

*Building Feminist Coalitions beyond Nationalism:
A “Minority Report” from France*

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On the Summer of 1980, in a house lying by the Mediterranean coast in Algeria, I met an Algerian painter that shared with me his thoughts on nationalism and the harm it was doing to his people, less than twenty years after it gained its independence at the end of an eight years long grueling war against the French colonial power. His argument, he said, was deeply rooted in what he came to realize soon after Algeria became a nation, even more so, a nation-state, a popular democratic republic, drawing on the Soviet bloc ideology. The preeminence of the power over the people, the lie behind the nationalist motto spread out in banners all across the country, “from the people, for the people” were blatant. A preeminence led by a military power that never hesitated to crush its people, especially its youth. Nationalism was a plague, it was the very reason why this country and its people could never be free and sovereign. He added an argument that, I guess, he thought might speak to me, coming from France. His conviction stemmed from a trip he had recently made to Corsica, an island off the Italian coast that belongs to France since the 18th century. It is the birthland of the famous and infamous Napoléon Bonaparte, a revolutionary leader who would eventually instate himself as emperor and thereafter spent his life in power wasting tens of thousands lives, rampaging peoples, plundering communities to conquer European lands and design how his empire should look like to him. Ukraine was saved from that enterprise by belonging to another empire. But that was not the French adventures of this Corsican born “hero” that led him there. M’hamed Issiakhem, the painter who was talking to me as we contemplated the beauty of the Mediterranean Sea, had recently met nationalist militants in Corsica. Men and women, but mostly men, were willing to give their lives for the sovereignty of their people, land and culture. They meant to achieve such goal by sending France and its overwhelming presence “back on the continent”, as they said, by any means necessary, including bombing official buildings and assassinating highly ranked civil servants of the French state. He told me he came

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to understand something was flawed in the nationalist aspiration, be it Corsican or Algerian or of any sort, because it was redundant with that of the oppressor's state, it mirrored the same obsessions and shortcomings. Not because of the violence it entailed to be achieved. He knew better, having himself being hit by this violence when, as a boy, he lost his right arm when entering a minefield close to his village, a remnant of the campaign the allies led in 1943 from North-Africa to reconquer Europe and save the world from Nazism. He also knew better because he took part in the anticolonial struggle and had witnessed first-hand the violence it entailed on all sides. Especially from the French colonizer and its army that would soon become a model of counterinsurgency method, including torture, and export its skills to all powers in search of the tools to break their people. The Algerian revolution was no exception in attempts to eliminate internal enemies, those who sided with the colonizer, the *harki*, as well as those who stood in the way of a military power prevailing once the independence would be settled. Colonialism on the one hand, nationalism on the other. Indeed, no equivalence between the two, no one could deny the righteousness of the will to self-rule that nationalism opposed to the colonial rule.

Yet, his argument spoke to me, as I had heard from my family in Algeria what the loyalty to the nation, to the revolution demanded from them in terms of ignorance, of obscuring repression, of relinquishing hopes and a sense of self-reliance. They abided by the rule of an exclusive power from the military and lost their ability to think and act for their own good. Along the way, or maybe as the warning of what would be the fate of the revolutionaries favoring a democracy, women lost almost all their rights to claim control on their bodies, their lives. The day after the whole country celebrated its independence, with girls, boys, women (veiled or not) and men chanting their pride and dancing to the sound of *darbouka* and *bendir* on the streets, women, including those who had suffered torture¹, fought side by side with men as their sisters in arm, provided intelligence to the clandestine anticolonial organization, were requested to go back home and take care of the household, if they had one, for the sake of the newly founded nation and of its people. As for his country, our country, he was right. A few years after our conversation, the Algerian state issued a family law that reinforced the rule of tutorship over women by a man, whoever he is, even if he is not related to the family, or even if he is a son. It would take decades to partially amend this law.

¹ https://www.lemonde.fr/videos/video/2022/10/07/louissette-ou-le-dernier-tabou-de-la-guerre-d-algerie_6144770_1669088.html or in free access <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x8e2ii4> but still in French, with apologies for non-French speakers.

Maybe this is why in his artwork, Issiakhem painted mainly women, in a blurred evocative manner that alluded to their womb, to their lost sovereignty, to their enduring resistance and to the hostile climate they had to live in, with their intimate oppressors, their men, their state, their nation. I wish I am wrong, but I doubt that this is just true for Algeria, or for North-African and Middle-Eastern countries, or more so for Moslem countries. In many countries, basic women's rights are being smashed by democratically elected governments or by institutions supposed to ensure full respect of the constitution. No need to name them, they are on everybody's mind. Yet, currently and paradoxically, since it was partially legalized in 2018², an abortion is easier accessed in a public health facility in Algeria than in Poland or the US. Nevertheless, this should not obscure what still has to be achieved in the name of women and all creatures who do not fit in, in Algeria, and elsewhere. A struggle that took an unprecedented twist on 2019 known as *Hirak*, literally the movement, and was quelled³ by the same military that rule since 1962.

Since that conversation, I have had plenty of time to read and learn about nationalism, ethnonationalism, homonationalism, femonationalism, and more. From Gellner, to Abu Lughod, from Yuval Davis to Faris, from Anderson to Puar, I even took a deep breath before reading Renan, who theorized the benefits of a nation at the very same time he was coining the semites and their irrefutable otherness in Europe that called for a specific treatment. None of those readings could challenge the doubts of Issiakhem, rather they all underpin his point and what I have come to see as an instance that exceeds any other consideration. Whether in places where the struggle against settler colonialism is still ongoing, such as Palestine or Ukraine or in countries that are comfortably settled in their nationalism, most of Europe, this doctrine has exhausted its promises and rather revealed its perils for people and communities. Even a supranational institution such as the EU is left disempowered by the farthest right kind of nationalism that defies if not ridicules the rule of law on which it claims to rely. On the eve of the invasion of Ukraine by Putin, dilemmas accumulated for European institutions in the face of illiberal regimes that bend to the far-right if not to fascism, and, as an ultimate provocation came to oppose sanctions on the Russian regime. Since then, Sweden, Italy explicitly obey the rule of saving the national people against its invaders, migrants and refugees while other countries, such as Denmark, the United-Kingdom or France pretend to remain humane in their way of treating

² <https://sxpolitics.org/abortion-finally-legalized-in-algeria/18834>

³ <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/analysis/after-hirak-algerias-opposition-struggles-survive>

asylum seekers by outsourcing their treatment to deport them to their birthland or to a third party country, such as Rwanda. Coined by a French dandy man, the theory of the great replacement speaks for and speaks to all these countries that have embraced this agenda of a European fortress that intends to maintain its place in the world and its original people, as Balibar describes in a liminal book.

In the first days after the invasion of Ukraine by Putin, I went to places where people gathered to stand by Ukrainians. By the Russian embassy in Paris, I saw graffities of anger and dismay. On the Place de la République where all popular events take place, I saw blue and yellow flags and heard for the first time the roar of pride from Ukrainians living in France. With a tight throat, I felt goose bumps at the sound of the mightly “Slav Ukraina”.

For many people in France like me, who know little about Ukraine, besides from being the birthland of Trotsky, the epitome of nuclear catastrophe since Chernobyl, the country from which originated the female founder of the bear breast Femen who castigated the religious fundamentalism of her country before expanding the scope of her vindication, to the greater satisfaction of white western audiences, or again that Zelensky was caught in a quid-pro-quo entanglement with Trump that raged for months before the stolen election and the missed coup on the US Capitol grabbed all the attention, there was no shortage of warning signs in the previous months. The presidential election campaign had already started when the war burst onto the international stage. Before February 24, one could hear clever comments on why not one European would want to fight to save the Donbass from its Russian grid. After all, not one state uttered any serious protest after the annexation of Crimea and of eastern provinces, seen as having separatist velleities. This stance upheld by the far-right anti-immigrant candidate on the verge of antisemitism, Eric Zemmour, was consistent with his fascination for virile expressions of power, as displayed by Wladimir Putin. The latter is also close to creditors who lent huge amounts to fund the recent electoral campaigns of Marine Le Pen, which she was still serving when facing off with her opponent, the then and now French president, who received Putin in the most private and prestigious monuments of the French Republic, Versailles for instance, in a vain attempt to tame him. The female blond post-fascist party leader has put the far-right at the center of the political spectrum by trivializing its presence and making it look respectable by chanting white nationalism. Indeed, them and their partisans could anyway vibrate in unison with this patriotic call. As the declarations of support for the Ukrainian resistance have shown, they kept on hesitating between the virile style of Putin or that of Zelensky to finally resolve to endorse without public hesitation, but not without ulterior motives, the cause of the latter and his people.

On those days gathered on the square, to the ears of France's inhabitants, whether citizens or aliens, the rallying call "Slav Ukraina" sounded unusual and yet vital. Hence, I couldn't help but hear the accent of a nationalist, virile, martial, unquestioned, imperative, exhortation. A call that resonates iteratively in times of aggression, as if saving a people from war, can only be pursued under the banner of a performative virility. I went back to read Mosse, to see if I could sustain such impression with his work. By tracing the invention of respectability as a nationalist feature all along the last two centuries, he equips to track its attributes all the way to rallying calls and the gendered divide they assert between male and female voices. His argument also speaks to the sexual hierarchy thus established, by reiterating a "division of labor between the sexes" that entails expressions of patriotism, a prerequisite of respectability, even more so in times of war, and when one is an alien in a foreign country, hence, a Ukrainian citizen in France⁴. The straightness one could hear in the voices and see in the bodies calling for the saving of Ukraine at la République, Saturday after Saturday, is a testimony to the way in which the war takes hold of all bodies, male and female, and prints in them the rectitude of virile attributes, including in their voice.

There was a stark contrast between these meetings gathering French and Ukrainian people and those I have witnessed along months and years, as an attempt of ethnography of the nation's most central square, la place de la République, nicknamed Repu'. From all venues of the leftist spectrum, some stand for Palestinians rights to overcome the apartheid regime imposed by the Israeli colonizer, others are Sudanese or Afghans claiming recognition of their right to seek asylum as they fled their countries at war. Some are French and Algerians expressing solidarity with the Hirak. Others are African families mobilized against dictatorship or against interferences or even downright support by France to their country's authoritarian power, making all too visible the neocolonial Franzafrique. Some are expressing solidarity with victims of terrorist attacks in Paris or France. Others make visible and audible antiracist feminist coalitions, unite with climate change activists, often the same people, show solidarity with undocumented people living in the street who are denied any shelter, denounce police brutality and systemic racism. Others again rally against neoliberal reforms of pension system, destruction of labor legal protection, of higher education and research system required to become bankable. Some spend days and nights on the République square calling for a utopian movement of radical change, called Nuit Debout (night awake), before being ousted by police

⁴ George L. Mosse, *Nationalism & Sexuality, Respectability & Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe*, New York, Howard Fertig, 1985.

units, and eventually uniting two years later with the yellow vests that take to the streets and the roundabouts all across France because enough is enough. Them and others shield tens of tents covering all the square to offer a brief relief to exiled persons living on the street, until they try in vain to shield the dehumanized bodies brutally extracted by the police who then systematically tears apart the tents and destroys all belongings.

As I stand among blue and yellow flags held high above or drawn on faces, I couldn't but remember the faces, and voices, and calls, and mottos, and sounds, and music of all those others rallies witnessed along years. They all resonate together in some cacophony of claims and protests, inextricably entangled.

Again, I pause and reflect on what feminist authors underline when they attend to the fate of minorities and disenfranchised in any nation. Because of the heteropatriarchy that still prevails in France, and elsewhere, protection under the aegis of the nation-state is either delusional or comes at a high price. Especially for women and minorities. Hearing the French president speak of a Russian imperialist war sounds nothing but concerning. France knows a lot about imperialism, how to maintain and exert it, up until today, as we speak, as we try to think, as you fight for your freedom and survival. This power is in no position to denounce the brutal invasion undergone in Ukraine while it looks the other way, or imposes its 'help' when dictatorships come and go in countries still under its influence, through an imposed neocolonial currency, le Franc CFA, and/or a military support. This is the delusional face of a nation-state that has not closed its imperialist agenda. As for the domestic matters, the price paid by the less protected in France is that of denial of fundamental rights and basic expression of solidarity, let alone freedom of circulation as a matter of dignity.

In France, reports from the frontline of bordering and border crossing are made under the light of the continental wave of solidarity for Ukrainians fleeing their country expressed almost immediately after they started to leave. In major train stations, for months, one can see signs of welcome and indications about where to go, a counter would be visibly, blue and yellow, put in place to first responses to all request or needs of the newly arrived from Ukraine. As of now, Ukrainians are the beacon for all other aliens in search of a place where to dwell and rest, however long they have to stay. NGOs and informal collectives who work on the ground day in, day out to help illegally entered migrants have been taken aback by the diligence and efficiency of the reception actions and by the amount of money made instantly available to implement them. Gymnasiums, empty buildings, concert venues, even a ferry boat in the port of Marseille, all were redesigned to accommodate refugees fleeing the war. The total cost of the ferry boat operation was six million euros for two months and a little more than

nine hundred Ukrainians sheltered. Soon enough, the double standard spoke for itself and the dismissal experienced by colored asylum seekers claims, not to speak of illegal migrants, became blatant.

Last April, a collective of French people, supporting these wretched of the earth chased out of every corner of north-east Paris, mainly surviving in used tent camps and makeshift shelters, entered an empty building in central Paris owned by a French bank, that until it stopped its business three years ago specialized in fiscal optimization. They managed to accommodate about a hundred people for almost six months, until last week, mid-October when they were brutally expelled from the building by the police, men, newborn and women alike. They managed to hold the place, as in some sort of urban war for decent housing, by drawing attention of the neighbors, mostly upper middle-class urbanites, some of whom expressed solidarity and offered all kind of daily help, and of some media, on their ability to organize the building. They made a home out of offices, adapted to the neighborhood, mainly by being quiet at night, protected and supported the inhabitants in their life, their work, most of them have one while undocumented, and are barred from legally applying for one, and their administrative formalities. They called the place The Embassy of Immigrants. This was the place for building coalitions, empowering and crafting agency. During the summer, as they heard that a sports arena in south Paris turned into a shelter for Ukrainian refugees was half empty, they invested the place to demand the same treatment for people who were denied a home although they could prove they were entitled to one by law, or who lived on the street without any accommodation as long as their case was not settled. The few hours they held the place drew the media attention and had its impact as they claimed the right to be treated like Ukrainians.

This claim of equal treatment based on the diligence and efficiency Ukrainian refugees benefited from, was met with an embarrassed silence from the city of Paris and the state administrations. They had no intention to provide the same treatment to people they have been harassing for years at the desk or on the street. As the official stance frames it, their potential delinquency and their dodgy look that might threaten honest people and quiet neighborhoods were enough of a justification. What had proved possible for white families who looked alike French people and shared the same European culture, turned impossible for a group of mostly black young men, whose fate and endured hardships were not written on their face or inscribed in their body. Only by speaking with them in a non-European language was it possible to take the measure of what they had gone through, often fleeing other theaters of war, crossing continents and seas, and were still enduring on the streets of Paris, and elsewhere. Rather than

falling into the trap of a divisive state politics, the asylum seekers from Sudan, Afghanistan, Ivory Coast, Ethiopia, Somalia and more stood in solidarity with Ukrainians asking that they should be recognized the same humanness and the same right to a humane treatment.

Ironically enough, on the Whatsapp thread of communication opened to attend to all needs and share information during the occupation of the building, once popped up a message from a Sudanese refugee: he was housing a young Ukrainian woman who had been abused in a camp. He asked for advice and information on how to make sure she would have access to all her rights since she was hardly communicating and remained suspicious of men.

The French state, like many other European ones, does not want Ukrainian refugees' devices established on an emergency and humanitarian basis to be mixed with the more and more repressive legislations they develop year after year, decade after decade, against migrants and asylum seekers travelling from the Souths. If it were not for war, Ukrainians arrived otherwise or before would probably be facing the same duress. There is a lesson to be drawn from these gendered encounters, racially marked and politically meaningful, that coalitions are built to oppose all designations and assignations, to absorb the excess of power nation-states are always tempted to exert on their people, and to open the horizon of possible modes of co/existences.

As a legacy, Saba Mahmood's last book was meant as a minority report, here is my minor contribution to a planetary report on the state of our lives and livelihoods, all scattered and all tied to one another, within the war and without it, in Ukraine and in all places where it looms, as a call for it to end.