

Immigration in Postwar France



Lecture 3

Introduction

In [lecture 2](#), I described the historical development of immigration in France since the middle of the nineteenth century. There were three main waves - the first after 1850, the second after 1918 and the third after 1955 - which took place due to a need for workers that could not be met nationally.

Focussing specifically on postwar immigration, I argued that there has been a shift in perception on the part of political élites, sections of the media and increasing numbers of ordinary French people towards immigration. No longer perceived as a temporary solution to an economic problem, from the mid-1970s onwards, immigration began to be perceived as a permanent social 'problem' in its own right. This 'problem' - and I place the word in inverted commas - stems in part from the construction of a dichotomy between an early successful immigration composed primarily of culturally similar Europeans and a contemporary unassimilable immigration composed primarily of culturally different North and Sub-Saharan Africans.

But what truth is there in this dichotomy? How successful were earlier waves of immigrants from Europe in settling in France? And how unsuccessful were later waves of immigrants from Africa in settling in France?

Discrimination in France: The Historical Background

To answer these questions, let's go back to the statistics from my first lecture. France has received, since the late nineteenth century, large numbers of immigrants. By 1851, the first year official records of this nature were kept, there were 380,000 *étrangers* in France or 1% of its total population. By 1881, just thirty years later, that number had nearly tripled to 1 million or 3% of France's total population. And by 1931 it had increased to 2.7 million or 6.4% of France's total population of 42 million. This was a higher proportion of the population in percentage terms than the United States of America, the main destination for European immigrants since the middle of the nineteenth century.

So France then, has seen large numbers of immigrants entering the country at earlier points in its history. The attempts of these immigrants to settle in France shows up the persistence of hostility and resistance by the French to them. Contrary to the myth of earlier culturally similar immigrants settling in easily, many European immigrants in France faced fear, hostility and racism and found their integration into French life to be a difficult process. Anti-immigrant prejudice was rife. For example, the Belgians recruited into the coal, iron and steel industries of northern France were often pejoratively described as *pots de beurre* or *vermines* (Bernard: 1993 p.20). Here is an extract from *La Patrie* from 1896 that gives a flavour of early French attitudes to Italian immigrants:

Ils arrivent telles des sauterelles, du Piémont, de la Lombardie-Vénétie, des Romagnes, de la Napolitaine, voire de la Sicile. Ils sont sales, tristes, loqueteux. Tribus entières immigrant vers le Nord, où les champs ne sont pas dévastés, où on mange, où on boit. Ils s'installent chez les leurs, entre eux, demeurant étrangers au peuple qui les accueille, travaillant à prix réduit,

jouant tour à tour de l'accordéon et du couteau. (Quoted in Mestiri: 1990 p.11)

Behind the hostility to immigrants was often the fear of *l'invasion*, the invasion of France by large numbers of foreigners who were seen as *briseurs de grève*, pushing down the wages of the honest and hard-working *Français de souche*, threatening the social order and the purity of French womanhood (Bernard: 1993 p.21).

The other fear was of *l'inassimilabilité*, the concern that these immigrants would not integrate successfully into French society. Italian and Polish immigrants, for example, were attacked for their religious devotion by a French working class that was no longer regularly attending Church (mass, confession etc.) and given the derogatory term *Christos* (mainly the Italians) or *calotins* (mainly the Polish). Their religion - Catholicism not Islam or Judaism - hampered immigrants' integration into French society.

This hostility inevitably led at points to violence. The economic downturn that occurred in the late nineteenth century led to a rise in violent xenophobia and attacks on France's immigrants were frequent. Anti-Italian riots, for example, occurred in Marseilles in 1881 and Lyon in 1894. The most notorious attack on immigrants occurred in 1893 when a mob, inflamed by the assassination of President Carnot by an Italian anarchist, set upon Italian immigrants in the town of Aigues-Mortes in southern France killing eight Italians and injuring many more.

The contemporary 'problem' then of recognisably different immigrant communities that cannot or will not assimilate as opposed to earlier generations of immigrants who could and did assimilate, can be seen to be myth. At many points in French history, sections of the population and political élites have felt threatened by immigrants and have responded with hostility to them, blocking their integration. The enforced and often violent repatriation of Polish miners in the 1930s is the clearest example of this.

Perhaps the real issue that we should be considering is not the degree to which immigrants are willing to integrate into French society but how successful has French society itself been at welcoming the immigrants it encouraged to settle in France in the first place? This inverts the terms of the 'problem' - the 'problem' is one of a faulty perception at best and of racism at worst rather than one of unassimilable immigrant communities.



The Islamic Headscarf Affair

There is a key incident in recent French history that exposes the fear, confusion and racism that so often clouds debates in France on immigration and assimilation - *l'affaire du foulard islamique*. In October 1989 three Muslim girls (two of Moroccan origin, the other Tunisian) were suspended from a state school in Creil near Paris for wearing Islamic headscarves. The school headmaster, Ernest Chénier, considered that the wearing of Islamic headscarves went directly against the principle of *laïcité*, a key Republican concept that insists on the separation of the state - including its schools - from religious institutions.

This decision came to the attention of SOS-Racisme and the Mouvement contre le racisme et pour l'amitié des peuples (MRAP) who called upon the then French Minister of Education, Lionel Jospin, to intervene and overturn the suspension order. Jospin did so quickly in an attempt to defuse the affair but it was already too late. Things had gone too far and *l'affaire des foulards islamiques* had become the key issue that dominated the end of France's bicentenary year and beyond.

Both the right and, interestingly, the left entered the fray to condemn Jospin's decision and support Chenière's original suspension in the name of the French Republican tradition of *laïcité*. Intellectuals like Régis Debray and Alain Finkelkraut likened Jospin's decision to France and Britain's appeasement of Nazi Germany, making a comparison between the growth of Islam in France and the rise of the Third Reich. The other intellectual who entered the fray was Bernard-Henri Lévy who described the headmaster's action as a victory for the enlightenment over the forces of darkness, obscurantism and the oppression of women.

Passionate and heated as these debates were, they revealed some of the fundamental misconceptions surrounding the nature of France's ethnic minorities, Islam in France and the nature of French Republicanism. One major misconception pertained to the definition of *laïcité*. The concept of *laïcité* or secularism does not mean that all traces of religious belief need to be abolished from the spaces of the state school system. Christian children were allowed to wear a crucifix and Jewish children the yarmulke or skull cap, for example. What *laïcité* prohibits is proselytism, that is, the attempt to persuade others of the virtues of a particular religion or political viewpoint. Ernest Chenière had misunderstood the nature of *laïcité* and had been supported in his misunderstanding by leading intellectuals. Incidentally, when Jospin referred his decision to the Conseil d'État, France's highest administrative court, his overturning of the original suspension was supported and the wearing of headscarves deemed not to be an infringement of *laïcité*.

Another misconception was that the affair split France in two: the North African community versus the rest of the nation. Here too was another area of confusion. Very few young women actually wear the headscarf and when an opinion poll asked a representative sample of 516 Muslim interviewees their opinion at the height of the affair, only 30% agreed that Islamic headscarves should be allowed in state schools with 45% against it (quoted in Hargreaves: 1995 p.127). In October 1994 *Le Monde* commissioned a similar poll but this time the percentage in favour had fallen to 22% with 44% against (quoted in Hargreaves: 1995 p.128).

Far from being a confrontation between the French Republic and an aggressively militant Muslim minority, the affair revealed rather the exaggerated fears of political élites, the media, intellectuals and sections of population. This exaggerated fear is still prevalent in France. For example, in an opinion poll held in 1992 two out of three French interviewees expressed their anxiety about the development of Islam in France. (Hargreaves: 1995 p.119). In reality, despite the growth of Islam amongst some young Beurs, a response to the exclusion they experience in their daily lives, religious belief and formal religious observance is weakening amongst the descendants of immigrants in France. The inter-generational erosion of Islam is very much a reality. Moreover, what Islamic organisations that do exist in France tend to seek consensus and compromise rather than confrontation, as the *affaire des foulards islamiques* illustrated.





Let's conclude these lectures on immigration with a calmer description of France's ethnic minority communities:

It is clear that most Muslim immigrants and their descendants have adapted to the framework of law governing religious practices in France. This is not the same as saying that a mechanical process of acculturation has led to the abandoning of their religious faith. Still less does it mean that they have been entirely assimilated into a pre-existing set of cultural norms. Rather, in the field of religion, as in other cultural spheres, immigrants and their descendants are forging new syntheses combining elements drawn from their pre-migratory heritage with a commitment to the overarching norms governing social intercourse in France. (Hargreaves: 1995 p.131)

Further Reading

- M. Baldwin/M.A. Schain (eds), *The Politics of Immigration in Western Europe* (London: Frank Cass, 1994)
- P. Bernard, *L'Immigration* (Paris: Le Monde-Editions, 1993)
- T. Chafer (ed.) *Multicultural France* (Portsmouth: Working Papers on Contemporary France, 1996)
- A.G. Hargreaves, *Immigration in Post-war France: A Documentary Anthology* (London: Routledge, 1987)
- A.G. Hargreaves, *Immigration, 'Race' and Ethnicity in Contemporary France* (London: Routledge, 1995)
- J.F. Hollifield & G. Ross, *Searching for the New France* (London: Routledge, 1991)
- G. Le Moigne, *L'Immigration en France* (Paris: PUF, 1986)
- Y. Lequin, *Histoire des étrangers et de l'immigration en France* (Paris: Larousse, 1992)
- G. Noiriel, *Le Creuset français: histoire de l'immigration XIX-XXe siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 1988)
- P. Ogden, *Migration and Geographical Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984)
- D. Schapper, *L'Europe des immigrés* (Paris: Bourin, 1992)
- R. Schor, *Histoire de l'immigration en France de la fin du XIXe siècle à nos jours* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1996)
- M. Silverman, *Deconstructing the Nation: Immigration, Race and Citizenship in Modern France* (London: Routledge, 1992)
- A. Zehraoui, *L'Immigration: de l'homme seul à la famille* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1994)

o0o

Concept & Design: Tony McNeill
Text: Tony McNeill

