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1

Lilian Thuram | Photo Conseil de l'Europe



WHY IS RACISM STILL A EUROPEAN QUESTION?

Fernanda Vilar

Lilian Thuram, a French world-cup winning footballer in 1998, has recently returned to the centre of media attention in Europe. He spoke out in defence of a black footballer who was racially abused by football fans. Thuram had the courage to declare straightforwardly that white people believe themselves to be superior and that racism is a centuries-old construction, and therefore very difficult to change (1). The fact that what Thuram said became controversial shows the necessity of discussing racism in Europe as a legacy of European imperial history. It also showed the need to go beyond this. As Angela Davis put it: “It is not enough not to be racist, one must be anti-racist” (2).

Thuram is the Founder of the Association for Education Against Racism (3). He has been accused of anti-white racism, a reprehensible oxymoron that seeks only to delegitimize those who denounce racism. It reveals the fallacies of those who believe they suffer daily oppression because they are white. “When a wise man points to the moon, the idiot looks at his finger,” says a Chinese proverb. To accuse Thuram of racism is to circumvent the issue that matters: the colonial legacy in European countries. Racism is a white problem; a logic that perpetuates social privileges, power, and exploitation by assigning people racialized identities (4). This is not to say that whites should guiltily martyr themselves, but that they must understand their place, their privileges, and their participation within the racist structure of society.

Public policy, however, is still inadequate – a pertinent example is the recent appointment of a [European Commission](#) vice-president in charge of migration issues under a portfolio called “protecting the European way of life”. Experts and NGOs have reacted sharply to the name of this portfolio, linking as it does the issue of migration with the protection of a European way of life. The term “protection” evokes security policy, and, as [Amnesty International](#) has pointed out, seems to deny the contributions of migrations to European values and ways of life.



Yet conceiving of immigration as a problem, and investing in the protection of the European way of life, are state projects. With the death of former French President Jacques Chirac, many of his actions and speeches have come to be memorialized. We can return to a speech he made in Orléans, on the 19th of June 1991. There he clearly identified that in his political project he conceived of immigration as a problem: “Our problem is not foreigners, but the excess of them. (...) It is true that Spanish, Poles and Portuguese working in our houses causes fewer problems than having Muslims and Blacks (...)” (5). This logic of the State is exactly the same as that of the current French President Emmanuel Macron who, while recognising France’s economic and social difficulties, in his next breath links them to immigration. The “other” constructed by colonialism is still the source and the target of fear, and true motives are hidden.

We need to address the lexicon used to deal with these “sensitive” themes. In political debates and the mainstream media, the agenda and the language of the far-right predominate. There, immigration is always accompanied by the word *problem*. Islam is put in counterpoint to secularism, communitarianism is linked to insecurity and identity to crisis. In this dominant semantic field, the logic of anti-white racism might make sense to some. However, the true struggle is to bring the real structural problems of society into the discussion: the impoverishment of the population; the precaritization of work; racial and sexual discrimination, and the globalization of capitalism. The struggle is to address the many preconceptions that are inherited from the colonial past, from islamophobia to the lack of public policy for the integration of immigrants and the proliferation of civilizational theories, Lusotropicalism and anti-black racism.

The role of the arts in bringing the theme of immigration and colonial inheritances into public debate is of fundamental importance. The launch of the series *Sauvages* by Canal+ in France, based on a tetralogy of the same name written by Sabri Louatah, questions colonial violence and its legacies in contemporary French mentalities. Louatah, a French citizen of Algerian origin, imagines the day when France elects its first *kabyle* (6) President. This political and familial saga interrogates the impossibility of France recognizing its own multiculturalism, the fruit of its colonial past. The question of French and European identity is central to this work, as it is to much contemporary work. In Portugal, we could refer to the recent novel *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso* (2018) by the Portuguese writer of Angolan origin, Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida. It questions the place of assimilated peoples in Portuguese society, as well as the way that their children live as the inheritors of a colonial past living in the capital of the old Empire. In



WHY IS RACISM STILL
A EUROPEAN QUESTION?

Belgium, identity, racism and the plurality of origins and languages in society is a major feature of the *slam* scene.

In this context, it is worth reaffirming how the MEMOIRS project is gathering interviews with citizens and artists, and building a database on post-memory and colonization in contemporary Europe. The work done by the team presents a vast panorama of experiences of coloniality in a post-colonial Europe in which racism is a constant. When art rescues silenced, latent memories, it fosters the emergence of different histories of slavery and the colonialisms of subjugated peoples. It questions the place of that which colonialism made “Other”, which makes up the demographic map of 21st century Europe.

Today, a revised version of Shakespeare’s *Othello* is showing in France (7), in which the “moor” is the only white person in the play. Whiteness is one of the tacit normativities of society. This theatrical choice therefore offers a counterpoint to the white European public, of being among only people who do not look like “us”. Perhaps this theatrical provocation can explain to those who use the argument of “anti-white racism” that the privilege of their skin does not make life easier for them, but that the colour of their skin does not make their lives yet more difficult.

This complex question of racism reminds me of the words of Scholastique Mukasonga, the French-Rwandan writer known for her celebrated novel *Notre Dame du Nil*. In a conversation with readers during FLIP (The Literary Festival of Paraty in Rio de Janeiro) in 2017, she spoke about racism and about how Rwandans do not want to be hostages to their past (8). “To struggle against racism is like walking through a burning forest and trying not to get burnt. In spite of it.”



WHY IS RACISM STILL
A EUROPEAN QUESTION?

- (1) “Quando si parla del razzismo bisogna avere la consapevolezza che non è razzista il mondo del calcio, ma che c’è razzismo nella cultura italiana, francese, europea e più in generale nella cultura bianca. **I bianchi hanno deciso che sono superiori ai neri e che con loro possono fare di tutto. E’ una cosa che va avanti da secoli purtroppo. E cambiare una cultura non è facile**”. Interview published at the beginning of September in the Italian newspaper [Corriere dello Sport](#).
- (2) Angela Davis is a North-American political activist, academic and author of many books including *Women, Race and Class* (1981).
- (3) [Lilian Thuram](#) will be hosted in Portugal by the MEMOIRS project to conduct an anti-racism educational tour between the 25th and 29th of November. On the 26th at 1800 he will be in the Auditorium of the Reitoria of the University of Coimbra, and on the 27th, at 1830, in Auditorium Number 2 of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon. The events will be free and simultaneous translation will be available.
- (4) The term “racialized” enables us to name a social group based not on skin colour or ethnic appearance, but by a shared social experience of racism. The person who is racialized is susceptible to being assigned to a social category; a group that is othered, differentiated from a majority, conceived as homogenous, that shares ways of being, living and thinking.
- (5) Jacques Chirac, speech at Orléans, 19th 1991, consulted on the site of [INA](#), 30th September 2019. “Notre problème, ce n’est pas les étrangers, c’est qu’il y a overdose. (...) Il est certain que d’avoir des Espagnols, des Polonais et des Portugais travaillant chez nous, ça pose moins de problèmes que d’avoir des musulmans et des Noirs [...]”.
- (6) Kabyle, or *cabilas* in Portuguese, are a Berber people from the North of Africa.
- (7) *Othello*, [staged by Arnaud Churin](#) from 3-19 October at the Théâtre de la Ville in Paris.
- (8) «Lutter contre le racisme est comme traverser une forêt en flammes. Et essayer de ne pas se brûler. Bien que».

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5

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