

## **Fighting for a Decolonial Europe**

**Article by Françoise Vergès**

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From the idea of blood purity to the “Great Replacement” conspiracy, from colonial slavery to the risk of a new green colonialism, Europe’s prosperity is built on segregation and exploitation. Françoise Vergès, a decolonial feminist active in the environmental struggle, argues that the collective fight for liberation can only succeed if it confronts all forms of dispossession.

**Green European Journal: You are amongst other things a political scientist and historian. Could you say a bit more about who you are and what you work on?**

**Françoise Vergès:** I’m based in Paris but I come from Réunion island, a small island in the Indian Ocean, which was a French colony and is still under French rule. I now write books and essays on feminism, the aftermath of slavery, the question of colonialism, and the question of environmentalism. I also curate and work with young artists of colour in Europe and elsewhere.

**In your work you talk about decolonial feminism – tell us more about what this means.**

It started with a very simple question: who cleans the world? For any society – anywhere in the world – to function, it needs to be cleaned. Banks, schools, restaurants, they all need to be cleaned and it is very likely that the people doing the cleaning will be Black women, women of colour, or racialised poor women. This work is today totally made invisible, underpaid, and exploitative. If we start from these women and their struggle, we can begin to imagine a decolonial feminism.

White bourgeois feminism has never really looked at these issues; it considers housework as alienating and boring, which it is, and so has not looked at the work these women are doing. So let’s start from cleaning and see how it has been organised historically, why it was assigned to women of colour, and what it means. From here, we can work towards a decolonial feminism which would be radically anti-racist, anti-capitalist, and anti-imperialist. It’s not just about equality and certainly not just about equality with men, because men are also dispossessed and exploited. Decolonial feminism is against all regimes and structures of dispossession and exploitation.

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**So it goes beyond pulling some women up so they can enjoy the same opportunities as the most successful men in business and politics?**

A woman who becomes a CEO can do so by relying on the same exploitation. Behind a successful female CEO, there lies the invisible work of women taking care of her kids, cleaning and doing the housework, and stitching her clothes. That kind of equality is not the objective of decolonial feminism. The objective is to dismantle the system of oppression, domination, and exploitation.

**What you are talking about is systemic and structural. Yet the very idea of structural racism is controversial in public debate, even in the United States with its history of slavery and in Europe with its history of colonialism. Why do so many people deny the idea of structural racism?**

The idea that racism is a matter of bad people or poor education is an idea that serves to protect the West from looking at the way in which it arrived at the “good life”. The reason that life in Europe is much better than anywhere else is because of racism, and, by racism, I mean how exploitation and domination through slavery and colonisation were justified.

To this day, so many things that arrive on the table in Europe, that make for the good life, are taken, extracted, from the Global South. Once you look at the way that Europe has constructed itself on exploitation and domination, it becomes clear that racism is not just a matter of bad people but is something that is structural and associated with how you live.

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You must confront what made Europe. Why is Europe wealthy? Why is the United States so wealthy? It is not because of some incredible talent. No, we are not talking about exceptionalism. We are talking about domination and exploitation.

**Some people in Europe argue that the idea of structural racism is not relevant for Europe. They argue that it is a debate imported from the United States. Are there differences? Or is it the same? Are we talking about whiteness?**

Of course, a major difference between Europe and America was that those enslaved by European powers were in their colonies in the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean, and North and South America, while in the United States, slavery was there, and Africans were among the first Americans. The genocide of the Native American peoples marks another difference with Europe: it was done on American soil.

However, that is not to say that the question of racism applies any less to Europe and its history. Europe saw processes of racialisation well before colonisation, against Jewish people and Roma people for example. I'm not talking about Europe as in people living in Europe, but when you talk about the idea of Europe, it is based on a common identity with two elements: whiteness and Christianity. This common identity can be seen reflected in historical documents such as the Treaty of Utrecht from the early 18th century and it has nothing to do with the United States. Historians have shown that the very idea of blood purity came from Spain, whose monarchs expelled the Jewish and Muslim population in 1498. We need to recognise this, and then understand those racial structures that were born in Europe and then exported elsewhere.

In his *Discourse on Colonialism*, Aimé Césaire explains and shows how even the worst crimes of fascism and Nazism in Europe had already been perpetrated elsewhere in the world by white Europeans. Remember that the contemporary idea of the “Great Replacement” [the theory that the ethnic white European populations at large are being demographically and culturally replaced with non-white peoples] that provided the ideological basis for massacres in New Zealand and the United States, is from France. Its inventor Renaud Camus is a French man. Europe is still providing racist ideologies to

the world and European countries and the European Union support some of the most murderous anti-migrant policies in the world.

**A supporter of the EU and today's Europe might say, yes, Europe has this past, but the European project today represents human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. Can that humanist Europe extricate itself from the civilisational Europe or will it always be tied up?**

There are people in Europe who are fighting against structural racism, helping refugees, and opposing racist laws and Islamophobia. We must distinguish between the people in Europe – the activists, writers, journalists, and underground associations – and today's political and institutional structures.

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The idea of Europe as it has been conceived and set up needs to be deconstructed. Any new Europe must be based on listening to the people excluded from today's Europe. After all, all the progressive laws in Europe, even its ideas of equality and liberty, are only there because people fought for them.

**The environmental movement is one of the important social movements in Europe, not the only one by any means but one of the most vibrant. How does decolonial feminism connect with the environmental crisis that the world and everyone living in it is going through?**

Decolonial environmentalism is today one of the most important struggles, as long as it always connects with the question of race, class, and gender and how people are and will be impacted differently.

There is a risk that we see the emergence of a form of environmentalism constructed in Europe that will be both greenwashing and that will also ignore the role of European colonialism in the destruction of other parts of the world in ways that are only emerging clearly today. Because understanding the impact of what regimes of extraction and dispossession do on the environment can take centuries. Historians today are for example uncovering the link between desertification and sugar and coffee plantations.

Be careful about greenwashing. Be careful about corporate-washing. Because recycling, while important, cannot solve everything while capitalism produces more waste than can ever be recycled. Decolonial environmentalism should not only be about the Global South but also about Europe. The Global South must do its part, but it is not Europe's place to say how or what that is. Meanwhile, Europe has a lot of work to do to break with its imperial mode of living and oppose the megaprojects in France, in Germany, in Serbia, that will only accentuate devastation.

**You are involved with Earth Uprising, the struggle based in France against the construction of mégabassines, these huge industrial reservoirs described as "water grabbing" that have led to large-scale protests. Why did you get involved?**

Earth Uprising is a vast platform. The French government thinks that it is an organisation, but it is much more. This vast platform connects people who have been organising against agribusiness for 40 years with more urban, younger people who can see the damage that megaprojects are doing and oppose more and more motorways and reservoirs. They're fighting against mégabassines, these huge open reservoirs for water, and are also opposed to industrial cattle farms.

I became involved because I am from Réunion, which was a French slave colony. I saw how our

geography had been shaped by colonialism and slavery. Our roads run the way they run because they connected the sugarcane plantations to the port. The ownership of the land was shaped by the same questions. Some people have huge gardens and beautiful homes, and other poor people are parked where the government put them. Living in different places, I always questioned the environment and patterns of what we would now call environmental racism. Cities are segregated in terms of trash collection and exposure to pollution, and this can be mapped out. The environment in the larger sense is organised by class, gender, and race, and the territorial struggles of Earth Uprising are about this.

### **Are you an eco-feminist?**

I wouldn't say that I am an eco-feminist. I mean, there are many eco-feminisms but for me the most important thing is to make sure that feminism is about the liberation of all. Paraphrasing Black feminism, the essence of decolonial feminism is that only when the most oppressed and most exploited woman is free will all women be free.

Rather than eco-feminism or any other kind of feminism, we need to remember that the name does not matter. What's important is what you are doing, how you are doing it, and with whom.

### **What is the most important lesson of decolonial feminism?**

Colonial slavery lasted four centuries, between the 15th and 19th century. In all those years, there was not a day when the enslaved did not resist and fight back. The first insurrections and rebellions were usually terribly crushed, but the enslaved never gave up. It was a day by day, by day, by day struggle. This is how progress is won. Constant fighting back.

Of course, it's going to be difficult. Of course, we have enemies. We have seen how the oil industry and the tobacco industry lie. We have seen how they use their billions to lobby and buy people. And we have seen the devastation that they inflict on people and places before they leave. They make their profit and leave behind a wasted land. But we do not have their dream of escaping to Mars. All we have is the earth.

As an indigenous artist told me, we have no choice but to fight back and appropriate that land. Don't do that by yourself. Whether you're an artist, a student, a journalist, the struggle must be collective. Then take the situation you are in and ask, okay, what can we do? From there, we multiply the places of action, and fight.



Françoise Vergès is a French political scientist, historian, film producer, independent curator, activist and public educator. Her work focuses on postcolonial studies and decolonial feminism.

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