

Rancière: ‘Racism, a passion from above’

This is a rough translation I made of [Jacques Rancière’s comments](#) at a forum on the recent [expulsions](#) of Roma from France. [Update Sept. 23: I’ve made a few corrections to my translation. Update Sept. 24: [MR Zine](#) has posted a corrected version of this translation.]

Racism: a passion from above

Jacques Rancière, 11 September 2010

I’d like to add some reflections around the notion of ‘state racism’ to our meeting’s agenda. These reflections run against a widespread interpretation of measures that our government has recently taken, from the law on the veil to the expulsions of the Roma. This interpretation detects [voits] an opportunism that is exploiting racism and xenophobia for electoral gain. This supposed critique reinforces the assumption that racism is a popular passion, the frightened and irrational reaction of retrograde layers of the population, that can’t adapt to the new mobile and cosmopolitan world. The state is accused of failing in its duty by showing indifference towards these populations. But this accusation only reinforces the state’s position as the face of rationality that must be presented to popular irrationality.

This conceit, adopted by the ‘Leftist’ critique, is exactly the one that the Right has used over the past two decades to implement a number of racist laws and decrees. All these measures have been taken under the same argument: there are problems of delinquency and various nuisances caused by immigrants and the undocumented [clandestins] that may provoke racism if we fail to enforce good order. So it must submit these delinquencies and nuisances to the universality of law so they do not create racist disturbances.

It’s a game that has been played, on the Left and the Right, since the Pasqua-Méhaignerie laws of 1993. It consists in opposing the universal logic of the rational state to popular passions, in order to give the state’s racist policies a certificate of anti-racism. It is time to turn this argument around and mark the bond [solidarité] between the state ‘rationality’ that controls these measures and the other—that adversary accessory—conveniently given as a foil, the popular passion. In fact, it is not the government that acts under the pressure of popular racism and in reaction to the so-called ‘popular’ passions of the extreme-right. The state’s aim [raison d’Etat] is to maintain this other to whom it entrusts the imaginary determination of what it actually legislates.

I proposed, 15 years ago, the term cold racism to designate this process. The racism that we have in today’s case is a cold racism, an intellectual construction. It is primarily a creation of the state. We have discussed the relationship between the state of law and the police state. But it is the very nature of the state that it is a police state, an institution that fixes and controls identities, places and displacements, an institution in permanent struggle against any surplus to the count of identities that may take place, that is to say it also struggles against that excess on the logic of identity that constitutes the action of political subjects. This work is rendered more insistent by the world economic order. Our states are less and less able to thwart the destructive effects of the free circulation of capital on the communities under their care. And they are all the more unable

since they completely unwilling to. They then fall back on what is in their power, the circulation of people. They take as their specific object the control of this other circulation and the national security that these immigrants threaten as their objective, that is to say more precisely the production and the management of insecurity. This work is increasingly becoming their purpose and their means of legitimation.

This use of the law satisfies two essential functions: an ideological function that provides a subjective figure who is a constant threat to security; and a practical function that continually rearranges the frontier between inside and outside, constantly creating floating identities, making those who are inside susceptible to falling outside. The legislation on immigration was firstly intended to create a category of sub-French people, making people who were born on French soil or to French-born parents fall into the category of floating immigrants. The legislation on undocumented immigration is intended to make legal 'immigrants' fall into the undocumented category [*cela a voulu dire faire tomber dans la catégorie des clandestins des «immigrés» légaux.*]. It is the same logic that has allowed the recent use of the notion of 'French of foreign origin'. And it is that same logic that is today aimed at the Roma, creating, against the principle of free circulation in the European space, a category of Europeans who are not truly Europeans, just as there are French who are not truly French. In creating these suspended identities the state isn't embarrassed by the contradictions, like those we have seen in the measure concerning 'immigrants'. On the one hand, it creates discriminatory laws and forms of stigmatisation founded on the idea of universal citizenship and equality before the law. This then punishes and/or stigmatises those whose practices run against the equality and universality of citizenship. But on the other hand, it creates within this citizenship discriminations for all, like that distinguishing the French 'of foreign origin'. So on one side all French are the same, and beware of those who are not; and on the other all are not the same and beware of those who forget this!

Today's racism is thus primarily a logic of the state and not a popular passion. And this state logic is primarily supported not by, who knows what, backwards social groups but by a substantial part of the intellectual elite. The last racist campaign wasn't at all organised by the so-called 'populist' extreme-right. It was directed by an intelligentsia that claims to be a Leftist, republican and secular intelligentsia. Discrimination is no longer based on arguments about superior and inferior races. They argue in the name of the struggle against 'communitarianism', universality of the law and the equality of all citizens before the law and the equality of the sexes. There again, they are not embarrassed by so many contradictions; these arguments are made by people who otherwise make very little of equality and Feminism. In fact, the argument mostly creates a relation essential to identifying the undesirable: thus the relation between migrant, immigrant, backward, Islamist, chauvinist and terrorist. The recourse to universality in fact benefits its contrary: the establishment of a discretionary state power that decides who belongs and who doesn't belong to the class of those who have the right to be here; the power, in short, to confer and remove identities. That power has its correlate: the power to oblige individuals to be identifiable at all times, to keep themselves in a space of full visibility before the state. It is worth, from that point of view, returning to the solution that the government found to the juridical problem posed by banning the burqa. It was, as we have seen, difficult to make a law specifically aimed at a few hundred people of a particular religion. The government found a solution: a law carrying a general ban on covering one's face in public spaces, a law which at the same time was aimed at a woman wearing the full veil and a protestor wearing a mask or scarf.

The scarf thus becomes a common symbol of the backward Muslim and the terrorist agitator. This solution then, adopted, like many measures on immigration, with the benevolent abstention of the 'Left', is the formula given by 'republican' thought [*c'est la pensée «républicaine» qui en a donné la formule*]. Let us remember those furious diatribes of November 2005 against those masked and hooded youths who took action night after night. Let us also remember the beginning of the Redeker affair, the philosophy professor menaced by an Islamic 'fatwa'. The starting point of Robert Redeker's furious anti-Muslim diatribe was ... a ban on the thong at the *Paris-Plage*. In that ban, enacted by the mayor of Paris, he detected a measure of complaisance toward Islamism, towards a religion whose potential for hatred and violence was already manifest in the ban on public nudity. The beautiful discourse on republican secularism and universality is finally reduced to the principle that we should be entirely visible in public places, whether paved or beach.

I conclude: a lot of energy has been spent against a certain figure of racism—embodied in the *Front National*—and a certain idea that this racism is the expression of 'white trash' ('*petite blancs*') and represents the backward layers of society. A substantial part of that energy has been recuperated to build the legitimacy a new form of racism: state racism and 'Leftist' intellectual racism. It is perhaps time to reorient our thinking and the struggle against a theory and a practice of stigmatisation, precariatization and exclusion which today constitutes a racism from above: a logic of the state and a passion of the intelligentsia.