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Marlène Schiappa, Femonationalism and Us¹

Kaoutar Harchi

Translated by Samuel Lamontagne

Barely appointed Minister Delegate to the Minister of the Interior in charge of Citizenship, Marlène Schiappa, former Secretary of State for Equality between Men and Women and the Fight against Discrimination, put on the new clothes—in fact, not so new—of the political function that she is to carry out. These new responsibilities don't come without reminding us of old positions. In 2017, these so-called feminist positions advocated both the introduction of maternity leave not indexed to the professional status of mothers and the prosecution of sexist insults uttered in the public arena. The combination, then as now, of the implementation of security apparatuses aiming at controlling masculine conduct on the one hand, and of the rhetoric of protecting women against sexist and sexual violence on the other, is far from being a circumstantial measure. It can even be part of a carceral, punitive type of feminist project: Deployed at the heart of the state, it carries the state's mark to the point of entrusting the monopoly of the protective management of women to the institutions of force—the police and the prisons.

Only having a passion for punishment and imprisonment is both necessary and insufficient; the analysis of the alliances made cannot be done independently from an analysis of the political meanings induced symbolically, nor can it evacuate the empirical effects on the lives of men and women. For, in the end, what men and women does Marlène Schiappa talk about when she defends the implementation of measures against “separatism” — which the President of the Republic already evoked, on February 18, 2020, during his speech in Mulhouse? Nothing could be simpler; one just has to listen to Schiappa's words: “When a foreigner commits sexist or sexual violence, he mustn't be able to remain in France any longer.”² Or: “If you have someone who presents himself as an imam and who, in a meeting room, or on YouTube, or on social media, calls for the stoning of women because they put perfume on, don't stand by and do nothing; file a complaint. All avenues and recourses must be open to study and we must be able to study

ways to reinforce the legislation to reassert the Republic's main principles and our struggle against separatism."³

Or: "The idea is to counter groups organized in a hostile and violent manner towards the Republic. There are things that already exist in the law: Nearly 300 problematic places have been shut down, non-contracted bars or schools that preach this political Islam, this Islamism and this separatism. [. . .] And this is a way of protecting Muslims who alert us and tell us that their mosque is taken to task on these issues by groups that organize to speak in the name of Islam. We have to be careful about words and terms, and that's why we are finalizing this law and will present it at the beginning of the school year." She finally specifies: "I want to be careful in the comparisons that are made, and I cannot compare [the examples cited above with] the deacon who considers that the bishopric must be reserved to men. I do not agree with him, but he does not endanger the Republic. It is not the same thing to say 'our traditions want this' as to say 'I impose my laws and I wish to stone women,' there is a difference in degree."⁴

Although we do not yet know what specific devices Marlène Schiappa intends to use to wage this "cultural battle," her sole way of ensuring its media performance allows us to easily identify the form of coalition that underlies it: a coalition of arguments centered on the unequal social condition to which women are subjected to, and a discourse that is both explanatory and prescriptive. A discourse that makes women's condition a phenomenon not attributable to the patriarchal regime as it (re)configures itself according to periods and spaces, but to a particular segment of that regime. By amalgamating the immeasurably othered figures of the foreigner, the refugee, the migrant, the Muslim, the Arab, the Black or the youth from the *banlieue* [lower-class periphery], this segment becomes the only one worth fighting. This rhetorical phenomenon where feminism and racism meet, recognize each other, and become embodied in government policies, educational programs, prevention campaigns, and integration repertoires, has been described as "femonationalist" and relates to the extended family of sexual nationalisms.

A Feminism at the Service of the Nation

Forged by Sara R. Farris in the book *In the Name of Women's Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism*, the concept of femonationalism

describes, according to the author, “the attempts of right-wing European parties (among others) to integrate feminist ideals into anti-immigrant and anti-Islamic campaigns.”⁵ While the critique of the convergences between the rhetoric of women’s rights and that of chauvinism-nationalism has highlighted, and with emphasis, the processes of culturalization of violence against women, Sara R. Farris, as a Marxist feminist, has worked to shift the analysis to the fertile ground of the political-economic complex. She has thus sought to understand the profound motivations that tend, under the influence of the consideration of non-white men as overly sexist, to oppose the interests of non-white men to those of non-white women and, even more so, to represent them publicly as antinomic figures.⁶ The theorist asks: “Nowadays, particularly in southern Europe, migrants are frequently perceived as a pool of cheap labor whose presence threatens the jobs and wages of national workers. Yet women migrant workers and Muslim women in particular are neither presented nor perceived in the same way. Why is this?”⁷

To answer this question, which is more difficult than it seems, Sara R. Farris focused on the economic sectors of migrants’ integration. From there, it appeared that women migrant workers are mainly employed in the domestic sector while men migrant workers are distributed according to a much more diversified logic. The feminization of the professional worlds, the opening up of the field of care to the market and the transactional facilitation, organized by the state, to employ external assistance—in particular relating to child care, the assistance to the elderly or the disabled—have greatly and durably favored the constitution of women from the Global South, not as a threatening “reserve army” but as a maintained “regular army” allowing white communities to live well.

According to the author, one of the grids of understanding of the femonationalist justificatory apparatus would draw its strength from the materiality of the feminine aid provided. The struggle for the preservation of this aid would then lead to represent and treat non-white women from post-colonial migrations as victims to be extracted and saved from the dangerous hands of their husbands, fathers, brothers, uncles, cousins, and more generally of any man from their supposed or real ethno-racial group. The neoliberal logic, whose structural intimacy with the sexualization/racialization of the labor force is clearly seen here and therefore influences the treatment—but not the violence—that right and

left governments apply to migrant women. These orientations are more probable and supported that they confirm, if not create, a coincidence effect with the dominant definition of the female figure—a fortiori the migrant one—as emancipated and legitimate to live on European national territories: a woman freed from the family grip and freely present on the labor market.

A Historical Femonationalist Sequence

In the specific context of French policies and legislation, Sara R. Farris' thinking sheds light on one of the most fundamental contemporary stages in France's longstanding femonationalist history: namely, the banning of the headscarf in public schools in 2004 in the name of secularism and equality between girls and boys. As sociologist Christine Delphy notes, feminists' arguments in favor of the headscarf ban, "formulated as early as 1989 by Élisabeth Badinter, Régis Debray, Alain Finkielkraut, Élisabeth de Fontenay, [and] Catherine Kintzler," affirmed the extreme sexist violence exerted by non-white men, while rejecting it beyond the framework of ordinary sexist violence.⁸ Many public debates have then turned to the "why" of this supposedly more violent violence, and have made it, when observed on the national territory, an accidental violence—that is to say, imported from a faraway place, a consequence of the immigration of men of the Muslim faith, real or supposed—and damaging to the integrity of "sexual democracy."

The organization Ni Putes ni Soumises, for example, largely focused on supporting the female population in the *banlieues*, embodied the fight against the supposed patriarchal "barbarism" of the masculine, Muslim, and popular fractions of French society. This was a struggle led by a few racialized women close to structures of power, wanting to appear representative of the feminine counterpart of the said fraction, and which symbolized, in itself, the uprooting of good women from a bad religion and culture. So much was the case that the necessity of helping the girls in question to leave their "culture" by leaving their families, and even more so to break all ties with them, was gradually defended by the members of the organization and by a number of prohibitionist institutional actors.

Articulating these elements and merging processes of racialization (which ensure the permanence of the patriarchal order) and mechanisms of sexualization (which give all its power to the racialized organization), Sara R. Farris then adds what sociologist Dina Bader has called “the dimension of gain”: the structural interest that leads governments of the right and the left, in a conservative and nationalist perspective, to monopolize feminist discourse, with the voluntary collaboration of feminists in office, “because they have something to gain.”⁹ Underlying this way of understanding the phenomenon of a racist feminism is the hypothesis developed by the Marxist philosopher Alain Badiou, according to whom “the law on the headscarf [would be] a pure capitalist law ordering that femininity be exposed. In other words, that the circulation of the female body under a commercial paradigm [would be] mandatory and in this matter [would] prohibit—and in the case of adolescent girls, as the sensitive plate of the entire subjective universe—any reservation.”¹⁰ Thus the commercial logic of a transparency of Western femininity is articulated with the fundamental residues of the (neo)colonial logic of the aforementioned unveiling.

In a paradigm where racialized women are perceived as always having something of themselves to sell, while on the contrary, racialized men are apprehended as not having the resources to purchase, then, the former are subjected to a conditional welcome—not to wear the headscarf, in particular—and the latter to an unconditional rejection.

Collective Stakes

The femonationalist rhetoric that Marlène Schiappa has been happily indulging in from the Ministry of the Interior unfolds amid suspicions of sexual assault that weigh on Gérald Darmanin: a revolting staging of a power that makes very visible the sexist violence of certain men to better conceal that of others.¹¹ This rhetoric calls for a strong, collectively organized response. Not because our men would suffer from racism and that as their women, we would have to save them from it—while other men would seek to save us from them—but because, as women belonging to no one, we believe that the anti-racist and anti-sexist struggle can only be fully accomplished in this acute awareness that people oppressed

by racism are not all non-white men and that patriarchal oppression does not only subjugate white women. From this perspective, and Delphy rightly points this out, racialized women are forced to build with and without the men of the racialized group, with and without the women of the white group. This raises the crucial question of the conditions of possibility linked to the construction of a political space for racialized women.

What does “with” and “without” mean? An infinity of traps scattering the difficult paths of the political emancipation of the objectively supportive members of the racialized group and of the objectively supportive members of the feminine group—solidarities that the femonationalist rhetoric simply seeks to definitively rupture by isolating women and men, leaving some to domestic consumption and others to drowning in the open sea or suffocation. This cannot and must not continue, for no one can be dispossessed of his or her existence and live knowing to be destined for death. Denouncing and fighting against the racialization of sexual issues and the sexualization of the racial issue—in which Schiappa and Darmanin, like others before them, promise a great future—implies confronting a central question: If racialized women are able—as constructed in this way by a set of social relationships—to see themselves, to recognize themselves and to experience a form of empathy towards the non-white man oppressed by racism and towards the white woman oppressed by patriarchy, then who among the members of these dominated groups recognize themselves in them?

It is important that we strive to point out the slightest injustice of gender, class, and race, produced not only by the instrumentalization of feminist ideas, but also and above all, by the *instrumentalizable* and therefore antifeminist character of these same ideas. Many activists have said this many times. But when it comes to the politics of activism, repeating oneself is a way of dialoguing with those who are hearing about this for the first time, just as it is a way of not allowing those who have heard too much to become apathetic. It is also important to break with the idea that racialized men would be substantially more violent than other men and that cultures of the Global South would be more marked by patriarchal ideology than those of the North. For, in both cases, we are trained to respond to the moralizing “why” of this alleged specificity, and not to the political “how”

of this specification. This rupture is absolutely fundamental. It conditions the possibility of orienting the activism, not against the most monstrous forms of patriarchy—which can only lead us to endorse the smiling and gallant forms of the latter—but against patriarchy in all its states.¹² Finally, it is important to assess the fierce competition that takes place within the spaces of white hegemonic feminism for the conservation and/or conquest of the feminist monopoly.

Let us remain vigilant as to the potential forms of co-opting of femonationalist critique, not from a revolutionary perspective that would benefit all members of women's class, but from a logic of pure strategic distinction of the dominant groups from each other. Since oppression is overwhelming on several fronts at the same time, we can only reflect on the construction of extended spaces together and in solidarity. Spaces where the theoretical reflections and concrete actions of women who advocate an anti-racist and anti-capitalist feminism can unfold even more, in the fullness of their intersections.

Notes

¹ Originally published in 2020 on the website of the French journal *Ballast*, under the title “Marlène Schiappa, le fémonationalisme et nous.”

² Les Grandes Gueules, *RMC Story*, (2020). <https://rmc.bfmtv.com/mediaplayer/audio/les-grandes-gueules-jeudi-23-juillet-2020-521009.html> (accessed July 23, 2020).

³ Compte rendu de la Commission des lois constitutionnelles, de la législation et de l'administration générale de la République, *Assemblée Nationale*, (2020). https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/dyn/15/comptes-rendus/cion_lois/115cion_lois1920085_compte-rendu (accessed July 28, 2020).

⁴ Aude Lorriaux, “Loi contre le séparatisme: ‘l'idée c'est de contrer les groupes organisés de manière violente vis-à-vis de la République’ annonce Schiappa,” *20 Minutes*, (2020). <https://www.20minutes.fr/politique/2831319-20200730-loi-contre-separatisme-idee-contrer-groupes-organises-maniere-violente-vis-vis-republique-annonce-schiappa> (accessed July 30, 2020).

⁵ Sara R. Farris, “Les fondements politico-économiques du fémonationalisme,” *Contretemps: Revue de Critique Communiste* (2013). <http://www.contretemps.eu/les-fondements-politico-economiques-du-femonationalisme/> (accessed July 30, 2020).

⁶ Refers to the view that non-white men are naturally more sexist than white men.

⁷ Farris, “Les fondements politico-économiques du fémonationalisme.”

⁸ Christine Delphy, “Antisexisme ou antiracisme? Un faux dilemme?,” *Nouvelles Questions Féministes* 25, no. 1 (2013).

⁹ Dina Bader, “Sara R. Farris: In the Name of Women’s Rights. The Rise of Femonationalism,” *Nouvelle Questions Féministes* 37 (2018).

¹⁰ Alain Badiou, “Derrière la loi du foulard, la peur,” *Le Monde*, (2004). https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/2004/02/21/derriere-la-loi-foulardiere-la-peur-par-alain-badiou_353904_1819218.html (accessed July 26, 2020).

¹¹ “Citizenship are the stakes of national cohesion, the respect of the principle of secularism, the defense of the right of asylum, the welcoming of refugees, the projects related to the fight against separatism, the involvement of the forces of law and order in the protection of women victims of violence, but also all the issues of the Ministry of the Interior to which the Minister associates me.”

¹² Mara Viveros Vigoya, *Les Couleurs de la masculinité* (Paris: La Découverte, 2018).