Project Report

Difficulties in French Historical Research on Immigration

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Despite heightened awareness of issues of immigration and ethnicity in the Western world, little attention has been devoted to comparing the immigration-related experiences of Western countries. In an effort to redress this deficiency, the US-French Immigration Study was conceived as a joint venture of the Academy and the Ecole Normale Supérieure. The project culminated in an intensive three-day conference held in October 1989 at the Abbaye de Royaumont, near Paris. Papers presented at that conference were recently published in a volume entitled Immigrants in Two Democracies: French and American Experience, *edited by Donald L. Horowitz of Duke University and Gérard Noiriel of the Ecole Normale Supérieure.*

The following report is an abridged version of Mr. Noiriel's chapter in the book (endnotes not included here). The author reviews French historical research on immigration in order to explain why, until now, that topic has been largely neglected by French historians. He discusses the consequences of this neglect in regard to the problem of the assimilation of immigrants. Mr. Noiriel offers a few hypotheses in the hope of stimulating further comparative French-American research.

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The French Pattern of Immigration: The Rejection of History

French-American comparative approaches to immigration cannot escape an immense paradox. At the level of what the Durkheim-

ian sociologist Maurice Halbwachs called "real-life history," based on individual and family recollection, the memory of immigration (meaning the process of definitive displacement of a group of people from one country to another) today concerns, proportionally, the French more than the Americans. And yet, at the level of collective memory—that which is conveyed, maintained, and celebrated by all forms of communication and dissemination (school texts, monuments, official ceremonies, etc.)—the situation is completely reversed. We are reminded by Lawrence Fuchs in his chapter in *Immigrants in Two Democracies* that the American myth of a melting pot—that is, the myth of the United States as a place of refuge for all people—is still so prevalent in American consciousness that even a conservative president like Ronald Reagan dutifully referred to it in his speeches. In contrast, the role played by immigration in the makeup of present-day French society remains completely repressed in the French national memory.

These contrasting uses of memory reflect the radical difference between the French and the American patterns of immigration. In all countries, a nation-state's creation is accompanied by a certain number of myths of origin, or founding myths, that reinforce the cohesion of a population composed of different groups. In countries where immigration played a decisive role in the initial settlement, the theme of immigrants often occupies an important place in the myths of origin (for example, in Australia, where collective memory sanctifies English convicts as those who formed the basis of the current population).

Immigration in France cannot be explained historically by the need for population. Until the end of the eighteenth century, France was the most populated country in Europe. The first statistical studies of population bemoaned the fact that although French districts existed in most of the large European cities, foreigners were scarce on French soil. But recent Anglo-Saxon studies have noted that the French pattern of immigration foreshadowed by a half-century, perhaps even a century, a process that would become widespread in Europe following World War II:

general recourse to immigrant labor as an exploited work force used in the most devalued sectors of the industrial labor market.

By the Second Empire, it became strikingly clear that the immigration curve closely traced that of industrial development. The boom of the 1850s–1870s was accompanied by a doubling of the foreign population (which bordered on a million individuals around 1880). Marked by severe depression, the following decades saw the number of foreigners stagnate. During the twentieth century, each cycle of expansion/economic crisis almost mechanically provoked a corresponding cycle of immigration (flux/reflux). Also, as of the Second Empire, foreign workers were particularly numerous in the most mechanized industrial sectors (textile industry), as well as in the most physically arduous sectors (mining, agriculture). Finally, the sectors in which immigrant labor was extensively employed were frequently also those that had the most striking rates of development (for example, heavy industry between 1900 and 1930), without a doubt thanks to the profits earned by firms with a dual labor force: French workers (stable and skilled) and foreign workers (unstable and unskilled).

Historically, it is thus indisputable that the French pattern is identified as a work-related immigration. However, to understand this pattern completely, the sociological reasons that explain the economic situation must be analyzed. How could a country that enjoyed an overabundant supply of labor at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution overwhelmingly and continually resort to foreign labor to develop successfully for the next 150 years? The answer illustrates two other decisive aspects of the French pattern of immigration found, and not by accident, in most European countries following World War II: the democratization of the political system and demographic Malthusianism.

Without tarnishing the recent celebrations of the French bicentennial, we must stress the significant influence the French Revolution had on immigration. As Karl Marx pointed out, one of the major effects of the Revolution was the strengthening of the peasantry's roots in the land, making this social group numer-

ically significant. The adoption of universal suffrage in 1848 furnished this peasant mass with the peaceful means of blocking massive rural exoduses and radical proletarianization such as occurred in Great Britain. The restrictions of births across the French countryside during the nineteenth century limited the dispersion of property (another classic factor of proletarianization).

By the end of the nineteenth century, Malthusianism in France was so strong that all great European countries were able to surpass France in population. A demographic deficit (aggravated by the slaughter of World War I) made large industry's recourse to immigration inevitable. The very fact that immigration was conceived as a solution to overcome any obstacles created by the rigidity of the labor market explains (in part) another characteristic of the French pattern: the premature and almost obsessive use of police and administrative means to channel the flux of immigrants toward the sectors of the labor market dependent on their presence (for example, the complicated bureaucracy of identification papers, work contracts, police surveillance . . .).

This cursory presentation of the French historical pattern of immigration explains why, unlike in other countries where immigration played an important role, immigrants have practically no place in the French national memory. For a century, at each period of influx of immigrants, French public opinion has consistently viewed immigrants as transient workers destined to return to their native countries (an opinion shared at the outset by the majority of immigrants themselves). Only the ordinary populationists (who appeared at the end of the nineteenth century at the initiative of demographers such as Jacques Bertillon), haunted by the theme of the decline of the French "race" (or people) and supported by the nationalist and xenophobic parties, conceived the question of immigration in terms of assimilation or integration, and thus, in historical perspective, as a lasting, irreversible phenomenon. We must not underestimate the strength and the influence of this view. As we will see later, the

assumptions on which it was developed by its proponents are too alien to republican values and myths to be widely accepted.

I have touched upon the central political problem posed by the comparative study of immigration in France and in the United States: the question of the founding myth and its role in modern societies. Contrary to superficial analyses that consider a myth an illusion, or at least a veil, I believe that we must stress the influence of the founding myth. This requires a serious analysis of its genesis. A comparison of France and the United States cannot avoid Tocqueville: "A people," he affirmed in *De la démocratie en Amérique* (1835), "is always affected by its origins. The circumstances surrounding its birth and development influence the rest of its existence." This remark is fundamental for those who wish to understand the radically different manner in which Americans and French have, until now, understood the role of immigration in their history. In the case of the French, neither the ethnic nor the immigration issue played a role in the birth of their Republic.

Mass immigration only began in the second half of the nineteenth century, at a time when the French nation's framework had already been in place for quite some time. Even though, as Eugene Weber showed in *Peasants into Frenchmen* (1976), regional diversity remained significant in France until the end of the nineteenth century, the beginnings of political centralization date from the sixteenth century; the origins of linguistic unification and codification date from the seventeenth century. This explains why, when the Republic of France developed its own instruments of political control (judicial system, administration, statistics, etc.), there were no racial problems like those that existed in the United States at its birth, and no large-scale linguistic battle (like that which has always pitted the Flemish against the Walloons in Belgium). Furthermore, unlike in the United States, where republicans were able to develop their constitution without opposing an aristocratic ancien régime, in France the political system imposed by the French Revolution was profoundly marked by the desire to discredit and

eliminate the values and norms of the nobility and the clergy, both principal supporters of the monarch. This antiaristocratic and anticlerical sentiment explains, far beyond the philosophy of the Enlightenment, the essential aspects of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen.

Behind the haunting theme of equality is a violent rejection of all privilege (and all stigmatization) based on origin. Whereas under the monarchy legitimacy of social position depended on birth and demanded the display of a genealogy and a degree of noble lineage, under the Republic only personal merit and technical qualification (acquired at school and measured by competitive examinations) defined hierarchies. This taboo of origins, in the spirit of the revolutionaries, most significantly includes class origin, but it does not exclude ethnicity, religion, or national origin. In effect, this taboo is combined with another decisive aspect of revolutionary ideology: the struggle against the religious beliefs conveyed by the Catholic clergy. The entire struggle concerning Jews, Protestants, or blacks from the colonial world at the beginning of the Revolution shows that, beyond the fight for human rights, at stake was a definitive separation between public life (the universe of politics in the true sense of the term) and private life (in which the individual is sovereign and which includes religion, race, and family culture). That is to say, it took from the Church all essential elements that had allowed it to exercise its hold on the population.

The rejection of the criterion of origin in order to increase the social value of the individual and the confinement of religion to the sphere of private life constitute two innovations of the French Revolution that are of decisive importance for the history of immigration. Every society invents its own social classifications. The initial weakness of ethnic and racial criteria (due to the long process of political homogenization mentioned above), supported by revolutionary action, in turn assigned an exaggerated importance to judicial criteria for nationality as the fundamental principle of social classification. We see once again how heavily initial circumstances weigh on a nation's history. In his chapter in *Immi-*

grants in Two Democracies, Lawrence Fuchs notes the importance of the frontier theme (movable and changeable) in American mythology—another symbolic reminder that in time, as in space, the American nation has not yet been completely formed. In French mythology, the question of a frontier plays an equally significant role, but one radically different from the role it plays in the United States. In fact, for the French, since 1792 (the significance of the Battle of Valmy) the border is first and foremost to be defended and preserved against attacks from invaders. In contrast to the United States, France is a small country, a complete world, whose territory is totally cleared and settled and has been for some time. The French nation is a state and not an "evolution." This rigid concept of the frontier is paramount in the republican right of nationality. Since the Revolution, the fundamental line of demarcation between men is between the citizen (or at least the national) and the foreigner. Whereas under the monarchy of the ancien régime, foreigners could occupy high public posts (and even lead armies), as of 1793 only the French had access to the public sector; only the French could be electors and elected. On the other hand, those who wish to enter the "French Club" are no longer, at least officially, discriminated against because of race and religious or ethnic origin. In sum, in republican logic everyone has the right to universalism, provided he is French.

The rejection of origins brought about by the nascent Republic, combined with this vigorous notion of a fixed frontier seen as a rampart between "them" and "us," is essential in understanding why, in France, we speak of immigration (others coming to our land) and not ethnicity. Thus we see how profoundly dependent we still are today, in thought and actions, on the initial circumstances in which our two republican revolutions unfolded.

Nevertheless, to break with certain of Tocqueville's metaphysical interpretations, we must say a word regarding the ways in which a nation perpetuates certain of its original traits. That which has often been analyzed in terms of the "soul of the people" or, more recently, national identity, should be conceived much more concretely. As Emile

Durkheim knew, what we inherit (often without knowing it) are words, judicial norms, classification statistics, which have perpetuated some of the initial circumstances surrounding the nation's creation. Take, for example, language. The entire French attitude toward immigration has been affected by both the resources and the gaps in the French language for defining social realities.

I believe the difficulty of grasping immigration as a historical process is, to begin with, based on linguistic peculiarities. We must return to the seventeenth century to understand why, in French, we do not have an equivalent of the English term *making* to describe both a social construction and a social movement. Likewise, as the German sociologist Norbert Elias (refugee in France and then in Great Britain) demonstrated, the French notion of civilization, which according to him was not easily understood by foreigners, designates the result of a cultural process more than the process itself. As he wrote in *La civilisation des moeurs* (1939), "It expresses the self-satisfaction of a population whose national frontiers and specific characteristics are no longer questioned, and have not been for centuries, because they are permanently fixed." Such words are only obstacles to thinking of immigration in terms of contributing to French culture.

Another powerful instrument that has successfully transmitted these republican principles of origin is the law. As we will later see, when we try to define the impossible, an immigration policy, the most important part of the Declaration of the Rights of Man of 1789 is not the Declaration itself (thrown together and imperfect as everyone knows it is), but the great principles embedded in legal clauses (notably in the constitution). These clauses have never really been challenged at any point, at least not in France (except under the Vichy regime): the separation of public and private life and the refusal to segregate according to origins have made it possible to limit the racist tendencies of French thought.

Statistics provide another major illustration of how the founding principles of a nation perpetuate themselves from generation to generation. As pointed out in Fuchs's chapter,

the question of race (blacks and Indians considered as foreigners) haunted American democracy from its beginning up until at least the 1960s. National origin and racial and ethnic background played a fundamental role in the taxonomy of the American census and, as a result, in the American perception of the social world. Conversely, from the beginning in France, official administrative classifications were based on socioprofessional categories and on nationality. From the Third Republic on, all questions concerning religion, language, etc., were definitively forbidden in the census. From this stems the extreme difficulty for historian to undertake, for example, the history of Jews in France, and the tendency to limit research on immigration to the facts made available by the census. The accent is thus on the history of foreigners (defined by their nationality), who disappear from the historical scene as of the moment they or their children become legally French.

In addition to language, law, and statistics, another essential instrument by which nations transmit their original worldview is the way they convey their collective memory; here, I will limit my study to books that explain the history of France. We must return to the prerevolutionary period, the eighteenth century, to grasp how the issue of the legitimate ancestors of the French people came about. In the struggle that pitted the nobility against the Third Estate, historians from the two camps quarreled over this subject. Whereas the nobility affirmed its affiliation with the Frankish aristocracy that conquered Gaul at the beginning of the Middle Ages, the Third Estate claimed the Gauls, the vanquished of the medieval contest, as their proper ancestors. This resulted in a presentation of the history of France in which racial struggle closely mirrored class struggle. The most famous historian of the Restoration, Augustin Thierry, drew the final conclusion: the French Revolution marks, for him, the victory of the people of Gaul over the Frankish aristocracy. Thus we see that the myth of "our ancestors, the Gauls," conveyed for more than a century by history books (even in African and Asian colonies), is an eminently republi-

can myth. However, it wasn't until Michelet that republican mythology acquired its definitive identity. In the name of the universalist values held by the Republic, Michelet challenged the ethnic version of history developed by Thierry. He proposed instead the theme of the French people as the product of fusion, of a melting pot in which were merged all the ethnic backgrounds of the people of Gaul. For Michelet, the fuel that permitted this fusion was the French nation itself, seen as both a nourishing and an assimilating land and as an abstract democratic principle that, with the Revolution of 1789, triumphed over all enemies, both internal and external.

At the end of the nineteenth century, when the Third Republic settled into power over French society, Michelet's message was interpreted in light of the political strategy of national reconciliation between aristocracy and the middle class. The historian Ernest Lavisse, author of the historical works that constituted, until World War II, the veritable Bible of republican ideology, drove the point home by teaching even those in the smallest village school the theme of a melting pot of people (even if the Gaulist component was given a special position). This rapid summary shows that although there is a common thread between French and American mythologies, the melting pot (the concept of a people as a product of a fusion, as compared, for example, with the German myth that identifies the populace as of a single ethnic group), a radical difference distinguishes the two: in the American case, the Revolution *inaugurated* the melting pot, and the process has continued throughout the entire contemporary era; in contrast, in the French mythology, the process of a fusion of peoples *came to an end* with the French Revolution, rendering totally impossible all redefinitions of the French people that might arise from the subsequent waves of immigration.

The Political and Scientific Consequences of the History of Immigration

Language, law, statistics, and the myth of origins thus combined to render unthinkable the idea of immigration as a historical

problem. This repression of collective consciousness provoked a veritable century-long blindness in social-science research on the question. Considering the role of historians in producing the myth of origins mentioned above, we should not be surprised that until the 1970s–1980s, they paid no attention to the question of immigration. But even if we look at other disciplines, in which the practical aspects of immigration should have, at the very least, appeared in their work on assimilation, the same neglect exists. Since the end of the nineteenth century, the disciplines that have given the most attention to immigration are economics and law. But they have exclusively conceived of it as a current problem (problem of food supply, labor market, mobility, or the right of nationality). After having ignored the question during the Durkheimian period, starting with the 1960s, sociological research on immigration proliferated in an intellectual atmosphere dominated by Marxism; but even here it focused on the work force and economic exploitation. Until recently, the only two fields that have integrated history into their study of immigration have been anthropology (primarily physical anthropology) and demography, two disciplines that, given their purpose, could not avoid being preoccupied by problems of origin and genealogy. But surprisingly, they approach this problem in an extremely pessimistic and negative manner, highlighting apocalyptic predictions for the future to the detriment of a dispassionate analysis of the past.

From the end of the nineteenth century, the question of assimilation was posed in terms that would not change until the 1950s. All discussion of the subject centered on one dilemma, a veritable squaring of the circle: either the waves of immigrants flooding into France would integrate themselves, thus causing the French population to lose its identity—"A population that recruits from abroad will quickly lose its character, its morals, its own force; it will lose with time that which is most precious: its nationality" (Rochard, 1883)—or the immigrants would not be assimilated, thus putting the political unity of France at risk by the formation of "national minorities." This view was stressed by Jacques

Bertillon, one of the most influential French intellectuals at the end of the last century, who even today is considered the founding father of demography. In *La dépopulation de France* (1911) Bertillon predicted the forthcoming appearance in France of a *Fremdenfrage* (foreign question), comparable to that in Russia or Austria-Hungary, "aggravating our fear for the future, that foreigners of the same nationality will group themselves in certain corners of the country: Italians along the Mediterranean, Spaniards along their border, Belgians in the North, Germans in the East." Fifty years later, anthropologist Robert Gessain and historian-demographer Louis Chevalier (professor at the Collège de France) developed the same argument in the first INED (National Institute for Demographic Studies) workbooks devoted to the question of immigration. But it is in the writings of André Siegfried, published just following World War II, that we can best assess the influence of this logic and its internal contradictions.

In a French-American comparative context, it seems appropriate to evoke the name of André Siegfried. Like Tocqueville (to whom he was often compared), Siegfried, the foremost French connoisseur of America in his time, was elected to the Collège de France and was considered the great forerunner of French political science. He was the first to approach the question of immigration from a comparative French-American viewpoint. Beginning with the premise that immigration in these two countries is an ancient historical reality, Siegfried concluded that the assimilation that occurred in both countries did so according to the same laws: at least three generations must pass in order to complete assimilation, but in fact it depends on the races involved. In the United States, the "Nordic races" assimilate themselves more quickly. In contrast, "when dealing with exotic races such as the Chinese, the famous melting pot of races no longer functions." Similarly, in France, the integration of Italians and Spaniards is relatively easy, "but the Chinese always live as foreigners." In the case of France, Siegfried wrote, assimilation is even more difficult than in America because "our country has been settled, closed, almost completed

(in the broadest sense of the term), for more than two centuries" and old organisms have more difficulty assimilating new elements (1946). In this argument we rediscover, strikingly, all of the republican mythology mentioned above, making the French Revolution an end result and not a beginning, and making the French people a fixed, static entity for eternity. But when we examine Siegfried's proposed solutions to the problem of immigration, we see that they are irreconcilable with the great principles of 1789. According to him—and to Louis Chevalier, who said the very same thing at the same time—the remedy is that in the end the French government must develop an immigration policy. The latter must be examined from the point of view "of the preservation of the traditional national character"; it should thus "admit the elements capable of assimilation and exclude the others." Consequently, Siegfried is an affirmed partisan of the policy of ethnic quotas similar to that observed in the United States during the 1920s, "even if," he adds, "from the point of view of principles, it can be contested because it is tainted with racism."

We are now at the heart of a decisive contradiction that, in large part, explains why an immigration policy in France could not exist until recently. French intellectuals are incapable of thinking of assimilation other than in terms of ethnic compatibility (what is now called cultural distance). From Adolphe Landry's speech in Parliament in 1915 (Landry was a demographer and minister of population between the two wars) until 1945, when General de Gaulle wrote his recommendations aimed at limiting the naturalization of Mediterranean immigrants (especially Italians), the leitmotif of French political thought on immigration was that in order to preserve the identity of the French people, a policy of ethnic selection must be applied. However, it was impossible to do so officially without publicly contradicting the fundamental principles of the Republic that are fixed in republican law.

In the following decades, the intellectual situation was profoundly transformed. The struggles for decolonization, the hegemony of Marxism in the social sciences, the increas-

ingly significant role played by militant sociology in immigration research, and a new phase of industrial development that again focused attention on problems of recruitment and management of the immigrant workforce all helped to downplay thoughts of assimilation and discredited the questions that had dominated the French intellectual scene for decades. In fact, the very term *assimilation* became taboo as of the 1960s.

Now, following the stabilization of the last waves of immigrants on French soil, integration has once again become a current problem. The dominant question is whether France can consider assimilation without being trapped in the circle described above, and how the American experience and philosophy can help us to do so. At the risk of stirring up controversy, I would say that a good part of the relevant literature in the social sciences is still caught in this circle. Some Frenchmen, skeptical about the notion of a French melting pot, refuse—as did many generations of good republicans before them—to see this as an intellectual problem. Instead, they see a myth hiding the "real problems," protecting the existing political structure, as if in explaining the sociology of crime, the crime itself would be vindicated. Others continue to analyze the question of integration of immigrants in terms of cultural distance (with the current theme of Islam as an obstacle to integration). I am convinced that a program of comparative research would permit us to contemplate these questions in a different manner, notably by offering us the opportunity to escape a far too French approach. We could reexamine Siegfried's proposal concerning the "long-term" assimilation of immigrants in France and in the United States—approaching it, however, with radically different conceptual tools. As I have attempted to show elsewhere, the three great theoretical traditions of sociology—the German tradition (Max Weber, Norbert Elias), the American tradition (the Chicago School), and the French tradition (Durkheim)—can be mobilized toward this goal. This assumes that two preliminary conditions can be met. On the one hand, scientific research on immigration must once again distance itself from political stakes and con-

troversies. And, on the other hand, we must contemplate the problem of assimilation of immigrants, not as a problem in and of itself but as a particular case within the problem of social assimilation that is at the heart of our contemporary history.