

Resisting Victimhood in Corsica

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In recent years, the French media have increasingly focused on the incidence of racism against Franco-Maghrebians in Corsica. On an island which has long been the locus of a minority nationalism organized on an anti-colonial frame of reference, this new problematic challenges and unsettles fixed binaries of victim/perpetrator, powerful/powerless, majority/minority. While for some, this new development reveals the “underlying xenophobia” of Corsican nationalism, for others, this is just the latest episode in France’s age-old “defamatory misrepresentation” of the island. Rather than attempt to adjudicate this debate, the article unpicks its discursive regularities. At stake in these complex politics of victimhood are issues of the representative (which instances are typical?) and the commensurable (which comparisons are acceptable?)—both of which are central also to anthropological accounts of victimhood. As a result, this case study raises some issues concerning anthropological comparison.

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Introduction: “Is Corsica Racist?”

On Thursday, 7th April 2005, the public television channel *France 2* ran a documentary on the French island of Corsica. Its title was the question: “Is Corsica racist?” (*France 2* 2005). One of the most striking moments involved the journalist entering a café in the east of the island, carrying a hidden camera. In the previous sequence, a local Moroccan man had pointed out this particular café as one from which North Africans were informally banned. After some suggestive bar talk, the undercover journalist managed to elicit proof of this from the owner, who said that he did not allow “Arabs” into his café. The documentary closed with a beautiful shot of a Corsican sunset, over which a voice described Corsica as “an island that is afraid of the other because it is unsure of itself”.

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Considered as an element in the French discursive construction of Corsica, this documentary exhibited many familiar signs of what in an extended sense, one might call Orientalist stereotyping (Said 2003). The depiction of Corsica as a mysterious or hidden realm to be unveiled, the use of the scenery in the implicit opposition between a pure nature and a corrupt humanity, the formulaic reduction whereby a whole population is seen to act as one individual, whose motivations are furthermore explained by a dubiously simplistic psychological principle. All of these have been intrinsic parts of French depictions of Corsica since the island became a part of France in the late 18th century (Candea 2005). Some sense of this was not lost on those viewers who were *au fait* with common French depictions of the island. One viewer responded to the programme by posting the following message on the channel's website: "the documentary you made gives a sickening image of Corsica... I am convinced that after such a documentary many people will not like Corsica... won't that be racism too?" ("Diatta" 2005).

The island of Corsica, which became a French province in 1768, and is now a region of metropolitan France, has long been a popular destination for travellers in search of the European exotic. Since the late 18th century, it has also been a prime locus of French concerns about the meaning of "Frenchness" and national unity. These concerns and disputes took a more radical turn with the revival of regionalism in 1960s France, and the appearance of armed Corsican nationalist groups in the 1970s (Loughlin 1989; see also McDonald 1989). In recent years, the French media have begun to report and comment upon the issue of racism in Corsica, primarily against so-called "people of North African origin", who in Anglophone literature are usually referred to as "Franco-Maghrebians" (for some examples, see Chemin 2005; Chemin & Zappi 2000; De Ton 2004; Le Monde 2004; Pivois 2001).¹

Such reports of racism in Corsica have sparked a wave of controversy on the island as many, including members of the local anti-racist organization, claimed that Corsicans were being unfairly stigmatized by the national press. The measured reactions of the anti-racists were often outflanked locally, however, by far more radical "illicit discourses" (Holmes 1993; see also Introduction, this volume) in which the victimhood of Franco-Maghrebians was negated or made irrelevant by appeals to the victimhood of Corsicans, variously construed.

This article examines these current debates as a recent development of the shifting politics of victimhood which have triangulated the relationship between Corsica, France and North Africa over the past 40 years. Two threads run through the following discussion. The first examines the enduring themes of *invasion* and *misrepresentation*, through which Corsicans have been portrayed as a community united in victimhood. These themes now play an important role in some Corsicans' reactions to the debate about racism. The second thread follows a shift in the position of Corsican nationalism in the context of a reconfigured European politics. Corsicans, traditionally represented as a minority in a wider French context, are increasingly being interrogated as a majority in relation to a local Franco-Maghrebian minority. Besides having serious consequences for the political positioning of Corsican nationalism, these uncertainties in the attribution of majority and minority categories also give rise to a zone of moral discomfort and confusion.

This bears on the anthropological description of these debates. Arguably, many anthropologists have treated the categories of victim and perpetrator as prior or external to analysis (Jean-Klein & Riles 2005; Benson n.d.; see also Introduction, this volume). The same has often been true of the categories “majority” and “minority” in anthropological work on European identity (S. Macdonald 1993; M. E. McDonald 1993). In other words, majority, minority and victimhood have sometimes been, to use Johannes Fabian’s expression, *a category, rather than an object* of anthropological thought (Fabian 1983). As a result, when the attribution of these categories becomes part of what is disputed locally, anthropologists may find themselves playing the role of adjudicator. This article attempts *not* to do so, but instead to maintain these categories as ethnographic rather than analytical ones—however, this move in itself requires some broader justification.

Some might simply argue that victim, perpetrator, majority and minority are “moral” terms, and eschew them for the sake of “objectivity” (see also D’Andrade 1995). This is not the approach taken here. My point is not just that these terms are analytically unhelpful, but also that they further the kind of politics of which they are a product (see also Ochs this volume). The anthropologists’ role, I suggest, is not to answer the question “is Corsica racist?” but to show that the question is inadequately formulated, and thus, hopefully, to prompt more productive ones. This is the performative hope which underlies the broadly descriptive approach taken in the rest of this article.

Resisting Victims

[Corsica is] the cradle of a human community, the Corsicans, long-suffering victims of history. A Mediterranean people which has had to bear invaders, covetousness, isolation. That may be why Corsicans sometimes seem a little reserved when it comes to tourists (Guide du Routard 2003: 28).

Perhaps the most marking feature of current historiographies of Corsica is the repetitive figure of invasion. The sequence of invasions which punctuates narratives of the island’s history starts as early as 7000 BC with the Ligurians, followed by the Greeks, Phoceans, Romans, Vandals, Goths, Byzantines, Arabs, Spaniards, Pisans and Genoans. For some, amongst whom many Corsican nationalists, the incorporation of Corsica into France is the latest instance of this series of invasions.

These themes of invasion, victimhood and resistance have become a truly ubiquitous feature in accounts of Corsica. They appear in the reports of 19th century French missionaries (for example De Lemps 1843), in the passionate political speeches of 1970s Corsican nationalists, and now even in the historical background provided by tourist guidebooks (Abram 2000; Guide du Routard 2003). In fact, the beginning of mass tourism in Corsica since the late 1960s has in itself provided the material for another version of the invasion motif. Thus my Corsican friends often claimed that they retreat to their inland villages during the summer months, leaving the beaches to the tourists. Even though I have never heard the link between these seasonal “invasions” and the “historical” ones being made explicitly, the correspondences between the two framings are clear.²

The islanders emerge from these historiographies (and their yearly reiteration) as constantly victimized but also constantly resisting. The particular kind of victimhood which is being outlined here is not of the familiar, non-agentive kind (see also Jeffery this volume). It is on the contrary, victimhood as the foundational ground of (re)action, a type of “resisting victimhood” which is a hallmark of the language of minority struggles in other French regionalist contexts (see also McDonald 1989) and beyond.

The Misrepresented Isle

The quote from the tourist guidebook with which I opened this section continues thus:

That may be why Corsicans sometimes seem a little reserved when it comes to tourists. But don't listen to the most banal clichés. These sons of shepherds have heart and character. It is true. They have sharp minds. That is true also. And they have the pleasure of speech: eloquence. But down with generalisations! ... Hard and tragic, secret and wild, Corsica will never be just another *département* on the French map. Nothing here is rational: not the skyline, nor the climate, nor the passions nor the houses, nor, of course, the Corsicans themselves. (Guide du Routard 2003: 28)

A rather more straightforwardly non-agentive strand in current Corsican narratives of victimhood follows the sense of being an object of study, appraisal and comment, constantly peered at and (mis-)represented in a wider and broadly uncontrollable national discursive space. Corsicans are not just—as above—described and essentialised in tourist guidebooks, they have been the object of two centuries' worth of official reports (Culioli 1999) and popular fiction, and more recently of social-scientific and journalistic attention.

But this victimhood, too, becomes the basis for a form of resistance. Some voices on the island have reacted strongly against this external representation, especially when it was felt to be negative. Books and websites are devoted, for instance, to the identification of what has come to be called “anti-Corsican racism” (see for instance Santini 2001). A number of racism lawsuits have been filed, so far unsuccessfully, by associations of Corsican lawyers against publications which printed, and networks which broadcast, humour based on the denigration of Corsicans (Amalou & Barroso 2002).

More generally, this sense of being the disempowered subject of influential narratives and dominant discourse came through ethnographically in the constant flow of “counter-narratives” in evidence on the island. Hewitt has defined counter-narratives as accounts which have “the appearance of being proffered in response to a previous story or stories, and of anticipating further narrative moves by others” (Hewitt 2005: 57). As such, counter-narratives, he argues, are “arguably an expressive instrument of any individual or group experiencing discursive exclusion and perceived injustice” (Hewitt 2005: 69). In Corsica, an explicitly counter-narrative aspect pervaded accounts ranging from popular discussions of well-known stereotypes about Corsicans, to local appraisal of famous tourist spots, to the articulate historical, linguistic and ethnological scholarship of Corsican regionalist enthusiasts.

Anti-colonial Solidarities

Beyond these general themes of invasion and misrepresentation, current formulations of Corsican victimhood are powerfully inflected by an anti-colonial discourse whose emergence deserves some contextualization.

Corsica, formerly ruled by Genoa, was ceded to France by the latter in 1768—somewhat controversially, since the island had for some time declared its independence from the Italian city-state. French troops put an end to local resistance however, and Corsica became a “province” of the *ancien régime*, predating the strict polarization of French territory into metropole and colony, following which Corsica fell on the metropole side. However, the continuity of government policies and concerns between French colonies and remote regions or lower social orders of metropolitan France has often been noted (Rabinow 1989; Colonna 1997), and Corsica was a particularly good example of the sliding scale of centre-periphery interactions. These interactions were not conceptualized or denounced in explicitly “anti-colonial” terminology, however, until the 1960s.

In 1957, the French state created two semi-private societies, SOMIVAC and SETCO dedicated respectively to the development of Corsican agriculture and tourism. Over the following 14 years, the SOMIVAC, drawing on 350 million Francs state investment, helped develop over 10,000 hectares of agricultural land. The gross agricultural product rose by ten per cent yearly during that period, and the landscape of the Eastern plain of the island changed drastically, as private landowners used the SOMIVAC’s help to buy unused terrain and develop large vineyards. As a result of the development programme, by the 1970s, 20,000 hectares were devoted to the monoculture of grapes, and wine represented 60 per cent of Corsica’s agricultural production (Pomponi 1979: 417ff).

It was not an anodyne fact that a number of the vintners were recently resettled French landowners from North Africa, the so-called “*pieds-noirs*” who fled the newly independent Algeria in 1962.³ The emphasis on wine, which had not been explicit in the original SOMIVAC project, was attributed by many sources to the *pieds-noirs* who were perceived to have carried over into Corsica the entrepreneurial expertise and know-how honed in the huge vineyards of the Algerian *Mitidja* (Pomponi 1979: 417).

This was only one of many increasingly uncomfortable comparisons which some Corsicans in the 1960s and 70s began to draw between the island and former French colonies in North Africa and elsewhere. Other such parallels were the resettlement of a French legion unit in Corsica, or the bungled attempt to relocate a zone of nuclear testing from the Algerian desert to a sparsely populated region in the west of the island (Bernabéu-Casanova 1997: 61). These comparisons were contextualized in the increasingly popular theories of “internal colonialism” (see also Hechter 1975), which were used as a framing device in calls for a “regionalist revolution” (Lafont 1967).⁴

Out of these multifarious parallels, 1970s Corsican nationalism forged a strong anti-colonial discourse which emphasized Corsica and Corsicans’ victimhood at the hands of the French state. Following this framing, the leading nationalist Edmond Siméoni described some amongst the *pied-noir* repatriates as:

Land-grabbers who, forgetting the lessons of the past, are acting in Corsica as they acted in Algeria, with the same indifference for the native, the same thirst for profit, the same reprehensible practices. (Edmond Siméoni writing in 1975, quoted in Dessaigne 1982)⁵

These anti-colonial framings were translated into practice: in the mid-1970s a number of buildings belonging to *pieds-noirs* were occupied by armed regionalist militants and painted with slogans demanding the departure of the colonists and the return of “Corsican land to Corsicans”. Formed in 1976, the major Corsican underground military organization, the FLNC (Corsican National Liberation Front), was named in explicit reference to the Algerian FLN.

The post-colonial motif was an important reframing of the historical narrative of Corsican victimhood. While it maintained the key themes of invasion and resistance, it also introduced the suggestion of wider anti-colonial solidarities, a community of resisting victims. And yet this solidarity was riven from the start by some strange paradoxes. The fact that many Corsicans had been involved in French colonial administrative careers meant on the one hand that they were familiar with and could easily recognize the trappings of colonialism and the somewhat ambiguous position of their native island in the national order of things. But it may also in part explain why a statistical majority of Corsicans had been opposed to Algerian independence (Bernabéu-Casanova 1997: 57)—which made the anti-colonial framing of Corsican nationalism anything but a consensual topic on the island.⁶

Accusing Victims

But although victimhood could unite, it could also divide. While Corsican nationalists sought to include Corsica in a wider “community of suffering” of colonized peoples (see also Werbner 1997: 235ff), French commentators who were hostile to Corsican nationalism were keen to foreground the plight of the *pieds-noirs* targeted by nationalist actions. This position is clearly evidenced, for instance, in a 1982 issue of the French journal *le Crapouillot*—a paper which self-defines as “non-conformist” and often contains topics, analyses and concerns associated with the French far right. The article challenges Corsican nationalist claims by foregrounding the victimhood of the *pied-noir* repatriates themselves (Dessaigne 1982). The author, with more than a hint of imperialist nostalgia (Rosaldo 1989: 69–74), evokes the tragedy of the displaced *pied-noirs*, long-suffering victims at the hands first of Arab nationalists and later of Corsican ones.

In Dessaigne’s account, the positions of victim and perpetrator are reversed: the *colonists* against whom the nationalists are claiming to rise in the name of a victimized nation, are portrayed first as *refugees* (the classic form of innocent, victimized “bare life”. See Malkki 1995: 7ff, Agamben 1998), displaced individuals whose fragile attempts to reconstruct their lives are shattered once again. Here it is victimhood (be it “resisting” or “helpless”) which is the linchpin of this war of positions over the moral categorization of groups.

The link from individual to group victimhood, from instance to category, is a central and recurrent feature of these debates (see also Introduction, this volume). Dessaigne’s

article alternates broad historical and statistical data with poignant individual life-histories and interviews. The value of the latter is always implicitly as a “representative” instance, one which comes to stand for some more abstract category, such as “the *pied noir* repatriates”. In the same way, nationalist occupations of specific vintners’ houses (often chosen precisely for their owner’s wealth, or their involvement in illegal activities) made these particular vintners *stand for* a “corrupt colonial state”. Generic slogans such as “Corsican land to Corsicans” or “Colonists out” were painted on *specific* walls—walls which could, in a sense, sustain the weight of these wider claims. As Žizek puts it, it is in this grounding of the general in the particular that ideological battles are lost and won (Žizek 1997: 28–9). In the Corsican case, the creation and delegitimation of “communities of suffering” is one of these enduring battles. This battle continues in the recent debates about racism with which I began. In this case, the politics of victimhood entangles Corsican and Arab communities of suffering in a triangular relationship with France.

In 1999, the French National Advisory Human Rights Commission (CNCDH) issued an annual report on racist violence. It claimed that out of 26 violent racist attacks noted in France in 1998, 17 had been committed in Corsica alone. This was particularly striking since the population of Corsica is only around 250,000 people, which is roughly 0.4 per cent of the national population.

The calculation and selection of cases was hotly disputed on the island, but for all that, the report became a yearly fixture. Every year, the results of this report were widely relayed in the national and regional press, which also started documenting an alarming rise in serious attacks on the homes and persons of Franco-Maghrebians on the island: beatings, houses blown up, shots fired. It was also revealed that a number of violent underground groups had formed, using the language and methods of Corsican nationalist groups but explicitly targeting the North African population (Millet 2003).

In the context of the long-standing politics of victimhood described above, the victimhood of Franco-Maghrebians in Corsica was explicitly used by some French commentators to displace or challenge the victimhood of Corsicans. The implicit and occasionally explicit message in many commentaries on racism in Corsica was “they complain about anti-Corsican racism, but they are more racist than us”. Concomitantly, some voices on Corsica have performed the symmetrical move, rejecting the accusation of racism by once again re-inscribing Corsicans as *the real victims*. This form of argument takes two main variants, which we have already encountered.

Invasion and Misrepresentation (Mark II)

The first—most radical and least widespread—of these variants is a discursive move favoured by far right and “new right” parties throughout Europe. Some people in Corsica acknowledge their rejection of those they call “Arabs”, but position *themselves* as the victims of the latter. This fits in neatly with the familiar theme of Corsican victimhood and resistance at the hands of “invaders”. The anti-Arab terrorist groups

which appeared in Corsica in 2002 and 2003 used this kind of language and these kinds of tropes. They accused Franco-Maghrebis of drug-dealing and criminal offences, and presented themselves as vigilantes—tough Corsicans taking over where a “lenient” French police left off (Millet 2003). This language of invasion was also reflected, for instance, in the following post, left on a nationalist online discussion group in the summer of 2003:

I'm not being racist but soon there'll be more of them than us... what are we going to do???? They're getting more and more confident. That's why we have to come down hard on them before they start stepping on our toes. We have to react: against the invasion on our own land!!!

Similar messages were rife on the discussion group, and often centred around accounts of alleged or actual attacks by Franco-Maghrebian youths on Corsicans. Although they were posted on the nationalist forum, such messages were not representative of official Corsican nationalist party lines. Furthermore, they were often countered by indignant responses from nationalists on the forum itself. Corsican nationalism, and this is a point its critics often forget, is an ideologically diverse movement, with members whose *other* political commitments range all the way across the left–right spectrum of French politics. Furthermore, the core of nationalists proper is surrounded, like many such political movements, by a crowd of satellites and stragglers, semi-enthusiasts and discontents, who occasionally blend the themes of Corsican nationalism with other concerns and commitments; these range from the anti-Arab vigilantes to the anti-racist group *Ava Basta*.

But the ideas expressed on the forum above found muted echoes amongst wider and less politicized sections of the population. I did my Corsican fieldwork in the wake of the notorious 2002 French presidential election, when national debates around policing and safety had reached a paroxysm of intensity. The implicit association of Franco-Maghrebian youths with criminal activity was an important subtext in these national debates. In the Corsican village I worked in, some people translated these issues into the idea that “on the continent, Arabs cause trouble”. When the topic came up, it was occasionally argued that this was not the case on Corsica, because the locals are “tough”. As one person I interviewed put it, Arabs might “cause trouble” on the continent, but “here they are scared... they are submissive”.⁷

Sometimes, therefore, French accusations about Corsican racism are obviated through this framework, in which Franco-Maghrebians are represented as external aggressors, whom Corsicans are legitimately resisting or “keeping in their place”.

Another way of obviating accusations of racism which followed the CNCDH survey was to return to the theme of Corsica as a victim of external description. This was an area in which “counter-narratives” played an important role (see also Hewitt 2005). For instance, some commentators would downplay anti-Arab graffiti and attacks on the property of Franco-Maghrebians as youthful pranks—unfortunate, but not “serious”. More large-scale events, such as the cases documented by *Ava Basta* in which Franco-Maghrebians were intimidated and made to leave a village in which they had settled, were often adjoined with the hint that the victims had been

“up to no good”, engaging in some illicit social or economic practice. As in Hewitt’s account of local white working-class reactions to the national news coverage of racist murders in South London (Hewitt 2005), these counter-narratives downplayed the role of race and racism and thus recast the national coverage of Corsican events as misrepresentative.

A more measured reaction, and one which was more often publicly voiced, recognized the incidence of racism in Corsica, attributed it to a marginal minority, and described it as no more present than elsewhere in France. The French media’s focus on racism in Corsica was then identified as yet another instance of attempts to demonize the island in the national press.

For instance, the leader of the nationalist coalition *Corsica Nazione* referred to the fact that the statistical data for the report originated at the French ministry of the interior. He described the report as a manipulation by the French government, to discredit Corsican nationalism (Chemin & Zappi 2000). It is true that French media representations often associated racism with Corsican nationalism, either by blankly equating the two, or by hinting that they were both informed by the same logic of “insularity” and “fear of the other”. The nationalist reply, that the statistic was a government ploy, was not to deny the existence of racism in Corsica, but rather, to reframe the debate as, once again, one between Corsica and the French state, in which Corsica is unambiguously the victim.

Minority Nationalism and Majority Anti-Racism

While, on this issue, the anti-racist group *Ava Basta* were supportive of nationalists’ claims and issued a statement to the effect that Corsican nationalism should not be demonized (Vincensini in Santini 2001), the relationship between the two was sometimes fraught. I first came across the tensions between nationalists and anti-racists about half-way through my fieldwork, during a debate on citizenship on the regional channel France 3 Corse.

On the somewhat sparse scene of a local TV studio, representatives of various Corsican political parties and associations exchanged their views on the specifically Corsican inflections of this eminently national debate. The familiar topics and themes of French citizenship debates rolled out, as various participants discussed Islam, integration, the representation of minorities, racism, and what in English has been termed the “colour-blind” policy of French republicanism (see also Candea 2006). My ears pricked up however, when the spokesman for the main Corsican nationalist coalition used the term “threshold of tolerance” (*seuil de tolerance*).

The notion of a threshold of tolerance, first developed by a group of social scientists working on the conceptual bases of ethology, posits that a natural reaction of xenophobia occurs when the number of foreigners to locals on a given territory exceeds a certain percentage. This percentage is the threshold beyond which tolerance becomes impossible. In the early 1980s, this notion was taken up with great enthusiasm by Jean-Marie Le Pen’s far right anti-immigration party, the *Front National*. The migration of this notion from social science into mainstream political

discourse in France over the past 20 years has been noted and commented upon by anthropologists (Grillo 1985; Silverstein, 2004; Stolcke 1995).

Back in the TV studio, the Corsican nationalist spokesman's use of the term was picked up by the anti-racist militant speaking for *Ava Basta*. She icily objected: "If we start speaking about thresholds of tolerance, we're on Le Pen's terrain."

The nationalist spokesman flew into a rage: "Please, Mrs Vincensini, don't go onto that terrain! You have no right to say that, you have no right! Take back what you've just said! You take it back! You have no right! You can't compare us to the *Front National*! Take back what you just said!"

As a result of this exchange, I started to pay attention to the problematic position of Corsican nationalism in French debates on integration. I became aware of numerous instances in which Corsican nationalists, both publicly and privately, had to justify their distance from the positions of the French *Front National*. The outraged tone of these justifications often seemed to go with a relative absence of content: as in the nationalist spokesman's reaction, the actual effective difference between the two nationalisms was rarely articulated. It seemed that Corsican nationalists and their supporters in Corsica felt it best to treat such comparisons with contempt, as a self-evidently slanderous and ridiculous charge. The problem was that the wider French world around them increasingly disagreed, and persistently called them on it.

One day, as we were driving back from a local teacher training conference, I finally put this to one schoolteacher I had been working with. I recounted the scene which took place on the TV debate, and asked him why the nationalist's reaction had been so violent. This kind and humorous man who had been a nationalist since his youth in the 1970s, replied with a sincere and heartfelt account of his own changing sense of the meaning of nationalism. As a young man, he recalled, he used to consider nationalism an ugly word. For him, nationalism was associated with the Spanish dictator Franco. But later, he understood that there are two kinds of nationalism: an "imperialist nationalism" which tries to subjugate others and impose itself upon them, and what he called a "reaction nationalism" (*un nationalisme de reaction*). The first was the nationalism of Franco and the *Front National*; the second was the nationalism of the Corsican movement, whose aim, he stated, was only to persevere in its own being, to preserve its own identity, and to let others preserve theirs.

God knows, he added vehemently, that if there was one man he hated and was glad to see the end of, it was Franco. So to compare Corsican nationalists to the *Front National* was simply horrific. "*C'est monstrueux*", he concluded, with feeling.

Corsican nationalists, unlike the *Front National*, resist a state which they understand to be a foreign oppressor. Yet notwithstanding this difference, the *Front National* has, since its eruption on the political scene in the late 1970s, been deploying many of the same themes with which the teacher justified Corsican nationalism: the preservation of the self, the valorization of culture and identity in the face of an external aggression, and even "tolerance" for other cultures and identities as long as they did not threaten the integrity of the "self".⁸ For all its references to past national glories, the rhetoric of the *Front National* is also infused with self-representations of a victimized, invaded,

resisting community, reclaiming “its territory”, and the integrity of its “damaged” culture. In fact, these kinds of arguments have become typical of far right anti-immigration parties across Europe (Bjørge 1997; Holmes 2000; McDonald [in press]). Increasingly, in the dystopic fantasies of “fortress Europe”, nearly every nationalism comes to imagine itself as in some senses a minority nationalism, *un nationalisme de réaction*—the political project of “resisting victims”. As a result, Corsican nationalists are increasingly finding themselves in what they regard as disreputable company. *Front National* ideologues seem to have picked this up and are making the most of it: although they are explicitly opposed to regionalism in their national pronouncements, *Front National* spokesmen are not shy of exploiting the regionalist vein in their local politics.⁹

Groups like *Ava Basta* tried, and still try, to reconcile these paradoxes, and retain in view *both* the victimhood of Corsicans *and* that of Franco-Maghrebians. This, however, is a difficult enterprise. Partly as a result of the national media’s focus on racism in Corsica, anti-racism itself has acquired an ambivalent characterization. Thus for instance, the Corsican comedy website www.atechja.com, one of the websites which is always on the lookout for anti-Corsican racism, published the following—eminently “counter-narrative”—joke:

Question: What does a racist say about Corsica?

Answer: They’re all thieves, layabouts, potential murderers, racists, machos and degenerates.

Question: What does an anti-racist say about Corsica?

Answer: They’re all thieves, layabouts, potential murderers, racists, machos and degenerates.

Conclusion: Is Corsica like Eltham?

In a recent book, Roger Hewitt has analysed the discursive politics of “white backlash” in working class communities in South London (Hewitt 2005). In areas such as Eltham, made infamous and nationally visible following media coverage of the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence, Hewitt argues that a counter-discourse has emerged, which accuses the media, the government and “the world out there” of misrepresenting a local reality in which, it is claimed, “unfairness to whites” is as much if not more of a problem than racism. Counter-narratives circulate in which either the “racist” nature of violence, or the violence itself are contested. Anti-racism *per se* comes to be seen as a suspect “external” or “dominant” discourse. As a result, even expressions of sympathy for black victims of racial violence become guarded or mitigated. A constant feature in Hewitt’s account is the resentful claim by local white inhabitants that white-on-black violence is given more media coverage than black-on-white violence. In a similarly invidious comparison, in Corsica, an angry caller on the regional radio station berated the anti-racists *Ava Basta*: “You defend Arabs, but you never denounce anti-Corsican racism!” (Millet 2003: 19).

The parallel is all the more striking given the critical differences between the two contexts. One is a dense urban, mainly working-class area in the national capital, where

the other is a sparsely populated rural off-shore island. Another key difference concerns national politics: Hewitt's case study is framed by the politics of (and backlash against) multiculturalism in the US and UK. While some aspects of these debates are relevant to the Corsican case, in the main, the French state has taken a very different approach to minorities and equality, one based ostensibly on abstract universalism and the discourse of individual human rights (see also Grillo 1985; Stolcke 1995; Candea 2005). And as I have attempted to show in this article, the current Corsican situation draws on a historical politics of victimhood which entangles colonialism, post-coloniality and "internal colonialism".

And yet for all these differences, both cases evidence a politics of victimhood which conjoins two main strands: firstly, it involves a population which is both a "majority" and a "minority" depending on where it is seen from; and secondly it is centrally concerned with the issue of commensurability as a way of policing the resulting moral confusion.

Such confusion is unavoidable when, as in the Corsican case, potential victims and perpetrators range from entities such as "the Corsican People", "the French State", "immigrants", "(Corsican) women", "Muslims", to named or anonymous individuals. Furthermore, the kinds of victimhood claimed and experienced, the kind of aggressions attempted and denounced, are just as varied. A fuller ethnographic account than I can engage in here would evoke beatings and explosions but also slurs and suggestive cartoons, expropriations, subsidies, graffiti, forced migrations and changing landscapes, wine, bullets and jokes (Candea 2005).

It is rarely the *reality* of these actors and events which is called into question in these debates. Rather, such politics turn on alternative constellations of these disparate elements, in which the central stake is commensurability (see also Introduction, this volume): debates turn on the question of which kinds of victimhood can or cannot be compared. Could the situation of Corsica be compared to that of colonial Algeria? Can racism against Franco-Maghrebians in Corsica be compared to "anti-Corsican racism" by a French majority? And as a result, is the Corsican situation comparable to "anti-colonial resistance", or to "white backlash"?

This brings into sharp and uncomfortable relief anthropology's own comparativist heritage. For instance, by the simple mention, above, of Hewitt's work, I have drawn a "comparison" of sorts which some may find misguided or even abhorrent. But this would be to misunderstand an argument which, like Hewitt's itself, attempts precisely to break this pattern. Rather than simply side with majority descriptions of Eltham as "racist", Hewitt investigates the complexity of a specific historical, sociological and ethnographic context. His study painstakingly disentangles actual violent expressions of racial bigotry from wider dissatisfactions with equalities policy, which he argues often overlap but should not be confused. In fact, it is this very confusion, in the blanket characterization of areas such as Eltham as "racist", which fuels these local counter-discourses.

Similarly, the aim here is not to "reveal" that Corsica is "like" Eltham. The approach taken here is that anthropological comparisons are valid insofar as they remain comparisons of specific points *despite* documented differences. The slide from the limited comparison to the overall moral equation (as from the specific victim to the

community of suffering), is a powerful ideological tool, and as the examples above show, it can be used for good or ill. It may not be unwise therefore to retain for anthropology an alternative approach to comparison, one which recognises the complexity of particular contexts. As anthropologists such as Roger Hewitt and Douglas Holmes (2000) have shown, this gives us the tools to analyse and hopefully to resist the dangerous manoeuvres of integralist rhetorics. This is in a sense what certain anti-racists in Corsica are already doing, when they attempt to represent to the French public that Corsican nationalists are a diverse movement, while reminding Corsican nationalists to steer clear of the simplifications of the Front National. Theirs is a critique which makes a single account multiple again (see also Strathern n.d.: 21).

Notes

- [1] The terminological issues here are as complex as the state policies and identity politics which underlie them (see for instance Gross et al. 1997).
- [2] In this context, the rich metaphorical construction of “the village” as fortress and eagle’s-nest, inaccessible and dominating the plain comes into its own, particularly when the village becomes a metonym for the island as a whole, under siege (Jaffe 1999; Candea 2005).
- [3] In Corsica as in the rest of France, the *pieds-noirs* were given state subventions and preferential loans to aid their resettlement. By the mid-1960s, around 17,000 *pieds-noirs* had resettled in Corsica, the equivalent of about ten per cent of the insular population. Many of the *pieds-noirs*—some historians say more than half—were of Corsican origin, with or without continuing ties to the island (Bernabéu-Casanova 1997: 56).
- [4] The colonial framing of Corsican victimhood was not without bearing on the previous theme of representation: many Corsicans who had lived and worked on “the continent” (as the French mainland is commonly known) were aware of the way broadly “Orientalist” stereotyping applied to them as well as to their Southern Mediterranean neighbours. In fact, the association of Corsicans and “Arabs” had a long history in French imagination, as the following comments—recently reprinted in a volume about “anti-Corsican racism”—attest: “At the sight of Corsica in arms, a foreigner might wonder whether he is in France or in Africa, and whether the laws of the most civilised of nations are all suitable to the rustic mores of a people which could be taken, in these mountains, for Arabs of the desert” (Constant 1918, quoted in Santini 2001). “The Arab at the foot of the palm tree, the Corsican at the foot of the chestnut tree... The Corsican chestnut forest is the superb laziness of its peasants” (Jean Lorrain 1905, quoted in Santini 2001). The editor of the volume argues: “If proof were needed of French colonialism in Corsica, it could be found in the constant outpour of anti-Corsican racism, expressed for centuries by the greatest minds as well as the most mediocre. Racism is not a secondary phenomenon, but a truly fundamental component of colonial ideology” (Santini 2001: 3).
- [5] Similarly, the Regionalist Front’s pamphlet “appropriating an island” (*Main Basse sur une Ile*), explained that “the [government]’s attribution of land plots is reminiscent of attempts at population colonisation in the past and the present worldwide” (Front Régionaliste Corse 1973).
- [6] Nationalists I spoke to who were young during the 1960s and 70s remembered many stories of families fraught by internal conflicts between nationalists and “legitimists” for whom the anti-colonial framing was unacceptable.
- [7] These debates over local toughness were powerfully brought out in a comedy sketch performed in the summer of 2003 by the popular Corsican duo “*Tzek et Pido*”. The sketch also illustrates the theme, mentioned earlier, of the village as a stronghold of Corsicanness, a bastion inaccessible to foreigners. *Tzek et Pido*’s sketch featured a stereotypical Parisian suburban youth on holiday in Corsica, and the first part of the sketch is based on a caricatural

rendering of the presumably Franco-Maghrebian youth's posturing hip-hop "hardness". The actor walks around on slightly bent legs, waving his arms about and speaking in a comedy rendering of suburban slang. The sketch then shows us the youth trying to "chat up" a local (and thoroughly disinterested) girl, played by the other male comedian in a long blonde wig, who gives a convincing falsetto rendering of a rather affected southern Corsican accent. At one point, the Parisian youth recounts how he and his friends had been to a seaside club the previous night and "tried it on with some local bitches" (*taspés*). Unfortunately, he says, one of them happened to be the sister of the club owner, who pulled out a gun and emptied a charger in their general direction. He comments on the "hardness" of Corsicans, and on his lucky escape, and says that tonight, he plans to go to a dance "somewhere up in the villages". "Up there," replies the girl laconically, "they won't miss" (*"là-haut, ils te rateront pas"*). As this sketch suggests, there is often a strongly gendered and sexualized aspect to such narratives of invasion and resistance, an issue which deserves more space than I can give it here.

- [8] The handful of people I have spoken to in Corsica and in mainland France who described themselves as receptive to the Front National's ideas often stressed this latter aspect, discussed at length by the French historian of ideas Taguieff (Taguieff 1987; Taguieff, 1989). In principle, the Front National claims to respect cultural difference, and to eschew any expansive or imperialist project. Steering clear (in their explicit pronouncements at least) of traditional biological racism, the Front National has risen on a platform of what Verena Stolcke has described as "cultural fundamentalism" (Stolcke 1995), and others have called new or cultural racism (Balibar 1991; Barker 1981; Cole 1997; Gilroy 1987).
- [9] On the 13th of June 2003, the Corsican head of Jean-Marie Le Pen's cabinet came to the island to speak in the name of the *Front National* about a forthcoming referendum. The essence of his message was less striking than the fact that he delivered a large part of it *in Corsican*. He justified this in an interview by the following phrase (in the same language): "I am Corsican, and when I speak to Corsicans, I speak Corsican". Commenting on the Corsican situation in French, he added: "Identity is Man's fundamental anthropological need [, ensuring the] stability of society". Both the use of Corsican as a language of public political address, and the theme of "identity" are unmistakable markers of the Corsican Nationalists' platform. The *Front National* has so far never made any significant electoral inroads into Corsican politics, but it seems from this example that they are constantly on the lookout for new ways "in".

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