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“Secularism,” the Celestial City and the Revolutionary Left

Khaled Satour

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The Left, including organizations calling for revolution, are making a chorus of complaints in response to the Call by the Natives of the Republic. On May 4 the Anarchist Federation published a text stating that the Call “marginalizes and further imprisons the concerned populations,” that it “ethnicizes social problems” and “makes divisions according to national origin.” Along with Lutte Ouvrière and part of the LCR [LO and LCR are Trotskyist — Translator], the Anarchist Federation has confirmed that organizations on the Left are distinguishable from the dominant discourse only in their rhetoric. Basically, they repeat the same clichés. Inspired by republican dogma, they evoke “the internal regulation” of bourgeois democracy that Marx described a century and a half ago: between the political community and civil society, people lead “a double existence, celestial and terrestrial.” Therefore, in society, they want to impose traditional frameworks in which struggles must be contained (limited to a private preserve). It is of little importance to them that the methods of domination evolve. It is of little importance, for example, that the Call of the Natives demands

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responses to specific forms of exclusion based on a common denominator in order to act (with the participation of the social sectors it recognizes in its analysis). As soon as that action breaks from struggles led “together” with the guardianship and support of a censored and guaranteed theme, it becomes “communitarianism.” There’s the paternalism of yore.

The Anarchist Federation’s equation on the relationship between colonized peoples and the peoples of the colonizing countries is significant in this regard because it was the same position expressed 60 years ago by the French Communist Party on the Algerian question and was completely repudiated by the empirical facts. Barely updated for new circumstances, it indeed seems to suggest that racism and exclusion are no longer more damaging to their direct victims than to the French people as a whole. Furthermore, as far as citizenship is concerned, these organizations claim their battle is a secular one concerned primarily with disarming religious and ideological hegemonies by putting in place a concrete principal of separation. But what they reproach in the Call is indeed the fact that it challenges the republic of souls, the dogma of the new city of God in which citizens pure of spirit must rid themselves of all social substance (the meticulously considered theory of the supposedly public, “secular” school system a new invention to justify prohibiting the veil). The Call of the Natives opposes the March 2004 law on the veil, and that opposition is unpardonable. Therefore, while brutally imposing the pretended “universal” norm on a category of the population, primarily working-class immigrants, who are attacked relentlessly with no other “justification” than paranoia, this law has had the effect of reducing opportunities for citizenship, despite the official mythology of a welcoming and solidaric Republic. It thus does violence to a consciousness already subjected to the cruelty of discrimination and exclusion. It is not enough to invoke integrationist delusions to make this reality disappear:

the wearing of the veil, considered from all possible perspectives is, above all and implacably, sociological behaviour.

Does the revolutionary Left fear this invasion of social reality into public space? In this business about the law on religious symbols, it is significant that these organizations of the Left have not re-established the discussion in appropriate terms: the issue to discuss is not whether one is for or against the veil, but whether or not to be against a law showing so dramatically the repressive character of the State. And the anti-authoritarian attitude of the Left should be to oppose the law, not speak out with conviction against the veil. If in certain cases, wearing the veil signifies the domination of the young woman within her family, is it the vocation of the revolutionary Left to contribute to the accumulated forms of domination used against high school students denied their right to education? The problem of what position to take on religion remains. While the atheist credo is legitimate, compulsively reaffirming that fact everywhere serves a little too opportunely the extreme-Right's strategy of substituting its racist theories on Islam. Atheism looks more honourable because it targets obscurantism, religious oppression or the opium of the masses, allowing the organization of a wide political arena with the good republican consciousness of all. It even permits prettier denunciations of racism and Le Pen. But thus ennobled, it still targets the same people as the National Front, which knows full well that its monopoly has deteriorated.

Whatever our personal religious convictions and prejudices, we cannot accept that one religion and its adherents alone provoke such a passionate rejection in the coalition of such a large number of civic and political tendencies. We reaffirm that the Call of the Natives of the Republic, including its position on the veil, must be supported as a legitimate initiative among all other social protests, even in the face of opposition from some revolutionary Left organizations that have appointed themselves the new guardians posted at the two levels of the bour-

geois city, along with the liberals and social-liberals, charged with keeping the heterodox challengers out of Babylon and the heretics out of Jerusalem.