



Monique Selim

An anthropologist between banlieues and globalized world

Anthropologist Monique Selim recalls her research into social structures in French housing estates in the 1970s and the taboos she ran up against on talking about the existence of working-class racism. Today, academic and media discourse on minorities, migration, and otherness has become ethnicized so that it no longer sets itself apart from the language of the street. While ethnic categorization can act as an instrument against discrimination, it can also, when imposed in an ontological fashion onto society, encourage the tendency to create a gap between the self and other.

Between 1977 and 1979 I lived on a housing estate in Seine-Saint-Denis in order to carry out anthropological research. I was an exception at that time, since public housing projects were the preserve of sociologists and integration was the issue. Anthropologists, on the other hand, were supposedly interested in radical "otherness", and therefore uninterested in urban society.

The ethnological method that I used was devised by Gérard Althabe and consisted of carrying out face-to-face interviews based on "micro-neighbourhoods": the landing, the building, the surrounding streets. My aim was to meet all the residents in each "micro-neighbourhood". I got them to tell me their life-stories, how they experienced this way of living together, how they had come to be there, what their present circumstances were, and how they saw their future.

My approach produced results that were quite different from those of the sociologists; unlike them, I did not find that life in this high-density environment was lived in anonymity. But in trying to understand how social relations were constructed on the estate, I discovered that the mental image of the foreigner structured all personal interactions and relationships, and that it was by reference to that image that the people I spoke to were able to tell their life-stories.

Racism and acquaintanceships on the estates

There was already a large immigrant population on the estate where I lived; many immigrants were actually French citizens, and came from Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and the Caribbean. The most recent arrivals were from Laos. On the estate, the proportion of residents born abroad (usually in former French colonies) had already reached between 70% and 80%. In their own minds, these people ranked each other according to their supposed degree of "foreignness" and their part in a "foreign invasion", which they saw as a diminution of status and moral authority. This was at the beginning of the

recession, when unemployment was rising and there was growing disillusionment with social housing on the part of people who had left substandard accommodation in Paris. But it was in terms of their relationship to the notion of "the foreigner" that residents assessed their current situation and their risk of falling back into the poverty they had left behind. The majority were manual workers, apart from the Laotians, since in Laos it was the upper classes who had fled the revolution and become refugees, especially in France.

This negative construction of "foreignness" also contained the idea that foreigners enjoyed the support of their extended families and had access to resources that other residents of the estates did not. The latter were afraid of being forced to move because of rent arrears, and of finding themselves poor and isolated; foreigners, on the other hand, could, in case of severe difficulties, supposedly rely on families who had stayed back in their home countries. Those seen as foreign thus provoked envy and longing.

In France at that time there, was a widespread denial of racism, especially on the estates. All ethnologists noted a form of social ranking based on place of origin, observed especially in neighbourhood gossip among groups of women. At the top of the hierarchy were the women who were active in tenants' associations, followed by Sephardic women from North Africa, and then by Caribbean and African women with French nationality. This hierarchical structure was very fragile and led to open racism in relation to schooling. Children's behaviour was said to be worse the lower down the hierarchy their parents were placed. In residents' eyes, the cause of the problem was the disorderly, anomic foreigner, who also presented the risk of contamination and moral decline. This image seemed to be reflected in the physical deterioration of the estates.

I had never before visited these suburbs and I had had no previous contact with working-class people. I was a complete newcomer, both socially and intellectually. I was twenty-five and the women I interviewed were between thirty-five and forty. It was a social relationship that I had never before experienced. This was the late 1960s and early 1970s, when "elsewhere" held tremendous attraction and the "other" was overrated: otherness fed our urge for subversion. The ethnological literature of the day was romantic, a symptom of prevailing social attitudes. The "other" was seen as being "without formal government" (Pierre Clastres), free from sexual repression, and with no need to work because he lived in conditions of abundance. In contrast, I wrote my thesis on a world that I found repugnant, where the fear of annihilation expressed itself in racist discourse.

My thesis was written in a "Marxist" academic context, in which it was vitally important to conceal working-class racism. The local council where I worked was Communist. I studied the symbolic structures to which people belonged, based on place of origin, religion, politics — in other words, the Communist Party and the tenants' association. Members of these bodies were themselves caught in this social quagmire and were accused of having their hands in the till or harbouring contempt for residents. There was nothing more they could do, and they tended to throw in the towel. The Jehovah's Witnesses were the only ones who shone in this situation.

My thesis was embarrassing because it revealed the existence of working-class racism. The project was funded under an urban research programme, first by the Délégation à la Recherche Scientifique et Technique [Scientific and

Technical Research Council], and then by the Ministère de l'Équipement [Ministry of Works]. We had enough money to rent a flat on the estate, record the interviews, and type them up before analysing them. Our task was to find out in what ways ethnologists saw things differently from sociologists. The main difference between the two approaches related to anonymity; the sociologists argued that life in the estates was marked by anonymity, while the ethnologists reported that, on the contrary, a dense network of local interpersonal relationships existed.

Rather than "racism" I used the now obsolete word "allophobia", but I also described the "ethnicization" of social relations, which is on everyone's lips today. While I didn't use that expression at the time, I demonstrated how social relations were reorganized around the mental image of "foreigners".

Old and young researchers face to face with racism

In the Association Française des Anthropologues [French Anthropological Association] we try today to stay as close as possible to everyday life, in every sphere and on every continent. This year our seminar focused on the *banlieues*, the housing estates that lie on the outskirts of many French cities. With that in view, we invited some highly regarded young researchers, so that we could get to know them. We found that their theories and concepts were very different from ours. These researchers are politically committed and are sometimes not impartial with respect to the *banlieues*. To speak of "whites" and "blacks" is not a problem for them. Unlike us, they no longer use the category of nationality, and they seem unworried by the phantasmal flavour their concepts may have when translated into real life.

The "ethnicization" that was already visible in the media is turning into "racialization": the concept of race has returned. It seems to me that these young researchers (who actively oppose ethnic discrimination) have broken the old epistemological taboo that banned the use of certain everyday words, but which also legitimized the anthropologist's stance in its pursuit of the everyday in terms that do not belong to everyday.

They appeal to what is obvious: he's clearly white and I'm clearly black. Older anthropologists are stunned. These are not subjective categories, but the objective categories used by the man and woman in the street. There is no gap between the researcher and existing public opinion; these concepts are the basis on which the research project is built. In an article comparing France with the United States, we find three categories: white, Muslim, black.

"Globalization": the foreigner at the bottom of the pile

Currently, there is a national debate about the addition of ethnic categories to the national census. One wonders how it is going to be done, because it has been agreed in principle. While it is clearly a tool that can be used in the fight against discrimination, it is also an imposture that has spread throughout the media and that is rife among intellectuals. Republican values are affirmed in an "absolutist" fashion, though these have never been applied to women — despite that fact that sex has always been a census category — nor to colonized people or workers, despite the fact that place of birth and occupation are recorded in the census. Ethnic categories will thus be implanted into society in an almost ontological fashion, and will encourage the tendency to create a gap between the self and the other.

Thirty years ago we glorified difference, we desired the other in order to challenge the familiar. Today, the other, the foreigner, is the absolute enemy, whose "influx" we try to prevent by building walls. Thirty years ago, working people in the suburbs construed the foreigner as stemming directly from the social relations in which they were immersed. This image of the foreigner was not linked to the wider world. Formerly colonized societies were moving towards independence, a positive experience for them. Globalization — economic, mental and psychological — articulates in a very intimate way the foreign enemy, internal and external: an invasion on two fronts and thus the destruction of self by the internal foreigner, as an agent of the external, global foreigner. The composite image of the Islamist is that of terrorist and starving man. We put up electric fences to control him, as we do animals.

In the "globalized" context, the link between the internal foreigner and the other, the global enemy, operates mainly in relation to Islam. This new vision of the world conflates place of origin and religion, and ignores the fact that terrorists are often converts, if not to the religion, then to its fervent practice. In what sense are they Muslims? Islam has become an ideology that one embraces in the same way that one joins a political organization, just as one embraced nihilism or anarchism in the late nineteenth century or communism in the mid-twentieth.

We have moved from a definition of the foreigner based on nationality to one based on religion, in parallel with the political project of re-Islamization, funded by Saudi Arabia and aimed at the whole world, not just France's *banlieues*. The globalization of Islam, undertaken by the Saudi monarchy, is making the residents of the *banlieues* (the young especially) the preferred targets of a quiet but determined exercise in domination through charitable works and educational activity.

The politics of female virginity

The process of racialization that we can observe in France's *banlieues* is a reflection of developments throughout the globalized world. Other countries see France as the bedrock of the ideal of universality. That ideal is collapsing. What is happening in the *banlieues* is no more than an alignment with what is happening in the world in general. Every government is urged to take a position on the problem of terrorism, and just as in nation-states there is confusion between society and the state, all the residents of the *banlieues* are urged to take part in the fight against terrorism and the foreign Muslim.

China, which is in the forefront of capitalist development, organizes summit meetings for dictatorships — in Shanghai in May 2006, and between China and Africa in November 2006 — and it is always under dictatorships that racialization has reached staggering proportions. In today's African dictatorships, the practice of politics has been placed under the sign of ethnicity, notably in Ivory Coast, the Congo, and Rwanda. The same thing applies to the former Soviet republics of Central Asia, where they are trying to build a sense of Uzbek or Turkmen identity, and to foster competition between nations. Both phenomena have their roots in the biologization of culture and the racialization of politics.

The anthropologists of the 1970s saw a danger in culturalism, but an essentialism based on place of origin is even more dangerous. The everyday is constructed in the globalized world, from the universal to the local, via the fragmentation and definition of a vaguely apprehended fund of shared

symbols. Ideologies of origin are therefore ubiquitous.

At the beginning, the feminist movement was anti-differentialist and egalitarian. Today it is increasingly the opposite. Having said that, Ségolène Royale, though defeated in the presidential elections in 2007, has made it conceivable that a woman be elected President of France. The essentialist dimension of femininity thus functions as a tool for differentiation. The sexual double standard has never been so strongly asserted as in contemporary society, and yet it is from there that a challenge may come.

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