

Minneapolis in Paris - On State Violence and Global Racism

Thursday 27 August 2020, by [BEAMAN Jean](#) (Date first published: 18 August 2020).

For us who are determined to break the back of colonialism, our historic mission is to authorize every revolt, every desperate act, and every attack aborted or drowned in blood.

Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* [1]

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On July 19, 2016, Adama Traore, a 24-year-old Black construction worker, was killed after an arrest by three police officers in Beaumont-sur-Oise, a northern banlieue, or suburban outskirts, of Paris. Adama was stopped for an identity check—a not uncommon measure by which police officers stop individuals and ask for their identification (often disproportionately targeting Black and Arab individuals). In this case, Adama was taken to a nearby police station and by the time he arrived, he was dead. The police originally stated that he had died of a heart attack, and then said he had prior health conditions which caused his death. In late May, the three police officers were cleared in their involvement for Adama's death.

Assa Traore is Adama's 35-year-old sister and is leading the movement for justice for her brother and other victims of police violence through the *collectif*, Comité Vérité et Justice pour Adama. On June 2, 2020, more than 20,000 protestors demonstrated outside of the High Court in Paris (in defiance of France's quarantine-related prohibition of gatherings larger than 10 people). As this demonstration was a mere week after the murder of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020, many assumed that this demonstration was just like any of the other protests throughout the United States (and the world) in the aftermath of this death. However, what activists in Paris and elsewhere in France are doing is making a direct connection between the police violence and injustice facing Black Americans with the long-standing police violence and injustice facing Black and Arab individuals in France, and around the world. Simply put, as both Adama and George's last words revealed, neither of them could breathe.

"Justice pour Adama, Justice pour George Floyd, Justice pour Tous!" or "Justice for Adama, Justice for George Floyd, Justice for everyone," protest signs read. Adama and George's deaths are connected, and so too are the anti-racist protests.

As an ethnographer and scholar of race and racism in France for over a decade, I remember hearing of Adama's death in a *New York Times* headline—"Black Lives Matter in France, Too"—[2]; on July 29, 2016. But Black and Arab, or Maghrebin-origin, individuals have long known—through the histories and legacies of colonial slavery and colonial rule—that the state does not value their lives.

State violence does not just refer to killings by the police or police violence more generally, but also

the myriad ways the state rejects and devalues Black individuals, as well as the “normality” of this devaluing and disregard. As anthropologist Nicolas De Genova argues in this journal, “ [3];Police racism is not exclusively an expression of specifically anti-Black racism but rather the systemic reflex of an all-encompassing regime of the white supremacy that has been the bedrock of U.S. national formation.” But white supremacy does not just undergird the formation of the U.S., but also the formation of what we now understand to be Europe, including France. And this fact is crucial to understanding the state of global racism and white supremacy, and anti-racist struggles in both societies. [4]

HOW WE GOT HERE

During the summer of 2019, I met up with an older white woman activist in Paris’s 5th *arrondissement* who has long been involved in Left and anti-racist struggles in France. She sighed and said, “No one did anything after 2005, so we’re here now. I know this in my heart... we are in a dictatorship, no longer a democracy. And what we have now in France, and around the world is unbearable.”

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By “2005,” she is referring to the 2005 uprisings in various *banlieues* throughout France, understood by many as acts of violence by postcolonial immigrants and their descendants refusing to integrate into mainstream society, and not as spurred by the deaths of two France-born ethnic minority youths - Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré- by the French police in Clichy-sous-Bois, a banlieue north of Paris. [5] The media and popular attention these uprisings received focused on the “other France,” that France not seen in glossy images of Paris boulevards, or reflected in the motto of “liberté, égalité, fraternité.” Such images of burning cars and buildings seemingly threatened France’s model of assimilation and integration. Local and state politicians proposed various reforms to improve schools, amenities, and public transportation in these communities following the uprisings, yet as my interlocutor explained, not much actually changed since that time.

Yet, Zyed and Bouna’s deaths were not as unique or exceptional as it might have appeared. We can draw a genealogy of state violence against Black and Arab individuals during French colonial rule in the Maghreb and other parts of Africa, the Caribbean, and parts of Asia, to the present-day. This state violence includes the 1961 Algerian War of Independence, including how the police drowned about dozens of Algerian protestors in the Seine river in Paris, or the death of Lamine Dieng in July 2007, a 25-year old of Senegalese origin who was born in France, following a struggle with multiple police officers in during which he was restrained face down on the street with his hands tied behind his back and his feet strapped together Paris’s 20th *arrondissement*. According to BastaMag, there have been more than 700 deaths due to police intervention in France since 1977 [6]. In other words, state violence—whether it involves identity checks (*les contrôles d’identité*) or actual killings by the police—has become routine and normalized, especially against Black and Arab individuals.

When we focus on France’s colonial empire and postcolonial legacies, it becomes clear that state violence and racism have been integral to the construction of modern France as we understand it, and that populations racialized as Black have long had to simultaneously survive and resist state repression. In France—and indeed, throughout Europe—this repression relies on a racial logic of white supremacy that sees Zyed, Bouna, Lamine, or Adama as forever outsiders. As Stephen Small [7] notes, Black people throughout Europe are simultaneously hypervisible and invisible, and

alongside this history of racism there is a long-standing tradition of resistance. This is reflected not only in the demonstrations for Adama and other victims of state violence, but also in the formation of anti-racist and anti-colonial groups such as Les Indigènes de la République [Natives of the Republic] or La Brigade Anti-Nérophobie [Brigade anti-Negrophobia].

Just as the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States has its origins in earlier periods of struggle for Black liberation in the United States and around the world, so too does present anti-racist mobilization make similar global and temporal connections. We need to pay attention to both the local and place-specific contexts of these struggles, as well as what unites them worldwide.

As Frantz Fanon reminds us, we can never forget the relevance of colonialism for delineating these boundaries between insiders and outsiders, and for establishing hierarchies of superiority and inferiority based on race. For example, in a conversation with Mamadou [8], a 47-year-old activist who was born in Guadeloupe and moved to mainland France when he was two years old, he explained to me how “what’s happening in France is just reproducing what happened in the colonies. Post-colonialism is just a myth, what we have now is neo-colonialism. Nothing has changed, the ideas are the same. This is a bigger problem than just police violence.” So we cannot discuss or understand present-day racism, both in France and globally, without understanding how these present struggles are just the latest enunciation of ongoing anti-Blackness, Islamophobia, and global racism.

WHERE DO BLACK LIVES MATTER?

After the murder of Michael Brown, an unarmed Black American man in Ferguson, Missouri in August 2014, scholar and activist Angela Davis noted that “Ferguson reminds us of the importance of a global context... The militarization of the police leads us to think about Israel and the militarization of the police there—if only the images of the police and not of the demonstrators had been shown, one might have assumed that Ferguson was Gaza.” [9].

But the importance of the global context extends beyond the structure of police and policing, but also to the structure of anti-racist mobilization. Following Brown’s death, some activists in Paris formed a collective, Ferguson in Paris, connecting incidents of state violence against Black Americans like Michael Brown with similar incidents in France through social media campaigns and demonstrations in the Paris metropolitan region. To them, the death of Michael Brown echoed the many deaths of Black and Arab individuals for which there has been no justice. As their Facebook page explains, they aim to show that what is happening in France is happening in the United States, and also around the world.

In other words, we should not look at the present solely through a United States-based lens, but rather consider how racial and ethnic minorities are connecting their racial oppression and anti-racist struggles worldwide. These global connections have their roots in earlier moments of diasporic solidarity and Black internationalism, as articulated by the Nardal sisters in the 1920s. Black individuals are making transnational connections regarding how it feels to be rejected by the state. Again, this is not to center the United States as the locus of such knowledge, but rather to consider global solidarities in the experiences of and mobilization against global white supremacy. Just as the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States has its origins in earlier periods of struggle for Black liberation in the United States and around the world, so too does present anti-racist mobilization make similar global and temporal connections. We need to pay attention to both the local and place-specific contexts of these struggles, as well as what unites them worldwide.

On a *Le Média* program on June 15, 2020, not long after the massive demonstration at the High

Court of Justice, “En Finir avec les Violences Policières” [Ending Police Violence] activist Almamy Kanouté, a child of Malian immigrants, explained, “The conditions that killed, or assassinated, George Floyd are the same that killed Adama Traore, Lamine Dieng, all the others. The list is so long, sorry, I cannot name everyone ... French police and American police are one in the same.” This is one reason why protestors in France can demonstrate against Adama’s death and George Floyd’s—without minimizing one or the other. We must pay attention to how police violence and racism has and continues to be normalized in both U.S. and Europe, so it therefore is not surprising that anti-racism mobilization is also global and interconnected.

That same month the European Parliament voted to declare that Black Lives Matter and to condemn the death of George Floyd [10]. Yet Black and Arab individuals in France—and the rest of Europe—are still waiting.

So we need to understand these present anti-racist demonstrations as a way that activists are mobilizing across nation-state lines and illustrating how both anti-blackness and racism, and the movements against them, are global. As when Assa remarked, when I met with her in 2017 in the offices of her book publisher, Seuil, in Paris’s 14th *arrondissement*: “When we mobilize with others, we intimidate the state. That’s why they want to separate us.” In the aftermath of both George Floyd and Adama Traore’s deaths, both men were framed as violent or delinquent. Global mobilization against state violence is crucial for explaining how the state enacts violence on all Black lives.

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P.S.

- Spectre. August 18, 2020}:
<https://spectrejournal.com/minneapolis-in-paris>

Footnotes

[1] Frantz Fanon. 1963. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press, p. 146.

[2] https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/29/opinion/black-lives-matter-in-france-too.html?emc=edit_tnt_20160801&nid=43222843&tntemail0=y&_r=0

[3] <https://spectrejournal.com/american-carnage/>

[4] Here I reference Charles Mills’ definition of global white supremacy as “a particular power structure of formal or informal rule, socioeconomic privilege and norms for the differential distribution of material wealth and opportunities, benefits and burdens, rights and duties.” (*The Racial Contract*. 1997. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, p. 3).

[5] Cathy Lisa Schneider. “Police Power and Race Riots in Paris.” 2008. *Politics & Society* 36 (1): 133-59.

[6] <https://www.bastamag.net/Violences-policieres-suivi-judiciaire-non-lieu-sans-suite-prison-impunité-IGPN>

[7] Stephen Small. 2017. 20 Questions and Answers on Black Europe. The Hague: Amrit Publishers.

[8] Name changed for privacy purposes.

[9] Angela Y. Davis. 2016. Freedom is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement. Chicago: Haymarket Books, p. 14.

[10] <https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/summary.do?id=1622557&t=e&l=en>