

The lost continent

My reaction to John Borneman's thought-provoking and analytically acute article was one of ethnographic *dépaysement*, of a certain confusion as to what place Borneman might be describing. Hence, as I was about to leave for Paris for a week when I received it, I thought I would test my reaction to the piece there. A week later, my sense of unfamiliarity persisted. Thinking of the Japan that Roland Barthes self-consciously depicted in his *Empire of Signs* (1982) as an imaginary semiotic space not to be confused with anything empirical, I admired Borneman's construction but doubted the existence of its referent.

The week of May 12, 2003, was a week of strikes in France; large numbers of union members protested the proposed changes in the pension system, which everyone agrees needs restructuring, and also manifested solidarity with the strong negative reaction of the teaching corps, as the French call them, to proposed school reforms that would further decentralize both administration and finances. The articulated motive driving the protests was the fear that the government was secretly introducing a form of neoliberalism. As France is indeed an advanced capitalist country, this fear was no doubt well-founded. Another key problem remained in the background, however, a problem that lies behind the issues of pension and schools: France's resolute and sustained unwillingness or inability to deal in a frontal and consistent manner with immigration. One can deploy many euphemisms for this phenomenon, but ultimately it amounts to racism; the pension system requires either higher taxes and more years of worker contribution or more immigration of young workers, who would in their majority be North African. The U.S. model of large-scale immigration, exploitation, and hope of upward mobility is simply not on the agenda in France (or anywhere else in Europe). Additionally, many of the problems in the schools stem from the failure to integrate the by now third-generation children of North African descent. Both right and left agree that France should be a secular state and that all signs of Muslim identity—most famously the head scarf—run counter to France's basic values. At its recent convention, the devastated Socialist Party stopped hedging and affirmed its undying commitment to *laïcité* (secularism). This has been the right-wing position all along. Thus, one remains confused as to what Borneman is referring when he calls the career of the far right leader

Jean-Marie Le Pen "stunted" (this issue). Le Pen came in second to Chirac in the last elections, ahead of the socialists. Both right and left are implementing his programs.

The present government, taking another of Le Pen's favorite issues, was elected on a platform of security and has spent massive sums on the police. That money has come from research budgets that are currently being cut by as much as one-third, from large cuts in state support for the arts, from the school budgets, and from the health care system. A national commission is establishing new standards to deny health care to immigrants. One could characterize these changes as contributing to a "vision of egalitarian, cosmopolitan democracies in an economic and legal union" (this issue), but in so doing one would be involved much more in producing an imaginary semiotic space than in practicing anthropology.

The core issue confronting the world, Borneman contends, is the politics of the Middle East. He contrasts the aggressive imperialism of the United States with the more internationalist stance of Europe. He mentions "the exhaustion of Europe's moral authority" (this issue) after World War II but seems to assume that Europe's moral authority has been reestablished since. There are many reasons to doubt such a claim. I recently raised this issue with Etienne Balibar, who has been writing about possible new paths for European politics; when I asked him about what I took to be the self-evident collapse of Europe's moral authority (we had been discussing genocide in the former Yugoslavia, the ongoing massacres in Algeria, and the silence around Chechnya), he looked momentarily surprised—this was clearly a U.S. question—and then agreed with a resigned chuckle that of course such moral authority had long since collapsed, although there were political domains in which one could imagine European strategic interventions. We went on to explore these possibilities.

On the plane home I read a moving book by Benjamin Stora, *Le Gangrène et l'Oubli* (1991), about the historiography in both Algeria and France of the war of decolonization, its antecedents, and its aftermath; Stora's thesis, which he demonstrates at length, is the stunning failure on both sides of the Mediterranean to accept the core historical facts into popular (and to a lesser extent, scholarly) understandings. Stora underscores an unwillingness, an incapacity, to talk frankly about many elements of an intertwined history,

however conflictual and murderous they may have been. His plea is for a more complex and comprehensive form of "memory" rather than the nostalgia and blatant partiality that marks both the Algerian and the French constructions. But such a change would require rather more discursive courage than currently exists.

Multiple examples of the privileging of monotone value discourses over historical complexity and brute facts are all too common today. Thus, to take another example, the massive resurgence of virulent anti-Semitism in France among some youth was dismissed contemptuously by President Chirac as a U.S. invention until tourist boycotts began to appear; then Chirac was obliged to admit the simple fact that in 2002 over 400 such incidents had been documented and that not a single person had been arrested. Not even the usual suspects.

Borneman's reference to the sophistication of European news reporting surely does not apply to France. The unabashed bias of the French media for the Palestinians (usually represented by French-speaking Lebanese Christians) is such that one basically never hears an Israeli speak on French television. When I questioned friends about this total lack of "balance" (however limited that formula may be), they responded that no one expected the media to be balanced. More importantly, if one compares the current coverage of world events in the once great newspapers of France, like *Le Monde*, to that of the *New York Times* or the *Los Angeles Times*, one is confronted with the evident consequences of stark economic realities; *Le Monde*, which has almost no advertising and remains in a perpetual fiscal crisis, simply cannot finance an investigative reporting staff. It is a journal of opinion. Often sophisticated opinion, no doubt, but it is no longer an organ where sustained investigation

and lengthy documentation are possible or expected. No one I know in France contests this lamentable fact. Friends rightly point out that the specialized journals in France, for example, those treating the Middle East or Africa, are of the highest quality.

When I read Borneman's claim that, "Today, to be European is to be an internationalist without forsaking the benefits of local democratic control and to be unwilling to sacrifice society building for economic or military dominance" (this issue), two associations spring to mind: One is a memory of watching events in Bosnia being reported night after night on French television as well as in the print media and wondering how there could be no European military response to a genocide taking place at Europe's very borders; the other association is an image of old Kant sitting at his desk 200 years ago and laying out the structural conditions that would be required to bring about Perpetual Peace or mulling over the fate of his Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View. I can only conclude that Old Europe still has not taken the exit ramp toward maturity that Kant thought would lead in the direction of Enlightenment. One could grow wistful wondering what "today" Borneman is referring to.

References cited

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