

France

Teaching colonial slavery in France, looking at the fight against anti-Black racism through history and memory

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Summary

We proposed to analyse the fight against anti-« Black » racism in France through the teaching of colonial slavery at school, and through the « racial paradox » (there is no race but there is racism). For the past ten years, slave trade, colonial slavery and its abolition have taken on a significant role in French schools. This is a result of committed teachers concerned with passing on an objective history. It also involves a reaction to social pressures and the demands of associations involved in projects working on memory and identity. These actors are aware of the consequences that memory has on our present collectivity. Since the 90's, we can observe the emergence of a movement that aims at reclaiming memory through acknowledgment of historical facts, of their solemn condemnation, and of their official commemoration – in particular in relation to the slave trade, slavery and colonialism. There is a will to introduce a component of French history that has been kept in the dark for too long and to take into account the need to recognise the population groups that descend from these neglected historical actors: afro-descendants and descendants from slaves, usually gathered under the category of “Blacks”.

Our paper focuses on France's partial responsibility towards its colonial past and consequently the difficulty of teaching it. The idea was that teaching is about “making society together”. But there is a “colonial rupture” that marks education in general and that is internal to the nation's educational system.

As history teachers, they are supposed to apprehend the past in a critical manner and try to deconstruct the association between being “black” and being a slave, and the assimilation “slave = black = victim” and “oppressor = white”.

The teacher notes a different historical approach depending on the identity attributed to their pupils. For most teachers, the history of slavery remains an effective pedagogical tool to fight racism. It also forms an ideological matrix for the education of citizens and a way of rethinking multicultural identities. The main task of teachers today when dealing with pupils is to avoid a discourse of identification in the Euro-centric vision of French history. The history of slavery also makes it possible to introduce some reflections on Human Rights and the socio-economic characteristics particular to a system of domination.

Introduction

The fight against anti-"Black" racism manifests itself in France mainly through issues of identity and discrimination. "Black" as a category is not commonly used in politics, as, in France, it cannot be used in the context of public policy to designate a population or part thereof.

The debate on the history and commemoration of colonial slavery¹ re-emerged in the 2000s as an essential part of this struggle. This re-emergence was triggered by the 2001 law of the Parliamentarian Christiane Taubira and the issues surrounding it. In France, so-called racism against “Blacks” is a politically neglected and little mediated issue - due to the taboos surrounding skin color. If there are no "races", there would be no differences (in terms of racial projections on individuals or groups) and therefore no racist society. So, "how can there be "Whites" and "Blacks" in a non-racist France?" (Durpaire, 2006: 20).

School is considered the place where citizenship and tolerance are shaped. For the past ten years, slave trade, colonial slavery and its abolition have acquired a significant role in French schools: It comes down to adding a civil dimension to a historical fact. This was, on the one hand, a result of committed teachers (mainly historians) concerned with the passing on of an objective history, and, on the other, a reaction to social pressure and demands of associations involved with projects working

¹ From the period of slavery onwards, up until the nineteenth century (and even up until now), a depreciated feeling towards "Blacks" has manifested itself, even though France has often been divided between *negrophobia* and *negrophilia*.

on memory and identity.² Common to these actors is their awareness of the consequences memory has on our present collectivity.

In this paper, we analyse the commitment of historians and politicians, the role of memory and its transference through commemorations as well as the representations of the concerned agents in a context of anti-racist struggles with regard to the « black » population. Since the 1990s, we can observe the emergence of a movement that aims at reclaiming memory through acknowledgment of historical facts, of their solemn condemnation and of their official commemoration – in particular in relation to slave trade, slavery and colonialism. The movement is based on two demands: On the one hand, there is a will to introduce a component into the history of France that has been kept silent for too long. On the other, to take into account the need for recognising population groups descending from these neglected actors of history: afro-descendants and descendants from slaves, usually gathered under the category of “Blacks”.³ As such, “the strategy used by the “memory groups” consists in conveying a representation of individual identities and group identities, one which does not grant its members a dignified place within humanity and the nation.” (e.g. Robine, 2008).

According to the writer Odile Tobner (2007), French negrophobia manifested itself both in terms of political power (e.g. Nicolas Sarkozy’s speech in Dakar in July 2007) and in the Media, as well as through intellectuals who did not consider it would become a “question noire” as such⁴, but rather a French debate on “Blacks”. Since 2005, the Media caused the re-emergence of the concept “question noire”, which brings together often very different issues into one “group, characterised by a shared or attributed phenotype and common experiences of discrimination, “caused by the racialization of skin color (Cottias, 2007: 81).

Until the 1990s, slavery and colonialism were considered “minor elements of the history of France, most probably because colonialism questions the French identity built around the concepts of the Republic and universalism.” (e.g. Vidal, 2008).

The French debate is divided: on the one hand there is the rejection of all racial definition of groups of people, on the other hand there is the desire to quantify the distinctive groups. Be that as it may, this debate is hampered by the fear of an institutionalised racialization of society.

² Associations such as CRAN and CAPDIV that we mention, as well as the Partie of the Indigenes of the Republic, for instance, have notably taken hold of this question.

³ Unlike in Anglo-Saxon countries, France made a taboo of this subject. Notable exceptions are the works of the historian Pap Ndjaye and those of the sociologists Eric Fassin and Christian Poiret.

⁴ In the American context, the expression the « negro question » is used. Literally translated we can talk about the « black question » and « black problems », but this does not reflect the objective concept the « question noire » has become in French society.

At present, the memory and the history of colonial slavery come into play in the re-appropriation of this colonial past, which finally opens a forum for debate and a field of research more in tune with the strong social demands on this matter. The attempt to recognize the colonial past of France has thus sparked a debate on our duty to remember and on the adequacy of historical discourse and its source material. The blame for a truncated French history, or even the misuse of memory, has resulted in great divisions amongst historians. The social cohesion and the national identity have become the common issues of history and memory, the latter having assumed a political dimension and become an object to law.

History requires methodological rigor to render faithfully the events and discourses of agents – in this case those of the colonisers, the masters and the slave traders, but also those of the dominated and the slaves; and it is the very transmission, the passing on of this discourse that the postcolonial literature has provoked. History questions memory as the depositary of the past and the interpreter of events; and this memory, in this sense, operates within a double dimension, an individual and a collective, a personal and a social. As a consequence, inherent to the notion “duty to remember” (*Devoir de Mémoire*) is the belief that the memory of *some* has to be integrated into the *common* narrative and that this shall be done through legislation.

We will mainly base our analysis on the works of the researchers and associated lecturers of the European research project EURESCL⁵, which is linked to the International Center for Research on Slavery (CIRESCL)⁶, as well as those of the Committee for the History and the Memory of Slavery (CPMHE)⁷. These works echo those of postcolonial studies, which have had a hard time emerging in France.

From the 18th to the 20th of May 2011, an international colloquium entitled “Teaching about slave trade, slavery, their abolition and their legacies” took place in Paris and raised the following questions: to which representations are the slave trade, slavery and their abolition associated? If any identification exists, does it subscribe to the paradigm of “chromatic identity” or to the more general one of situations of domination or exclusion? Which are the continuities and ruptures between the past and the present? What are the meanings of these representations of the past and their

⁵ <http://www.eurescl.eu/>

⁶ The International Center of Research on Slavery (CIRESCL) is a Grouping of International Research (GDRI), created in January 2008 in the scope of the convention between the National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS), the School for Advanced Studies in Social Sciences (EHESS), the University Paris Diderot (Paris 7), the University of Poitiers and the York University in Canada. <http://www.esclavages.cnrs.fr/> See also the project « Afrodescendants et esclavage » (AFRODESC) : <http://www.ird.fr/afrodesc/>

⁷ The article 4 of the law of the 21st of May 2001 considering the recognition of slave trade and slavery as crimes against humanity has forecasted the creation of a “committee of qualified persons meant to give suggestions about sites and actions on the national territory, which would warrantee the permanence of the memory of this crime throughout generations.” <http://www.comite-memoire-esclavage.fr/>

current legacy? Is there a danger of over-interpreting a blurred demand and posing pre-existing identity quests? In teaching about slave trade, slavery and their abolition, how is it possible to convey values of tolerance in a country that is characterised by its cultural diversity and where forgetfulness regarding these questions, maintains “racial” prejudices?

The critical view of the colonial past and slavery in France creates a possible pitfall of essentialising an identity based on skin color, a view that is taken in turn by politicians and the Media. The issue of memory presents an opportunity to make discrimination more visible in the public space, and to rethink racism in the light of a historical racialisation of society (the color "black" having been associated with servitude and the color "white" with liberty).

For the first part, we will study what is at stake socially, politically and scientifically in the commemorations and the "duty to remember" (*devoir de mémoire*) when concerned with colonial slavery. Then, on the basis of the field experiences of teachers of primary, secondary and high schools, we will then analyse the very role of school in the promotion of tolerance – a concept made problematic by the project *Tolerance*. Finally, we will see how schools can induce the construction and the deconstruction of social and cultural imaginaries of the so-called “Blacks” or afro-descendant populations.

1. Slave trade and colonial slavery: What is at stake in commemorations, between History and memory

Despite its long history of colonialism and slavery, France is still reluctant to truly acknowledge the realities and the consequences of its past. From the 15th to the 18th century, France grew extensively richer through slave trade, maintained through the exchange of Sub-Saharan Africans reduced to slavery from Africa to the Antilles.

In the 19th century, Africa experienced a new wave of French (amongst others) colonisation. The postcolonial analysis of Homi Bhabha (*The Location of Culture*) has strongly criticized the evaporation of the colonial memory of western intellectuals – the thunderous silence around the colonial experience as a source of economic enrichment for Europe and imperialist violence as an ethnocentric project of modernity. At the time of the First World War, France called upon conscripts of Senegalese skirmishers, some of whom, once the war was over, settled on French territory. Then, during the 1920s and the 1930s, young African and Caribbean students came to France to study at the prestigious high schools and universities (in particular in Paris)

and invented the movement of “Négritude”. The influence of the *Harlem Renaissance*, of American jazz as well as the visits of Afro-American intellectuals to France in the 1940s contributed to the establishment of a “black” elite, characterised by its search for an identity and for the rehabilitation of Africa. In the 1960s and at the time of the Independence Wars, France called upon labor forces from its old African colonies that by then had become francophone, which led to the development of an economical migration. In addition, in 1946 France made Guadeloupe, Martinique, Guyana and the Reunion Island French overseas departments (Haiti had declared its independence in 1804).

This relationship between France, Sub-Saharan Africa and the Antilles led to a demographic increase of Africans (some of whom had become French citizens) and people from the Antilles (with French citizenship for those from the Dom-Tom). These population groups had and have kept the questions related to slavery alive in its collective memory – through family narratives and through the historical signs still visible in their countries. An associate professor in history assumes that this is the reason why, today, some assert the necessity of demanding a firmer recognition of this identity than of other French citizens. In the 20th century, this quest for identity and recognition has contributed greatly to the emergence of what is called: “the black question”.

To these social demands were added the political and legal aspects of the “duty to remember”. The partial borne responsibility of France towards colonial past creates confusion. The cases of Algeria after its independence or of the “Françafrique” are obvious examples of the ambiguity of France’s relation to its old colonies: denial of acknowledgement of its wrongdoings during the colonial time, but also economical, diplomatic and geo-strategic interests, neocolonialism, etc.

How is this question of slavery considered in France with regard to the construction of a “black identity”? The interest in such an “identity” is empowered by people from the Antilles as descendants of slaves, but also, in a more or less conscious manner, by the Africans who relate to it through their experience of racism and with prejudices of skin color. The relevance of skin color gives meaning (usually within the framework of a revendication) to the belonging to a common painful history and experience of racism of African and Antilles populations.

The idea of “*colour-blindness*”, which is central to the pact between the Republican and the Universalist French and is part of the Constitution of 1958, basically requires the Republic to “*guarantee equality before law for all citizens, regardless of origin, race or religion*”. It has however triggered numerous scientific studies and protest movements, all testing the premise “*there is no such thing as race*” (Calvès, 2002:

173). This constitutional principle is opposed to the recognition of the collective rights a group could claim (origin, culture or common belief), as the laws of the Republic are intended to apply to all – without any distinction.

The anti-racist movements started as a reaction to problems related to racism, but have now shifted their focus to discrimination. The two main associations before World War II were the *League of Human Rights* (LHR, 1898) and the *International League against Racism and Anti-Semitism* ('Ligue Internationale Contre le Racisme et l'Antisémitisme', LICRA, 1927). After the war, we saw the creation of the *Movement against Racism and for Friendship among Peoples* (MRAP, 1949), *SOS Racism* (1984) and more recently *Les Indivisibles* (2007). These associations were regularly accused of using 'a good cause' for selfish political purposes.

The fight against racism and discrimination is also strongly influenced by the debate on ethnic statistics. The goal of these statistics is not only to list but also to quantify the populations for which the Republican idea in theory rejects all distinctions, but who are yet experiencing racism and discrimination in everyday life. Gwenaël Calvès talks about a "semantic tinkering, based on changing, varying and unevenly spread social perceptions, [...] and presented as the Achilles heel of a policy which – in order to be fully operational – demands to be entirely based on legally defined categories." (Calvès, 2002: 178).

Anti-racism spread extensively in the late 1970's, as a reaction to the racism against migrant workers with mainly North African and sub-Saharan Africa origin. Supported by the Socialist Party, SOS Racism was established shortly after the election of François Mitterrand in 1981, which put the Left in power. It was also a result of the March for Equality and Against Racism ("Marche des beurs") in 1983, which took place in a climate of concern about the rise of the National Front in the early 1980s. Focusing on the topics of social recognition and access to citizenship, the mobilizations of the 1980s fought against a structurally negative and stigmatizing image and have a strong identity dimension that persists still today (Beaud and Masclat, 2006: 809-843).

In France, historiographic problems concerning memory, multiculturalism and the construction of identities have developed in a particular way.

In 1998, the French state – represented by Jacques Chirac and Lionel Jospin – celebrated the 150th anniversary of the second abolition of slavery in the colonies and recognised the event as a historical trauma for slaves and their descendants (the latter was given the status of victims).⁸ The legal qualification of slavery as a crime against humanity became a fundamental element for the recognition of this status. The

⁸ The second decree on the abolition of slavery in France was signed on the 27th of April 1848 by the temporary government of the 2nd Republic, following the suggestion of de Victor Schoelcher.

abolitionists, represented by Victor Schoelcher⁹, were celebrated, whilst the slaves and their revolts were forgotten. Hence, the silent march that followed on the 23rd of May 1998 questioned the dominant narrative that understood abolition as a gift generously offered by Europe. The government “related to abolition through auto-glorification. It is the nation that abolishes! Yet, this understanding had to change. As reported by the deputy Christiane Taubira, France could no longer keep on praising its abolitionist glory without conducting a reflection on its past as an important enslaving power”.¹⁰ This anniversary would also leave a permanent mark on the “métropolisation” (“Métropole” is the French term for motherland) of the memory of slavery already existing in the overseas territories as a direct consequence of emigration of Antilles to Metropolitan France. In the opinion of Christine Chivallon, even in the Antilles “the topic remained hidden by a bewildering layer of silence”. And according to the surveys of Myriam Cottias, at the end of the 1990s, the selective legacy concerning slavery made visible a “disincarnated past”, a “charming image” close to “exotic folklore” (e.g. Chivallon, 2002).

Unanimously adopted on the 10th of May 2001, the Taubira law¹¹ recognised human trade and slavery as crimes against humanity and required that the question should be integrated into schoolbooks, which had not yet been done. Within a traditionally Universalist society, this was an answer to the request of associations from overseas and in France, asking for an official recognition of a “racial” category: the “Blacks”. The memory of slavery was therefore emerging within a context of migration and strong social demands. Both in the public as well as in the academic sphere, the demands for the re-establishment of the question of colonial slavery and its consequences on the social representation of the “black” populations grew louder. In 1991, the association “Rings of Memory”¹² was created, which set its primary goal as the introduction of the history of slave trade, slavery and their current consequences to the general public.

The Taubira law was adopted but it never obtained the expected impact: in the History of France the question of slavery and the very involvement of France is still hardly mentioned. Moreover, there is no *lieu de memoire*, leaving the old colonies absolutely deprived of their own memory. Is that due to a phenomenon of inertia or unwillingness of recognising a part of humanity or even to a social pathology of forgetting a painful past and its effects (racism, discrimination, etc.)? Accordingly, the laws on memory question France’s capacity to remain silent and blind on the aspects

⁹ (1804-1893)

¹⁰ <http://www.afriscope.fr/Christiane-Taubira-fait-le-bilan>

¹¹ <http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=LEGITEXT000005630984&dateTexte=20110815>

¹² <http://anneauxdelamemoire.org/>

of its past, question this collective amnesia as the structural moment of the Creole identity in the Antilles.

The Taubira law follows directly the Gayssot law of the 13th of July 1990¹³, which “represses all discourses of a racist, anti-Semite or xenophobic character”, yet innovates by qualifying as criminal the denial of the existence of crimes against humanity by citing the Jewish and the Armenian genocides. In 1993, a decree established “a national day of commemoration of the racist and anti-Semite persecutions committed under the authority of the government of the French State.” The law of the 23rd of February 2005¹⁴ concerning the «positive» aspects of colonisation together with the statements of the historian Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau of that same year were heavily criticized. In an interview for the *Journal du dimanche* on his new book *Les Traités Négrières, Essai d'histoire globale (The Slave Trades. Essay on a global history)*, Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau explained that “this accusation against the Jewish community [of the very controversial French stand-up comedian Dieudonné] actually emerged in the 1970s in the Black-American community. It bounces back today in France. This goes far beyond the case of Dieudonné. It is the same problem as that of the Taubira Law, which considers the trade of Blacks by Europeans as a “crime against humanity”, inducing thus a direct comparison with the Shoah. The slave trade was not a genocide. The goal of the trade was not to exterminate a people. The slave was considered a possession that carried economic value and was required to work as much as possible. The Jewish genocide and the slave trade are two different processes. There is no Richter scale of suffering.” Pétré-Grenouilleau also asserts that to call one-self a descendant of slave « consists in a choice of identity, not of reality, [...] it is choosing amongst one's ancestors.” The case greatly divided the historians and a Vigilance Committee, supported by the historian Gérard Noiriel, was created in order to watch after the public usages of history.¹⁵ A manifesto was thence adopted on June 17th 2005, expressing “the worry drawn by the “multiplication of legal procedures concerning historians and thinkers””, not agreeing to grant “the historian the inordinate power to rule on memory.” Memory is not history, but rather a rational narrative facing historical reality.

In 2005, the French government asked the history department of the CNRS to create a suitable section for reshaping social cohesion: a Thematic Priority Network was established in November and lead by the historian Myriam Cottias.¹⁶ At the same time, the Ministry of Education published a first letter addressing the superintendents

¹³ <http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=LEGITEXT000006076185&dateTexte=20110815>

¹⁴ <http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000000444898&dateTexte>

¹⁵ <http://cvuh.blogspot.com/>

¹⁶ <http://www.esclavages.cnrs.fr/>

and the education officers (Inspecteurs d'Académie).¹⁷ The idea behind this policy was to symbolically restore the socially disqualified group the « Blacks » - a topic that was tackled again by the creation of the Representative Council of the Black Associations (CRAN).¹⁸ The CRAN, supported by the teaching profession and the academics, was founded on November 26th 2005 and gathered 120 associations and federations dedicated to fighting discrimination and generate a collective memory of slavery and colonization. That same year, two colloquiums organised by the CAPDIV (Circle of Action for the Promotion of Diversity in France) preceded the creation of the CRAN: the first one, on February 19th, was entitled “The Blacks in France: anatomy of an invisible group”. The second one from April 23rd, added to the title: “What is revenged? Which strategies?” Finally, the end of 2005 was marked by riots taking place in the suburbs, raising the question of a so-called social dimension of the socio-economic problems (e.g. Fassin, 2008).

Following the Taubira Law in 2001, we note a phase characterised by fuzziness and a wait-and-see attitude. From 2005 onward, however, the “duty to remember” appeared as “a means to educate citizens”, as a professor and PhD student reported:

“May it concern old deportees or slaves, their memory would function as a means to fight anti-Semitism and racism. The “duty to remember” is also promoted by the public powers in order to encourage a feeling of belonging to the national community. Indeed, acknowledging the existence of multiple memories enables the integration – at least symbolically – of diverse communities into a common history.”¹⁹

The questions that are raised today are as follows: Can teaching the history of slavery reduce racism and discrimination? Should such teaching and the “duty to remember” be made major political tools to fight discriminations and racism and promote tolerance? The collective memory that is expressed here by the teachers and activists became the privileged space for political and social recognition. The absence or the partial absence of the history of slave trade and slavery in French schoolbooks constitutes a visible proof of the oblivion and the social contempt in which certain population groups were kept (e.g. Ledoux, 2009).

Hence, it took a long while for this question to find its place in France, resulting in that most French people kept believing that their society was not an enslaving one. Plantation slavery did not take place on French territory; the phenomenon was not

¹⁷ “The school institution assigns a privileged place to the reflections on memory : as such, the theme of slave trade, slavery and their abolition takes part in the educational mission, as has reported the Committee for the memory of slavery to the First Minister on May the 12th 2005. Indeed, this memory partakes in the shaping of minds of responsible citizens, the ones tolerant and open to others. The importance of this dimension of our national memory should be emphasised to the teaching community and it should be encouraged to take into account teachings and educative actions.” BO n°41 du 10 novembre 2005.

¹⁸ <http://lecran.org/>

¹⁹ <http://www.rue89.com/2008/02/18/le-devoir-de-memoire-nouvelle-religion-civile>

meant to reach the “Métropole”. As a philosophy professor puts it, the colonial “matter” is about thinking that everything starts from the center and spreads towards the periphery without any understanding of the effect on the periphery, and not only without understanding, but in addition, by denying these effects. Almost all French philosophers consider these topics non-philosophical. In philosophy, the French tradition consists in dealing solely with “noble” subjects. For instance, servitude was often thought “nobly” as a political servitude or constraint, but only rarely in a trivial or prosaic manner as Condorcet did. The question of “race”, as if it was not a philosophical question, is not tackled anymore aside from in the works of the French philosopher Etienne Balibar (*Race, Nation, Class : « Race, nation, classe »*), who questions the specificity of racism today, a reflection he makes based on the works by Frantz Fanon, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Albert Memmi, Colette Guillaumin and Pierre-André Taguieff, and more recently by Elsa Dorlin, whose work looks at *the sexual and colonial genealogy of the French nation (The matrix of the race)*. (« *Une généalogie sexuelle et coloniale de la nation française (La matrice de la race)* »). In the phrase “Education Nationale”, one ought to question what the term “national” means when it comes to education. Philosophy affirms that the French tradition that only mentions what concerns the motherland. In the school syllabuses, for instance, the Second World War is over-represented because it directly concerns Europeans. According the same philosopher, the “historisation of questions is a French specialty”, i.e. We let past be past and the present is kept blank. This goes hand-in-hand with our way of thinking about the national reconciliation in total silence. As soon as someone wishes to speak without sticking to the historical narrative, he is said to be willing to reopen old wounds. The children of Martinique and Guadeloupe are very much aware of the history of this question, while the children in France are not meant to know or learn anything about what happened there. In other words, it is indeed the “colonial rupture” that marks education in general and that is internal to the nation’s educational system.

To consider the slave trade and colonial slavery also allows the questioning of their contemporary forms (such as domestic slavery, human trade, etc.). From the lived experience of discrimination and racism, a common face of the exploited and the dominated emerges that exceeds the “duty to remember”. What an associate professor in history, expressed is the fact that going back to the question of slavery and slave trade allows investigating the practices of Human Rights’ violations.

On the international lever, the Durban’s conference in South Africa (that took place from the 2nd to the 9th of September 2001) was the third convention of the world conferences against racism organised by UNESCO. Amongst other things, the possibility of compensation from the old enslaving States was raised: a request that

was forcefully rejected. On the other hand, in 1993, on the occasion of its general conference – and following a proposition of Haiti and the African countries – the UNESCO agreed on the project “La Route de l’esclave”²⁰ (the slave’s path), which was officially launched in 1994 in Benin.²¹

The issues of the project are the following:

- To establish historical truth;
- To fulfill the “duty to remember”;
- To promote pluralism and intercultural dialog;
- To favor the institution of a culture of peace and social cohesion;
- To encourage the construction of new identities and citizenships.

This project is a partnership of the network of the Associated Schools of the UNESCO (réSEAU)²², created in 1953 and consisting of 7.900 schools in 176 countries. The réSEAU promotes education for all and concentrates on:

- Worldly problems and the role of the United Nations;
- The teaching of sustainability;
- Peace and Human Rights;
- Intercultural education.

It is also responsible for providing tools to guide school teachers and professors in their teachings of these questions.

2. Teaching slavery: what is the role of schools in the promotion of tolerance and the fight against racism and discriminations?

The debate concerning the added value and the methods of teaching about colonial slavery in associations and among teachers addresses multiple issues: it is not only about the objective analysis of history, but also questions the construction of an identity, somewhere between the loaded claims of “communitarianism” (“it is those who are victims of racism who are accused of racialising the society”, Durpaire, 2006: 32) and an increasing invisibility of differences.

The French debate about anti-“black” racism is not actually resolved, continuing to oscillate between the use of racial categories and consequent racialization on the one hand and the willingness to move towards a “post-racial” society - as discussed by

²⁰ Résolution 27C/3.13)

²¹ http://portal.unesco.org/culture/fr/ev.php-URL_ID=25659&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

²² <http://www.unesco.org/new/fr/education/networks/global-networks/aspnet/>

researchers and activists (Lilian Thuram, François Durpaire, Rokhaya Diallo, Marc Cheb Sun and Pascal Blanchard) in the "Call for a multicultural and post-racial Republic." The main idea of this discussion is the idea to not talk about racial groups, re-enforcing the representation of these groups and how they see themselves, but rather to talk about "living together".

In the 19th century, schoolbooks were conveying the national myth of a white, Christian France, an ideological tradition that was perpetuated throughout the 20th century. The events of the 1990s and the 2000s have proved it necessary to modify this national narrative. How to teach the history of slavery, a long-term pedagogical and socio-cultural taboo? Since the 1990s, the Ministry of Education has adopted a strategy of avoidance, while some teachers have attempted to introduce the question into their syllabuses. Remaining silent concerning a particular period of time in history, however, is never an innocent action.

Between 2006 and 2010, the institute of national research in pedagogy conducted extensive research led by eight professors and entitled "The teaching of slavery, trades and abolitions within the Métropole". Their investigation on the postcolonial context resulted in a report, which constitutes a first inventory of the state of affairs of the question.

To what extent are the school syllabuses conforming to the request stated in the Taubira law? The importance of teaching lies in the appropriation of knowledge in order to reveal the problematic and persistent elements (consequences, effects, etc.), which permits us to understand the world, in which we live. According to Christiane Taubira, teaching is about "making society together".

In 2002, an explicit reference to slave trade and colonial slavery was implemented in elementary schools' teachings, which did not exist beforehand (solely abolition was mentioned). In eighth grade, pupils had already tackled the problem of the triangular trade, but the approach had not been systematically constructed – as teachers report. In 2008, the secondary school's syllabuses were entirely revised and from the beginning of the school year 2011, the question will constitute a whole chapter for the eighth grade. In high school, on the other hand, general letters are communicated in order to advise teachers on how to tackle different questions (such as the French Revolution, the first Abolition, the Riot of Toussaint Louverture in Haiti, etc.). What should be questioned anew, through this teaching is the role of: the great discoveries, the exploitation of land by Europeans, the European expansion as an important phase of globalization (that has greatly shaped the current geopolitical and socio-economic situation) and finally the introduction of civil and political issues such as the Nation and Europe. What should a citizen know in order to understand the world in which he lives

and acts?

An associate professor in history insists on a high level of vigilance: it is about incorporating the question of slavery in teachings as any other historical event, because the interest for it may fade away, giving way for a particularly infantile clean conscience.²³ The period of slavery is considered essential for the understanding of a number of historical phases as well as for the grounding values of our republican pact. Furthermore, it raises questions of injustice and oppression, which are sensitive issues for the pupils and which question emotionally the notions of right, freedom, equality, dealing with others and violence – as they put into perspective the present socio-economic problems. She explains that it is also about civic education: there can be situations of oppression, domination and exploitation that we denunciate, but we can nevertheless partake in them unconsciously (for instance when it comes to children's labor in certain countries and our consumption of these goods). What students should remember, according to the historian Françoise Vergès, is that “the slave is a human being partaking in the economic, cultural, social and geopolitical system. He can challenge this system internally by expanding his freedom and resisting in different ways or externally by grousing and organising riots. This makes him a political agent”²⁴ as much as those who impose this domination.

A history teacher refers to the question of slavery as the main thread to allude the question of freedom and identity, which leads students to question their own origins. Having a large majority of students of “foreign” origin in her classes, she opens a debate and a reflection on living in France and being French (or not) whilst having different origins. Through slavery and colonialism, she suggests students to question again their own identity, which creates contradictory and polemical reactions. Indeed, as the historian François Durpaire puts it, « to discover the black man solely through the process of domination will result in a problem of identification » (Durpaire: 2011). She also notes that “students from the suburbs” are often eager to discuss the stereotypes imposed on them. But in any case, she affirms that they are most of the time quite happy to have the opportunity to debate on these questions, to neutralize certain racist discourses going on in their daily lives, which allows a better understanding of the aspects of the historical content, i.e. the exploitation of Man by Man, etc. Theoretically, she maintains that at the time when a sense of nationalism is constructed, racism is the result of the necessity felt by populations to reject an ‘other’,

²³ In *Sortir de la grande nuit*, Achille Mbembe defines this European clean conscience as what « has always been a mix of *laissez-faire*, indifference, will not to know and swiftness off-loading responsibility. It always consisted in willing not to be responsible of anything, guilty of anything.” (p.171).

²⁴ <http://www.afriscopes.fr/Combattre-les-nouvelles-formes-d> Interview with Françoise Vergès, president of the Committee for the History and Memory of slavery (CPMHE).

one which may be totally imaginary and hence creates an identity filled with stereotypes; an 'other' to be dominated or from whom one should protect. In parallel to the Shoah, what is in question is to reflect with the students on how a society rejects the 'other' to the point of exclusion, exploitation, animalization, dehumanization, slaughter and extermination. She gives the example of this young Haitian who, through learning about this history, expressed a feeling of betterment in his understanding of his origins and the political, economical and social situation of his country.

She provides us with an example from a session in her class:

"In my history class, we offered students to have a debate between the supporters of slavery and the abolitionists. This took place as a role-play by using texts from the end of the 18th century. The point was to try to determine the author's thesis. The difficulty consisted in finding a rhetoric strategy that would enable one to adopt the opponent's position in order to better refute his arguments. The students had to use the arguments from the text and incarnate the authors themselves. One was not allowed to invent a new position or new arguments; they had to use those of the historical character, thus requiring a real position of detachment. Surprisingly, the roles of the enslavers were very well played by quite a number of students as they were more familiar with the "economic" type of argumentation. The economic process were very well understood in this case, unlike the abolitionists who would sometimes run out of arguments. It was a rather unsettling situation for the students as, while being absolutely convinced of holding the truth, their ideas were not grounded enough on arguments and their positions remained null and void. This allowed them to understand how hard it sometimes is to historically overcome a position, even though one's own position is believed to hold the philosophical, ethical or political high ground. This was a good lesson of humility."

A university professor specialist on the matter explains that another issue of this lesson is to make children between the age of 10 and 15 understand what the great amount of victims actually represents: the 13 millions of deportees remains a rather abstract thing. It becomes clearer though when compared to the 6 million Jewish deportees in the Second World War. Hence, it shows itself relevant to incarnate this neglected humanity without necessarily identifying with it: the *Diary of a young girl* from Anne Frank illustrates well the deportation of the Jews, and for the transatlantic trade, it is interesting to refer to the memoirs of slaves like Olaudah Equiano (the only one to have written memoirs in the 18th century) or Ottobah Cugoano. Cinema and literature also make it easier to channel the emotions provoked by these difficult historical events. Finally, it is a question that would gain from being tackled within different disciplines (history, philosophy, literature, civil education, and history of art)²⁵ and sincere attempts to work on moral and contextual detachment: what is considered a crime today might still have been legal in the past.

²⁵ Circulaire n° 2005-172 du 2-11-2005, BO n°41 du 10.11.2005
<http://www.education.gouv.fr/bo/2005/41/MENE0502383C.htm>

3. Social representations of postcolonial subjects and constructions of identities.

“French historians have created the historiography of the French nation from the French motherland’s perspective solely and for the “white” race exclusively, both entities coinciding with each other. Due to this causality, being posited “natural”, we can better understand that the French nation has been unable to integrate the populations of the Antilles – mostly “black” or “mixed” – in the national “We.” (e.g. Cottias, 2005/5: 59-63).

This thought brings us back to the school’s Pantheon of famous historical characters, which remain, for most of the students, male and “white” figures. How to integrate the protagonists who remained until now on the historic and geographic margin? In the opinion of university professor specialist on the subject, this history should be viewed in terms of a *longue durée*. Since 2002, the schoolbook chapter dedicated to it only mentions the very peak of slave trade and slavery system in the 18th century. Instead, he argues, it is necessary to go back in time in order to understand the more global processes. According to him it is about going back to the origin of the word “slave”. In Latin “servus” translates to the word “serf”. In the Middle-Ages, “sclavus” meant “slave” and from then on it carried the meaning we know today. The etymology of the word allows determining that the original meaning was indeed one of economical servitude rather than a racial one. The genealogy of the word reaching back to Antiquity, can make sure we avoid remaining stuck in the modern chromatic vision of the formula, one assimilated solely to the colonial time: “slave = black = victim” and “oppressor = white”. It is the role of the teacher to deconstruct the association between being “black” and being a slave and to give an account of the historians’ re-contextualisation, which reminds us that slave trade was already something that was taking place in Africa. An associate professor in history has also noticed that the tensions between the Africans and the populations from the Antilles were reproduced at home and in the public sphere: the population of the Antilles, as descendants of slaves, was uprooted, while the Africans, who partook in the same trades, still remained in their homeland. She explains that “in addition to the shocking fact that hypothetical ascendancies, wholly fantasized and reconstructed are assigned to students, it shall be remembered that no one is responsible for his ancestry. This debate is inappropriate and is the symptom of a real problem. Obviously, it is neither about judging people on their genealogies nor about making children responsible for the historical and collective past. As history teachers, we are supposed to apprehend the past in a criticizing manner.”

Indeed, the black color was long attributed to the social status of the slave, which enabled legitimising its inferiority – an argument which was often used by pseudo-scientific theorists of the 19th century. Nowadays, this confusion between social and “racial” characteristics continues and consists in what the psychiatrist from Martinique

Frantz Fanon used to call the prejudice of color: in France it is still difficult to be “Black” and French at the same time, to be considered “a full-fledged citizen and not only a partial citizen” – as the poet of the Martinique, Aimé Césaire, adequately puts it. The representations of the colonial period are still present and keep feeding prejudices and stereotypes.

“In France, we observe a real vigilance toward contemporary forms of slavery, but a great difficulty in apprehending the legacies of the colonial slavery. We seldom perceive hostility, rather embarrassment – who is responsible? Why is this continuing for so long? It is more from the elected representatives or from historians that we perceive hostility. They refuse to see what represents slave trade and slavery and to admit that it is precisely where racism against Blacks found its origin. They refuse to see what Europe has done, the influence of its racism against blacks and its inability to admit that it is not the center of the world. It is a movement of communitarianism, one of Eurocentric reduction, which refuses any other reading of history. The oppositions are usually grounded in a refusal to take responsibility that can be summarized as such: “slavery was something practiced by everyone; the “Africans” sold their own brothers; we cannot judge today the state of affairs of yesterday.”²⁶

Concerning syllabuses, teachers noticed that the ones that had been elaborated in 2009 for the professional tenth grade contained an entire chapter dedicated to the first French colonial empire. Why did these classes, usually the most disregarded by the French elite, get the privilege to study this (neglected) part of history? She assumes that the differences amongst the teachings in different high school classes (the professional ones versus the “normal” ones) depend on the “type” of students they deal with. On the one hand, we have students from an underprivileged social class and, on the other, students from a middle class with a limited amount of immigrant children– or at least from what is visible of such a background. Nevertheless, she notices a difficulty in describing the scientific aspect of this situation and a differentiated historical approach which depends on the identity that is assigned to the public. In other words, on a very same territory, namely the French, depending on whether one studies in one high school or the other, the history taught varies.

A teacher and also PhD student working on this area reminds us that we have to remain careful: by identifying with the slaves or to the colons, the students remain caught in a racist logic. The discourse held by some teachers is sometimes confused, carrying stereotypes and leading to a dead end. The experience depends greatly on where one teaches:

“It shows that it is quite difficult to make a public from a « migration » background understand that the « Black » has to be tolerated. To say that one should tolerate differences is not efficient pedagogically because these children are themselves the victims of differences. It is, in the same way, dangerous to attribute to these students an ancestry of slaves (mixing in so doing the populations from the Antilles and the Reunion Island with the Africans who are legally “foreign”), a history of which they should be proud...In brief, there is a lot of confusion. On the other hand, in underprivileged classes, it is well understood that one should not reject the other because he is “black”. All this is very–too–well assimilated.

²⁶ <http://www.afriscope.fr/Combattre-les-nouvelles-formes-d> Interview with Françoise Vergès, president of the Committee for the History and Memory of Slavery (CPMHE).

Right away, they think: “they are not like us, but we have to accept them”. On this point too we should reflect as it remains both a limited and normative view. However, the history of slavery remains an efficient pedagogical tool to fight racism.”

Conclusion

The question of teaching slave trade, slavery and its abolition finds its place within the scope of a critique of the relationship of France to its old colonies and offers a possibility to make a certain use of history, in this case of colonial slavery as “an ideological matrix for the education of citizens” (e.g. Mbembe, 2010). as well as to rethink multicultural identities. The debate was triggered by a political and legal necessity together with a strong social demand for recognition and for a fight against the ‘anti-black’ racism – aiming at the foundation of a social order with high political stakes (mainly the Taubira law). In the years 2000, the question of slave trade, slavery and abolition has acquired a privileged position in the educational policies of the French state. The guiding idea behind the increased interest was to make slaves and their descendants proper agents of history. Indeed, the perspectives of history have remained for too long those solely of the French homeland, of Europe and of the Western world. For very long, the history schoolbooks have hardly recognised “to which extent the history of the Antilles during the revolutionary time [could enable] to rethink the limits and the contradictions of the French Republic and the French universalism” (e.g. Vidal, 2008). Nevertheless, some questions remain unanswered: has slavery “been permanently integrated to the corpus of teachings or is it meant to be a transience theme at school, one merely subject to satisfy some communities by a policy of recognition which apprehends the teaching of this historical fact under the sign of a moral indignation and the fight against discriminations? Is it about the transmission of historical knowledge “in progress” or about using history to reduce social divisions?”²⁷

Schools have undeniably instrumentalised memory as a vehicle for education, but also as a tool to regulate social order. While giving consideration to the racism held by the system of slavery, the main task of the teachers, when dealing with their students today, is to avoid a discourse of allocation and identification inherent in the euro-centered vision of the French history. The history of slavery also allows introducing a reflection on Human Rights and all the socio-economic characteristics peculiar to a system of domination.

²⁷ Rapport INRP.

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