

Race and Statues in France

by Michael Curtis



In his speech in Nice on June 14, 2020, French President Emmanuel Macron declared “I will be very clear tonight. The Republic won’t erase any name from its history. It will forget none of its art works, it won’t take down statues.”

France like other countries has been affected by the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, which has ignited protests in France, a country already troubled by lack of integration of non- white and Muslim immigrants from former colonies. The protests focus not only on the death of Floyd but also on the death of a young 26 year old man of Mali background, Adama Traore, who died on July 19, 2016 of asphyxiation while in police custody. Large protests have taken place with participants holding signs to stop police violence, and some echoing the U.S. in “taking the knee,” and holding an eight-minute silence. Thousands rallied in the Place de la Republique and climbed the statue there of Marianne who personifies the Republic.

The protests are focused on the belief that race or ethnicity are still the basis of discrimination. President Macron has asserted that racism is a betrayal of universal republicanism, but also that the "noble fight" is unacceptable when taken over by separatists.

Race has become central in recent years in many ways and is a divisive issue. On one hand, there was an art exhibition, adapted from the work of an American scholar Denise Murrell, in March 2019 in the Musee d'Orsay, focused on the contention that art history had left out the names of the black models in French masterpieces from Gericault to Matisse. The rationale is that in the 300 items people of color, the "forgotten" black models, have been eclipsed by racism and stereotyping. On the other hand, there is opposition to the cancelling in France of the showing of the film "Gone with the Wind," *Autant en emporte le Vent*, with the argument that France will defend freedom to create and distribute works of art.

The French protests have also emulated those in the U.S. and UK with threats to topple statues of distinguished but now controversial Frenchmen. Three in particular are in danger of hostile action: those of Jean-Baptiste Colbert, Joseph Gallieni, and Charles de Gaulle. Colbert, statesman and adviser of Louis XIV and advocate of mercantalism was involved in 1685 with drafting the *Code Noir*, the legal code, which defined the condition of slavery in the colonial empire. Part of the *Code* was that fugitive slaves should have their ears cut out. However slavery was abolished in 1848. Gallieni was the military commander in the colonies who among other things put down rebellions against colonial rule in Sudan, French Indochina, and Madagascar in 1896, suppressing it with punishment of forced labor and execution." Charles de Gaulle is best known of the three. The bust of de Gaulle in Hautmont in north France near the Belgium border was defaced with the slogan "slave -driver."

A different view of de Gaulle was declared on June 18, 2020 by President Macron. He attended in London the 80th anniversary of the BBC radio address by de Gaulle who called for French resistance against Nazi Germany, a call that founded the Resistance. De Gaulle called on French people "to get in touch with me." Whatever happens, he asserted the flame of the French Resistance "must not be extinguished and will not be extinguished." In fact, only a relatively small number left France in immediate response to the appeal. Among those who did was the entire male population, about 120, of the tiny Breton island of Sein. De Gaulle at the time, June 18 1940, was a little known junior General, an outsider who represented no group or party and had no legal authority, but on arrival in London was encouraged to speak on the BBC by Prime Minister Winston Churchill, who feared Marshall Petain, head of Vichy and collaborator, would allow the Germans to control the French fleet.

At the ceremony on June 18, Macron, the would-be inheritor of the mantle of de Gaulle, praised the UK for giving Free France the first weapon, the microphone of the BBC. Britain, he said, had spearheaded the liberation of the world. He bestowed the French highest award, the Legion of Honor, on the city of London. In return, the UK bestowed an award on four Resistance fighters, the only surviving holders of the Croix de la Liberation given by De Gaulle on 1,038 men and women distinguished in the struggle to liberate France.

On the occasion of June 18, 2020, Prince Charles responded to Macron, saying that "your presence is a strong testimony to the ties that bind our countries, our people, our joint determination." Yet two comments are pertinent. One is that de Gaulle when President of France opposed British entry into the European Economic Community in 1962, and again in 1967, arguing that the UK was politically and culturally different from continental Europe. British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, humiliated by the manner of de Gaulle's rejection

at a meeting at Rambouillet, Renaissance chateau in November 1962 sadly thought, "the French will always betray you in the end." De Gaulle had at least two other motives. One was he thought the UK was too close to the U.S. which would then be the Trojan Horse in Europe. The other was his ambition to have France play the leading role in European affairs.

The second comment is that Brexit which has strained relationships between the countries was not mentioned by either the British or French speakers. Like de Gaulle, Macron has the same ambition of being the champion of Europe, which has led him to be the main critic of the UK's Brexit proposals. He has held that the Brexit campaign was made up of lies, exaggerations, of simplifications, of "cheques that were promised and will never arrive." Macron had previously said on January 31, 2020 concerning Brexit, "we must remember at every moment what lies can lead to in our democracies."

France like Britain is presently concerned with the protests against racial injustice and police brutality, and the issues of racism and colonialism. The problem of the statues of controversial figures troubles France as it does Britain. Macron understands that an individual's address, name and color of skin can lessen the chance of succeeding in French society. Yet he holds that everyone can find their place regardless of their ethnic origin or religion. He denounces racism, antisemitism, and discrimination. Nevertheless, he is opposed to taking down statues of controversial figures. The Republic will not erase any trace or any name from its history, and it will not take down any statue. We should look at all of our history, including relations with Africa with the goal of "truth," instead of denying who we are. It is necessary to unite around Republican patriotism.

However, there are nuances in official French positions on race. The government spokesperson. Sibeth Ndiaye, a black woman of Senegalese origin, asserted that France should assess the representation of people of color in the public,

political, economic, and cultural life of the country. She alluded to a technical problem. A French law of 1978 prohibits the collection of data on a person's race, ethnicity, or political or religious opinions. Collecting data on race is illegal. Therefore, there is no official data of the racial makeup of the population, and the true extent of racism is not clear. Ndiaye argues that revealing racial data can help fight "subtle racism." The difference between her view and that of Macron remains. Ndiaye argues we must not hesitate to say that skin color is not neutral.

The French dilemma about the extent of racism exists, and the problem is pressing. But the position of the French president is clear. The contrast with the U.S. is stark. The history of France will not be rewritten and the destruction or elimination of statues and memorials will not be permitted.