Foremost among the imperatives for writing a longer annotation on this text was its repeated co-option by the right-wing ideologue Steve Bannon during the 2015-16 phase of the Syrian refugee crisis. Bannon used Raspail’s 1972 novel as a prophecy to attempt to sow panic about what he saw as an organised and deliberate ‘Muslim invasion of Europe’ (Breitbart News Daily, 13 November 2015).
This rhetoric of a swamping invasion is a familiar trope in extremist discourse of all kinds as it can trigger a radicalising ‘fight or flight’ response among those with existential anxiety about their identity group. Recently though, the trope has been ramped up among white identitarian French thinkers such as Renaud Camus, who wrote Le Grand remplacement, a 2012 treatise showing white Europeans being supplanted by non-whites. The perpetrator of the March 2019 Christchurch mosque killings appears to have been influenced by this idea.
Of all French books on India, Raspail’s fifty-chapter white extinction epic contains the most consistently negative portrayal of India and Indians. It also has the conspicuous distinction of depicting the greatest number of ‘les hommes du Gange’ (Chapter XVII, Location 1929) in the most inhumane way.
In 1971, in the year before the book’s publication, the Bangladesh Liberation War resulted in a cross-border refugee crisis on a par with that in Syria and Europe in 2015-16, though it was principally India that was affected. In 1970s France, influential intellectuals such as André Malraux took a pro-Bangladesh stance calling for international brigades and Mother Teresa was seen to tend to the most destitute among the displaced. Above all, the West Bengal state and union governments and civil society groups worked to alleviate the suffering with the limited resources at their disposal.
In contrast, Raspail’s text, though purporting to be set in the contemporary period, ahistorically draws on depictions of the far larger cataclysmic 1943 Bengal Famine when describing huge waves of people coming into Calcutta. Indeed, in an apparent confusion of the 1905 partition and 1971 liberation, the Ganges region is described as having a separate ‘gouvernement’ (Chapter XI, Location 1332) with its own ‘ambassadeur du Gange, très entouré, accompagné de ses collègues de l’Inde, du Bengale et du Pakistan’ (Chapter XXLVI, Location 5760). All through the text, the masses of people flow like water: ‘[u]ne cascade de corps dont le mouvement ininterompue paraissait liquide’ (Chapter XLII, Location 5192). The action starts when the Belgian consulate stops its adoption process and the masses stream on to ships moored on the Hugli with names such as ‘India Star’ (Chapter VIII, Location 1176). They immediately wrest control of them and set sail for ‘France et l’Europe comme terre promise’ (Chapter V, Location 943), hence the reference to Revelation 20:9: ‘And they went up on the breadth of the earth, and compassed the camp of the saints about, and the beloved city: and fire came down from God out of heaven and devoured them’. The omniscient narrator who can see the ‘armada du Gange’ (Chapter XVII, Location 2082), also describes a limbless ‘monstre d’enfant’ (Chapter V, Location 964) on deck of the lead ‘bateau de pariahs’ (Chapter XX, Location 2411) who is somehow mysteriously directing everything. ‘La non-violence est l’arme des multitudes (Chapter XXII, Location 2716), for Raspail, therefore, Gandhian doctrine is only a strategy of attack in ‘une guerre raciale inexpiable’ (Chapter XXIII, Location 3038).
Underpinning this text is Raspail’s existential numerical panic: ‘[n]ous sommes blancs. Que représentons-nous, au total? Sept cents millions d’individus, principalement concentrés en Europe, et cela face à plusieurs milliards de non-Blancs, on n’arrive même plus à en tenir le compte à jour’ (Chapter XVII, Location 2085). As much as the Bengali Indians are most frequently described as a subhuman excremental brown flow, the bitterest of Raspail’s bile is reserved for liberals and Republicans who want to welcome them on to French soil: ‘L’ennemi, le vrai, se trouve toujours derrière les lignes, dans votre dos’ (Chapter XXXVIII, 4483). Humanitarians are hated too: ‘[l]’un chassait les malades de nos hôpitaux pour coucher, dans des draps blancs, lépreux et cholériques. Un autre peuplait d’enfants-monstres nos écoles maternelles les plus gaies. Un autre prêchait la copulation générale au nom de la future race unique. (Chapter XIII, Location 1472). Similar rhetoric decrying a ‘fifth column’ is broadcast by Bannon (Breitbart News Daily, 15 July 2016). Raspail also criticises a ‘Pape brésilien’ (Chapter XXXII, Location 3900) who sells some of the Church’s valuables to benefit the migrants. Common humanity before God is rejected in favour of racialised Catholicism. Towards the end, ‘[q]u’arrive enfin sur la Côte d’Azur l’envahisseur venu du Gange (Chapter XVII, Location 1886), ‘Hamadura, Indien français, ou Français des Indes, comme vous voudrez, né à Pondichéry (Chapter XVIII, Location 2217), is unique among the small group of twenty whites taking up arms.
The character of Hamadura, a ‘French Indian’ who can choose his side, is Raspail’s single concession to conventional French Republican assimiliationist doctrines vectored through India. After resisting massive force, the small group are bombed by a pro-immigrant French army. According to Raspail, all around the world, from Australia to South Africa to Switzerland, so-called white nations are opened up to migration and swamped, accompanied by the clear narrative that the Gangetic hordes kill those who do not give up their living space.
This is an unapolgetically racist text that downplays the negative effects of European colonialism around the world. In a delusional way, it imagines that a professional (as opposed to conscript) French army would have been able to keep Algeria French (Chapter XXVI, Location 3238).
Yet, as is so often the case when a white man casts himself as the master of other races, co-existing with the hatred of brown people, there is a counterintuitive attraction for female Indian adolescents when these girls are seen, not as humans, but as religious icons: ‘une jeune fille tomba [dans le Gange], très belle, déesse à peau sombre (Chapter VIII, Location 1132) ‘les ponts des navires ressemblaient à ces bas-reliefs de temple si appreciés par les touristes […] rougissants mais rarement sensibles à la beauté de la sculpture et des gestes’ (Chapter XIX, Location 2379). Raspail seems to have a secondhand ahistorical knowledge of India and is willfully ignorant about how it was exploited by colonialism. This text uses the populousness of India to dehumanise it and make Indians into an active existential threat to the white population of France. The answer, sanctioned by the protagonist Professor Calguès, is to kill the Indians as soon as they arrive on French soil. The main threat to this matter-of-fact genocidal plan? Humanitarianism.
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