexual and racial oppression (2006: 4). In another edition of *Nouvelles Questions Féministes*, explicitly cite the influence of Latina, Black and postcolonial feminism to stress the interconnected nature of these systems and structures of power that were also mutually reinforcing (2006:93). In the same edition, veteran French feminist Christine Delphy rejected what she saw to be the “false dilemma” that had been created in French public discourse through the posing of feminism and anti-racism in opposition to each other. Now this may not be the first time the idea of intersectionality is expressed (indeed the work of Collette Guillaumin powerfully illustrates this) however what is interesting is the active connection of this scholarship to both activism and to a globalised context of social struggle.

Sadly, this part of the movement has also fallen prey to the difficulties of creating a true intersectionality in activism. In an interview with Houria Bouteldja in mid 2009, I was told that MIR had already abandoned the feminist agenda, seeking to ‘concentrate first on racism’ (personal interview, Paris, June 2009). Clearly the question of how to translate the complex message of intersectionality, so well-developed in postcolonial theory, into strategies for achieving change remains difficult and unanswered. However, even in spite of this, I believe MIR has something interesting to contribute to the development of postcolonial studies.

What’s so Special about MIR?

In his 1992 article in *Public Culture*, ‘Can the postcolonial be decolonized?’ Fernando Coronil wrote of the need for postcolonial studies to do a number of things:

1. The need for a decentred, situational and inclusive perspective that permits study of a range of colonial and postcolonial regimes and situations;

2. The importance of recognising the powers operating beyond the nation-state context (processes of globalisation, internationalising of domestic markets, etc);
3. Recognition of the relationship between the historical and the representational. The importance of categories of 'normal' and the centrality of the body;
4. A practice of listening to decolonisation projects within and outside of the academy

So too Coronil warned of the need to be mindful of allowing 'postcoloniality' act as a euphemism which focuses on the relations of power in former colonial societies as products of past colonialism rather than also arising from contemporary forms of neo-colonialism (1992: 102). I think that MIR addresses many of these needs and as a result provides a potentially interesting site of rejuvenation for postcolonial studies.

One of the notable details of the movement, particularly for an Anglophone and coming from a settler colony (Australia) is the fact that they call themselves '*indigènes*': the term used to describe colonial subjects and generally translated as 'native'. A simple reading of this could be the attempt to very explicitly link the current situation of north and sub-Saharan African immigrant and ethnic minorities in France with their past treatment. But I think it also does something else. In many ways it plays to the exact popular anxiety identified by Dely, about the shift from 'French Algeria to Algerian France' (Dely 1996:9, cited by McMurray 1997: 26). This is made even more evident in the establishment of the MIR party. The message is clearly that they are here to stay! Moreover, it is an ironic reflection on the very colonial discourse which has made Algeria such an open sore in French public discourse (and reflected in Dely's quote) – the notion of Algeria as an extension of the metropole rather than a distant colony. While Stuart Hall points to the false divide between the metropole and the colony, MIR demonstrates this very vividly and are able to draw on the specificity of the French colonial endeavour to situate their claim. At the same time, MIR demonstrates the potential for mobilisation in ways that are both

globalised and contextual: while the use of the terminology of '*indigènes*' is possible for MIR because of the specific colonial encounter it is responding to, it also does not focus only on this specificity but openly celebrates the influences of the Chicano movement and postcolonial studies. This, alongside the range of issues it seeks to comment upon (discussed in a moment) assists with articulating a message that seeks to avoid what has increasingly emerged as a significant faultline within postcolonial studies: the relationship between the categories of 'diaspora', 'indigenous' and 'subaltern' (Byrd and Rothberg 2011; Desai 2011).

MIR also seeks to actively turn the abstract theorising into political claims and strategies, intervening on issues ranging from demonstrations of support for the *sans papiers* and other precarious migrant labourers, protesting against the exclusion of mothers who wear veils from school outings (*Mamans Toutes Égales*) and racist violence on the part of the police through to expressions of support for Palestinians in Gaza and against Israeli state violence. As the final example suggests, MIR not only attempts to contextualise current debates in France about identity and exclusion through highlighting their resonance with past colonial discourses and practices of management,⁶ it also seeks to maintain links with other colonial/neo-colonial projects. Its email updates provide information and statements of support for the Arab world, for Cote d'Ivoire, for the French Caribbean territories known as the DOM-TOM. This is important as a means of maintaining the focus on colonialism not as something from the distant past but very much a lived experience of the contemporary world. It also appears to respond to the call, '*to bring metropole and colony into a single analytical field*' (Coronil 1992: 102)

Reviewing the interventions made by MIR, the unifying feature seems to be the constant attention that is brought to bear on how the material effects of racism and economic disadvantage cannot be understood without reference to

⁶ An illustrative example being the discussion on the MIR website of the French *hijab* debate in the early 2000s situated alongside colonial photographs of ceremonies organised by colonial administrators to assist with Algerian women's 'liberation' from their *hijabs* (see Grewal 2009 and 2011 for further discussion).

the colonial context and legacy. Moreover, it reinforces links between metropole and periphery, *not* through classic structures of power and knowledge but through the invocation of shared identities of oppression and celebrations of alternative ways of knowing and being, perhaps contributing to the cosmopolitan subalternity de Sousa Santos (2005) talks of as an alternative to the liberal Eurocentric model of cosmopolitanism promoted within much human rights discourse?

I do not mean to overstate my case nor over-romanticise MIR. As noted above, it has made some difficult and possibly dubious choices. Also, it remains a marginal feature of French public sphere, getting nowhere near as much airtime or institutional support as other 'non-white' associations like *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* or *SOS Racisme*. However, for me it provides some justification for my continued commitment to postcolonial studies as an area that continues to not only hold relevance but to have something to offer our understanding of the contemporary world as well as possible tools to change it. For this reason I think it is worth restating Walter Dignolo's important comment:

"colonial and postcolonial discourse" is not just a new field of study or a gold mine for extracting new riches but the condition of possibility for constructing new loci of enunciation as well as for reflecting that academic "knowledge and understanding" should be complemented with "learning from" those who are living in and thinking from colonial and postcolonial legacies... (1993: 131).

While far from perfect, I think MIR in a small way helps us do just that.

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