

Viewpoint: Avowal/disavowal - Europe as an Ideologized Commitment

Ali Kassem

In December 2018, I relocated to Paris for a two-months research fellowship. Before arriving, many friends and colleagues exhorted me to make the best out of a city they framed as the city of lights, of love and of culture. I had been to Paris once before, when I was 14, and had little memories beyond the glistening Eiffel tower. Surely, I had high hopes of my stay. Yet, despite this, I knew that the depiction I received from many was exaggerated and that a darker side existed.

From my stay's earliest days, I felt could not but absorb the inequality and segregation, the uncleanliness and noise and the oppression and falsity which saturated the European capital. It was weird, I thought, that the looting of the world's wealth(s) for hundreds of years was not sufficient to produce something better than what I saw in the heart of Europe. Clearly, Empire's internal others (including class others) held wounds that echoed those of its external others. The gilets jaunes I saw and heard stood for a partial embodiment of that.

A few weeks into my stay, thousands took to the streets of Beirut (my hometown) in protest against the failing economy. Having waited for months without a government, frustration seemed to have finally pushed people into mobilization. As my family told me of the happenings, it was not the people's pain or the caretaker government's complete farce of a reaction that they found worthy of comment. Rather, it was the fact that the protestors wore yellow vests, in emulation of the French gilets jaunes.

As banners that echoed those raised in Paris were raised in Beirut, newspaper headlines centred their articles on the diffusion of the French expression of freedom to its former colony. Across the news and popular discourse, a promise was seen in that emulation. As the people of France were understood as a people of freedom it was that freedom, that *liberté*, which was seen to have long defined them and which continues to define them today. It was fortunate, indeed honourable, for our protestors to be inspired by such a free people. In this, the social injustice that marked France, the deep divisions, police violence and brutality and the complete detachment of the French presidency, among many other 'facts', seemed not to register.

Mid-way through my fellowship, a German-based Lebanese friend, who had never been to France before, decided to visit the capital beset by demonstrations and unrest. In his words, he wanted to come himself and see. It was unclear, to both of us I would say, what exactly it was that he wanted to see. He came, and an exploration of the French capital ensued. One cold night around Christmas, the scene of homelessness on the streets of luxury was painful. I took a picture of it, which he decided to send it to his family's WhatsApp group.

The reactions were striking. Most important of all, his mother sent him a private message reprimanding him, asking that he show 'the beautiful image of France' and stop whatever it was he was trying to do. For her, and many of those other family members on the group,

the pictures did not represent France's truth, its essence. These were blips, aberrations, imperfections that can exist anywhere. There was nothing structural there and, blatantly, there was nothing there to be linked to, for example, the gilets jaunes (a movement many in Lebanon found incomprehensible, and shrugged over). What they depicted was sad, unfortunate, but they were disturbances in an otherwise excellent oasis of equality, peace and freedom. They had nothing to do with what France stands for, for what it really is.

Outside of my Parisian stay, I am based in the English academy as I pursue a PhD exploring markers of inferiority along the lines of the human. As part of my fellowship in Paris, I was to present two seminars on my work. Theoretically anchored in Post/decolonial studies, my first presentation was around social hierarchy in Lebanon along the lines of the human while my second was on the erasure of non-western forms of knowledge and their replacement, ontologically, epistemologically, and materially, by the westernized academic model. In both, the reactions were similar: unease with my theoretical framework and objections of reductionism, generalization and inattention to nuances and resistance.

As I spoke of modernity as a European project of civilization and claimed 'Modern Science' as a movement that sought the erasure of other forms of knowledge I was met with outrage. As I explained that alternative cosmologies exist with alternative models and definitions of the 'scientific' and the 'rational' I was met with surprise. Modern science, I was told, was the congregation of the planet's knowledge. As I spoke of the Enlightenment as a parochial Eurocentric Enlightenment, I was scolded. The Enlightenment, I was told, was the apex of all human development that collected everything from everywhere and put it together for everyone. As I spoke of how modernity stands on the production of a hierarchy of human beings and their subsequent erasure, I was rebuked. I must not conflate the idea(I) and its application: human mismanagement does not mean there was an error in the principles. Genocide, mass murder and the horrors of the nation-state were ill-fated (historical and ongoing) practises in an otherwise great system. My theoretical framework, I was warned, missed all the subtleties and failed to see all the complexities as it presented Modernity as a totalizing machine. Things, I was informed, were much more complex.

Invited by (some) professors, researchers and students in the French academy to realize how modernity and colonialism had brought much good to the world and how they removed illiteracy and ushered in progress and civility in the Levant, I felt I was speaking a different language, and so did they. Committed to France, and to Europe, I realized that they saw, and could only see, the atrocities of erasure and destruction, the horrors of colonialism and imperialism, as aberrations. These did not, do not, represent what these phenomena were, or are. These were mistakes, mismanagements, wrong applications, nothing more. The cause was pure, it was honourable, it was worthy. Its application might not have lived up to its idea, but we must not fall into collapsing the idea with the practice. The mistakes were disavowed as the idea was strongly held to.

In writing global history, the western academy has neglected significant moments and fetishized others, in a process of what Bhambra (2016) has called 'epistemic disavowal.' In doing this, certain chosen events take centre stage while others are rendered by historians and social scientists as 'anomalies' that are not to be taken too seriously in the construction

of narratives. Accordingly, certain things are unregistered/able while others colonise the (epistemic) space. Disavowal, therefore, is coupled with its antonym; a movement affirming the centrality of some aspects coupled with the negation of the relevance of others. The result is a process where specific things can no longer be spoken because (Euro-American) master-narratives stand ideologically hegemonic. Yet, it has become clear to me, this is not limited to the westernized academy. Rather, it is a cognitive process that exercises power over the minds of many both in the academy and outside of it, in the Global North and outside of it, in reading the past as well as understanding the present.

In an article titled 'Mexico', DuBois, in 1914, criticized the American threats to declare war on the Latin American nation writing: "We may blunder into murder and shame and call it a Mexican War. But it will not be war. It will be crime." Du Bois, I believe, was speaking of the facts. Yet, for others, the facts did not matter. Committed to Europe, it appeared that many I encountered in the French academy as well as many in Lebanon were structured by a powerful cognitive mechanism of avowal/disavowal that side-lined all horrors as blips without compromising the master-narrative of the European enlightened horizon. The Euro-American illusion, or lie, stood firm and people, it appeared, held on to it. Committed to Europe with an a priori entrenchment meant that no matter what was heard or seen, positions would not, could not, shift. The facts made no difference: the fact that homeless people were freezing to death on the streets of Europe, the fact that the gilet jaune represented the opening of one of many (post-)imperial wounds within Europe, the fact that racial segregation and discrimination were the norm across the old continent, or the fact that literacy is not a superior form of knowledge (or that it long existed before colonisation in the Levant), among many, many other facts, were irrelevant. It was not a question of facts, it was a question of avowal/disavowal as an ideological cognitive mechanism; and a very powerful one at that. Change, therefore, cannot start with facts. It must start elsewhere. It must start with Power.

References

- Bhambra, GK. 2016. 'Undoing the Epistemic Disavowal of the Haitian Revolution: A Contribution to Global Social Thought' *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 37 (1): 1-16
- DuBois, WEB. 1970. 'Mexico' In: M. Weinberg, ed., *W.E.B. DU BOIS A Reader*. New York: Harper Torchbooks.

Ali Kassem is a PhD student in Sociology at the University of Sussex and the recipient of the LPS PhD scholarship. His PhD is a critical exploration of Islamic dress in Lebanon under coloniality and the resulting marking of humans as inferiors through associations and dissociations. He is mainly interested in the sociology of religion, of race and of knowledge as seen through a Post/decolonial lens. Ali is also research fellow at the Ludwig-Maximilian university in Munich and holds an MA in sociology from the American University of Beirut.