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## The Great Replacement?

### Old National Mythologies and Contemporary Realities

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## **“The Great Replacement”?**

### **Old National Mythologies and Contemporary Realities**

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(translated by Julien Queleennec)

The theory of “the Great Replacement” was elaborated by a French Far-right writer, Renaud Camus, in a book published in 2011 (*Le Grand Remplacement*, ed. David Reinhard). On the political level, this writer has supported the Far-right candidate Marine Le Pen, leader of the party “Rassemblement National”, which replaced the “Front National”.

In 2014, Renaud Camus was condemned for incitement to racial hatred as he accused Muslims of being, among other things, the cause of “the great replacement” as well as an existential threat to France and its “identity”. This year, in 2019, he was running as head of the list “La ligne claire” (The clear line) during the European parliamentary election (26<sup>th</sup> of May). His program can be summed up in just a few points: to fight against immigration, considered as a massive phenomenon, and to set up what he names a movement of “remigration”, that is to say, in less euphemistic words, to expand the mass expulsions of non-EU foreigners. At first, Camus' theory was marginal, but it is now largely taken up by political forces of the right and far-right, by conservative medias and by some French intellectuals such as A. Finkelkraut. Furthermore, since the dreadful islamophobic attacks in New Zealand, its fame and influence are now international. The murderer has indeed made explicit references to this theory. Also, several heads of States, heads of government and political leaders in the European Union (Hungary, Austria, Poland, Italy) defend, explicitly or implicitly, the opinion according to which Europe would be in the process of being submerged by an uncontrolled movement of immigration.

#### **1. The “Great Replacement”: an old and longstanding myth**

Importance of the so-called “exotic” immigration, that is non-european immigration in France

between the two World Wars.

Main reasons:

- Long-term factors, knowing the weakness of French demography, the source of enduring political and geopolitical anxieties which have sustained the alleged French decay, decay to-come for some, already under way for others.
- Shifting situational factors related to the catastrophic human consequences of the 1<sup>st</sup> World War: close to 1 400 000 dead to which we must add the numerous victims of the “Spanish flu” (around 200 000 dead).

The immigration from French colonies will become a source of fear cultivated by political, administrative and academic elites of that period, as well as by some political parties. It fed the widespread popular racism. This fear is indexed on the theory of the impossible assimilation of those North-Africans, which explains their alleged dangerousness, a public danger (for the safety of property and persons), and a health hazard relative to the contagious diseases affecting the migrants, such as tuberculosis and syphilis. That's what was believed at that time. This last venereal disease fueled the great myth of a possible syphilization of French population, contributing to the dramatic weakening of France, both physically and morally. Here, the elitist racism is supported by biopolitical observations which provide legitimacy for racist and xenophobic policies, in the name of “the defense of society”, to use Foucault's terms. The Other, here the “migrant” from North Africa, is supposed to pose an existential threat to the French nation.

From 1924: Many restrictions imposed upon the free movement of North African migrants.

On the 12<sup>th</sup> of November 1938, Daladier's government passed a decree-law applicable to the foreigners living on French territory. This text was prepared by the Minister of Home Affairs. It invokes the imperatives of “national security” and of “the protection of public order” to justify the detention in “specialized centres” of “unwanted” non-natives when no offence had been committed. From a colonial origin, the administrative detention applied to “natives” (“*indigènes*”) of French possessions has then been imported and incorporated within the metropolitan legislation. For a long time now, some immigration specialists have warned public authorities against the foreign nationals, perceived as the cause of many evils potentially

damaging “the reason, the esprit de finesse, the caution and moderation characterizing French people”. The author of these last words, written in 1932, is not a marginal scribbler who would express himself in some obscure publication of that period, something to which we should not give too much importance. It is Georges Mauco, in the dissertation he defended at the prestigious Sorbonne University, before he was appointed General Secretary of the French Committee on population, and later Assistant Secretary of State in charge of immigration and foreign nationals in 1938. It was certainly a great honor for Georges Mauco who, in a few years, became a known and renown expert. This common form of xenophobia was shared by numerous contemporaries and politicians. In February 1939, the first victims of these dispositions were the 350 000 Spanish Republicans who fled the troops of Franco and reached France, where they became detained in camps, in particular the one in Saint-Cyprien, Argelès and Gurs.

Likewise during the Liberation, and for similar reasons: human casualties and massive material destructions.

Improperly called migrants, whereas they are citizens of the Republic coming from the departments of Algeria to settle in the mainland, the number of “French muslims” from the colonies considerably increased – 22 000 in 1946, almost 300 000 in 1954. At the origin of these migrations, there are the consequences of the misery raging on the other side of the Mediterranean Sea, the imperatives of the country's reconstruction, and the needs of a growing economy. The freedom of movement which was eventually granted to the “exotic” populations also favored the migrations. To speak of “welcoming” (“d'accueil”) would be inadequate when you consider the conditions in which lived the people coming to work in France.

According to Andrée Michel in *Les travailleurs algériens en France* (published by the CNRS in 1956), the unemployment rate for the “European population” was 1.7%, and 25% for the Algerian “migrants”. These last were employed for the lowest positions and lowest wages, while a “real segregation of the North African inhabitants” was already in place “in some industrial regions or cities”. In the introduction of the book, the State advisor Pierre Laroque (founder and later director of the Social Security) writes : “if there is an obvious conclusion to draw [from this study], it is that discriminations between European and Algerian workers can be observed *everywhere, in the terms of employment, in the recruitment process, (...) in the*

*conditions of existence [and in] the housing*” (emphasis added). The discriminations are serious, numerous and cumulative. In one word, they are systemic. They are the same discriminations that the followers of the great national-republican narrative deny or downplay by presenting them as marginal discriminations linked to individual and negligible behaviours. The inheritors of the colonial and postcolonial immigration know this not-so-much glorious story of the “thirty glorious years” (Trente Glorieuse – 1945/1975). They also know that these discriminations continue to affect their daily life and their professional future, among other things.

## **2. On some contemporary realities**

With regard to the amount of refugees, that is persons who have crossed one or more international borders due to political, ethnic, religious persecutions, to gender and sexist discriminations, or to flee genital mutilations (the excision is a reason for the women who refuse such practice, for themselves or for their daughters, to demand international protection, that is to be granted the refugee's status), the numbers clearly invalidate the dominant opinion according to which Europe and Northern countries more generally would be the privileged destination of these refugees.

In 2016 (source of the UNHCR – United Nations Human rights Council), there were 65.6 million refugees worldwide, an unprecedented quantity. There were 22.5 million refugees to which the 40.3 million of internally displaced persons (Syria, Colombia, Afghanistan) must be added.

85% of these refugees are in the so-called Southern countries, and often in the neighbouring States. Since the beginning of the first war in Afghanistan against the Soviet forces in 1979, none of the Northern countries rank in the first three destinations for refugees. Since a long time now, Iran and Pakistan have been the two main countries concerned by the flow of refugees.

At this point in time, the first three countries receiving refugees are: Turkey (around 3 million), Jordania (more than a million), and Lebanon (where refugees represent 25% of the total population). There are also more recent movements of migration related to persecutions, to catastrophic political, economical and social circumstances. For example, the Rohingyas who

fled in front of the atrocities caused by the Burmese army, with more than a million of this muslim minority leaving towards the neighbouring Bangladesh. In Venezuela, more than 3 million of people have fled their country and went, for most of them, in Colombia.

Moreover, the cause of such movements of population is not only poverty, but also civil wars, which are sometimes combined with foreign interventions. The first countries of origin for refugees are: Afghanistan (5.5 million), South Sudan (2.5 million), Somalia (1 million).

Some explanations of these phenomena.

To leave one's native country, contrary to what many demagogues assert without knowing what exile represents, supposes the mobilization of numerous resources for the people who take this decision.

- **Financial resources:** to go to Europe for an Afghan or a Bengali can cost up to 10 000 euros, more if the journey is made with wives and children. For the Sub-Saharan migrants, it is less expensive, but the practices observed in Libya show the existence of a traffic of human beings, with hostage situations involving demands of money to the part of the family which remained in the home country. So in most of the cases, for those who leave as well as their close relatives, a departure requires the selling of properties or the taking of a significant loan. There is no need to add that this kind of decisions, on the economical, social and financial level, are not taken lightly, in a few hours, or even days, except in specific cases, when there are evidences of precise and individual threats. We must add that the tightening of juridical provisions and control practices by the EU and Maghrib States increased the cost of the border crossing, because of the potential problems and risks encountered.
- **Social resources:** acquaintances in the countries of destination or in the countries crossed by the migrants.
- **Affective resources:** the exile often has an excessive human cost, since the exiled know that they let relatives, wife, husband, children and friends behind, often for long periods of time. Two possibilities then: these persons are not regularized, and it is then impossible for them to come back to their country and make their relative come in the country where they live; or they have got the refugee status and they can move everywhere in the world but in their home country (family regrouping can then take

years).

- **Physical and psychological resources:** facing the risks of detention, sexual violence and/or exploitation, human trafficking... As examples, we could take what is happening now in Libya and the number of dead people in the Mediterranean Sea (more than 6000 in 2018, 25000 in the last 20 years).

Therefore, and contrary to some preconceived ideas, the persons leaving their home place to go to Northern countries are not the most powerless. In fact, less than 1% of the persons born in Sub-Saharan Africa live in Europe, and 70% of West Africans live in Africa, often in neighbouring States. As to the European Union, it hosts only one refugee out of ten, which confirms that the vast majority of them remain in the so-called Southern countries. More generally, 97% of human beings live in their country of origin. Except in some particular cases (civil and foreign wars, mass massacres and genocides), migrations are ultimately marginal phenomena from a worldscale point of view.

Regarding the situation of foreigners within the EU, the situation is varied: Poland and Romania are more emigrating countries and the portion of foreign residents there is low (0.6%); on the contrary in Luxembourg, 47.6% of residents are foreigners, most of them being from another European country; in France, the migration flow represents 0.9% of the total population (in comparison Japan is 0.3%, Switzerland 4%).

What prevails today in Europe, except in Germany which has temporarily “opened its door” to refugees, especially Syrians, is not a hosting policy but a politics of inhospitality prospering on what we were many to name a State racism (State xenophobia) after the election of Nicolas Sarkozy for president in 2007 and the setting up of a Minister of Immigration, Integration and National Identity, for the first time in contemporary French history. If this minister didn't last long (end in 2009), the immigration policies it enforced have for the most part been maintained.

As a proof of that, we can consider the outrageous treatment imposed to migrants and asylum seekers who have spent months, sometimes years, in the “jungle” of Calais, the biggest European slum. Likewise, there are hundreds of isolated minors let to themselves. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights wrote the 02.11.2018 that these minors “have been subjected to inhuman living conditions, left without proper shelter, without food, with no



access to medical services and to psychological assistance” because of French and British authorities which “did not live up to their responsibilities”. A failure? Not at all, it is the actual implementation of a politics which is confirmed by the rising number of families with children put in administrative retention (45 in 2014, 105 in 2015, 67 for the six first months of 2016 in the mainland, 4300 in Mayotte). We have to remember that the 12<sup>th</sup> of July 2016, the European Court of Human Rights condemned France in cases relative to such kind of retention practices. More recently, the 28<sup>th</sup> of February 2019, the same ECHR condemned France once again for the “degrading treatment” inflicted upon an Afghan isolated minor who arrived in France when he was 11 years old, not taken in charge by the French competent authorities, in contradiction with their national and international obligations. Finally, in comparison with the other States of the Old Continent, France only ranks 14<sup>th</sup> regarding the number of refugees in proportion to total populations, and the 25<sup>th</sup> for the rate of recognition of refugees in the first instance (Source Eurostat, see also the report published by the association P. Lévi [<http://www.primolevi.org/actualites/persecutes-au-pays-debouttes-en-france.html>]). A glorious hosting land, isn't it?

More generally, we must underline the multiplication of camps for foreigners within the EU. There are around 300 detention places which can be either closed camps, like the administrative retention centers, or open, like in Sangatte yesterday, Calais today, or in some of the Greek islands. There are also camps in the neighbouring countries located South of the Mediterranean Sea (Turkey, Cyprus, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya) which adds up to make a total of more than 420 camps, according to the calculations realized by an important network of scholars and associative militants (Migreurop network).