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Le Melting-Pot: Made in America, Produced in France

Nancy L. Green

Israel Zangwill is fast becoming one of the hottest references on the French academic scene. For those interested in melting pots and multiculturalism, the English Jewish writer who settled in the United States and whose 1908 play, *The Melting Pot*, opened to rave reviews from Teddy Roosevelt himself has become the name to know in order to comprehend and critique assimilation.¹ An “American model” (variously defined) has become the inevitable reference in French discussions of immigration and settlement. How can we interpret this migration of a concept, and what can it say to American historiography, which remains superbly indifferent to most comparative perspectives?

The nation-state is being battered from within (Yugoslavia and the ex-Soviet Union) and from without (the making of Europe), but it is not going down without a fight. In most of the oldest of the nation-state specimens, although internal diversity and borderland theories are rewriting much of the old national histories, national historiographies are very much alive and well. Given this persistence of nations as concept, reality, and historiographic practice, such historiographic traditions need at least to be confronted.

Ironically, the national traditions are nowhere more evident than in writing about migration, a transnational topic if there ever was one. In Europe, as the old nation-states grapple with further integration into the European Union, many countries are also coming to terms with defining themselves much as the United States has long done: as countries of immigrants. Nowhere is such a definition more fraught with questions of history, memory, and identity than in France. Of all the European countries, France has the longest history of mass immigration, dating back to the nineteenth century. Since 1789, it has also been a country (like the United States)

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I would like to extend hearty thanks to David Thelen for bringing all of us in this issue together, intellectually as well as socially. In addition, I would like to thank William Cohen, Mitchell Cohen, Donna Gabaccia, Lucette Valensi, and François Weil for their careful readings and ever comparative thoughts on such matters.

¹ Israel Zangwill, *The Melting Pot* (London, 1919). Denis Lacorne has argued that, contrary to the idea that Zangwill embraced Zionism *after* he wrote *The Melting Pot*, the play was part of Zangwill's larger strategy of supporting the Galveston Project, an attempt by American Jewish elites to direct Russian Jewish immigrants to the port of Galveston, Texas, and thus to encourage dispersed settlement. This was a first step, in Zangwill's mind, toward an experiment in Jewish autonomy. Denis Lacorne, *La crise de l'identité américaine: Du melting-pot au multiculturalisme* (The crisis of American identity: From the melting pot to multiculturalism) (Paris, 1997), 205–25. (Translations are my own.) On Theodore Roosevelt and the melting pot, see Gary Gerstle, “Theodore Roosevelt and the Divided Character of American Nationalism,” *Journal of American History*, 86 (Dec. 1999), 1280–1307.

born in revolution, based on republican, individualistic, and universal values, and committed to the proposition that all men are created equal. I have examined elsewhere the many historical, economic, political, and even ideational similarities that exist in French and American histories of immigration. Nonetheless, the cultural conclusions about immigration and national identity drawn in France have often been very different from those drawn in the United States.²

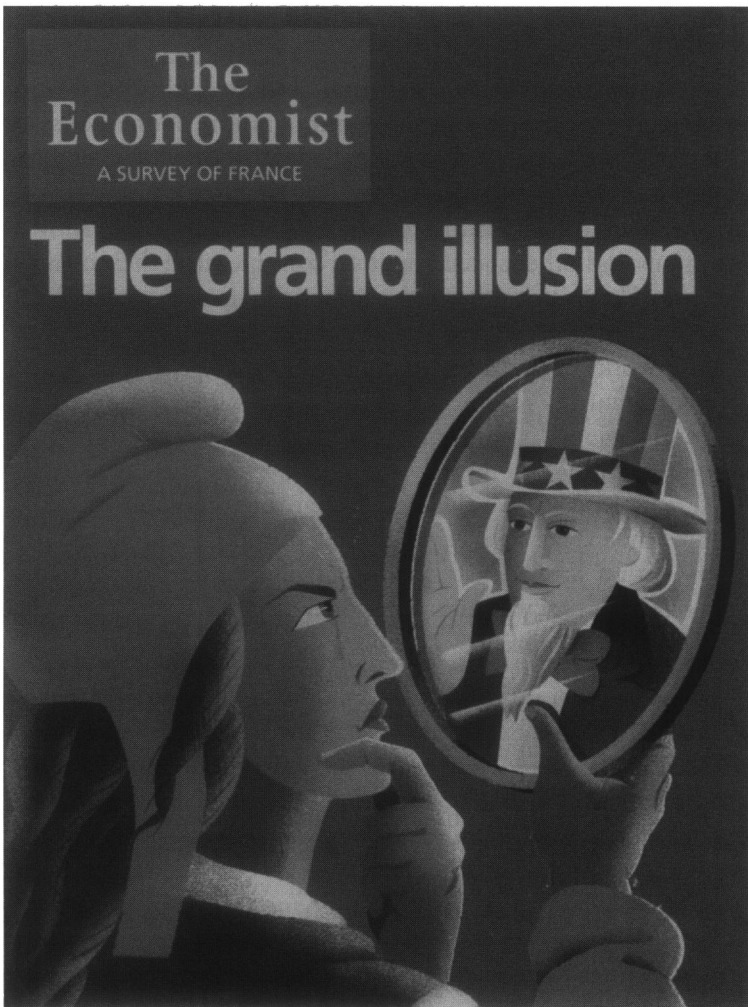
A comparative study of the historiography of immigration can show rather strikingly how historians and other social scientists conceptualize their own nations while imagining others. The historiographic comparison is not symmetrical, however. Variations on the American example loom large in a long tradition of French debates, from the works of Alexis de Tocqueville on, that use the American experience to understand France. Yet rare are American comparative reflections on other countries of immigration. In spite of John Higham's call of thirty years ago, the American history of immigration rarely contemplates the different Australian, Canadian, or French experiences. I would suggest that the internationalization of American history is already a fact . . . everywhere but in the United States. A look at how another country with a similar history conceptualizes a part of its past and does so with continual references to an American model can be a useful reminder that internationalization often starts abroad.³

As a comparative historian (and as an American living overseas) who has studied immigrant groups and national historiographies in comparative perspective, I have been interested in the comparative gaze. I have argued for the importance of comparative history while exploring the multiple contours of its practice. (The questions asked, the objects compared, and the level of analysis chosen all have an impact on the outcomes "discovered.") Both the comparisons constructed by scholars to study and those interactive comparisons—"reciprocal visions"—made by participants merit attention.⁴ It is the latter that interest me here to the extent that globally simi-

² On migration as a transnational topic, see Donna Gabaccia, "Is Everywhere Nowhere? Nomads, Nations, and the Immigrant Paradigm of United States History," *Journal of American History*, 86 (Dec. 1999), 1115–34. For examples of recent French writing on memory and history, see Suzanne Citron, *Le mythe national* (The national myth) (Paris, 1987); Pierre Nora, *Les Lieux de mémoire* (The places of memory) (7 vols., Paris, 1984–1993). For a comparison of French and American revolutionary ideals, see Elise Marienstras and Naomi Wulf, "French Translations and Receptions of the Declaration of Independence," *Journal of American History*, 85 (March 1999), 1299–1324. On the comparative French and American historiographies of immigration, see Nancy L. Green, "L'immigration en France et aux Etats-Unis: Historiographie comparée" (Immigration in France and the United States: Comparative historiography), *Vingtième Siècle* (Paris) (no. 29, Jan.–March 1991), 67–82.

³ John Higham, "Immigration," in *The Comparative Approach to American History*, ed. C. Vann Woodward (New York, 1968), 91–105; John Higham, "Current Trends in the Study of Ethnicity in the United States," *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 2 (Fall 1982), 5–15; John Higham, "Multiculturalism and Universalism," *American Quarterly*, 45 (June 1993), 195–219. On the internationalization of American history as seen from abroad, see "Toward the Internationalization of American History: A Round Table," *Journal of American History*, 79 (Sept. 1992), 432–542; "Interpreting the Declaration of Independence by Translation: A Round Table," *ibid.*, 85 (March 1999), 1279–1460; and Rob Kroes, "America and the European Sense of History," *ibid.*, 86 (Dec. 1999), 1135–55.

⁴ Nancy L. Green, "The Comparative Method and Poststructural Structuralism—New Perspectives for Migration Studies," *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 13 (Summer 1994), 3–22. For an example of a study of reciprocal visions (in this case, French views of American style and American views of French fashion), see Nancy L. Green, *Ready-to-Wear and Ready-to-Work: A Century of Industry and Immigrants in Paris and New York* (Durham, 1997), 105–33.



Cross-cultural perceptions are a game of mirrors. Here a British magazine contemplates the French (represented by Marianne in Phrygian cap) contemplating Uncle Sam.

Courtesy the Economist.

lar histories of immigration have often led participants to very different views of their meaning.

The purpose of this article is to examine how French writers have marshaled different versions of an American model in order better to elaborate variations on a French model. French reference (and a love/hate relationship) to an American model is not new and hardly confined to migration politics and history alone. (Any topic from Henry Kissinger to Mickey—Mouse or Rourke, for that matter—may do.) But in the case of migration, the debate is particularly bound up with compara-

tive notions about exceptionalism. While American exceptionalism has been defined in part by the immigrant character of the nation, one mode of French exceptionalism has been to reject the idea that France has been a country of immigration, emphasizing instead the universal character of French citizenship. In recently “discovering” a history of immigration, French scholars have turned to what they call an American model in order to work through their own ideas about immigration to France. The French references to an American model are complex, as we will see, and debate is as heated as in the United States between universalists and defenders of cultural diversity.⁵

In what follows, I will explore how the American history of immigration has been interpreted through multiple French gazes by focusing on the use of the term “melting pot.” I will begin by examining the slipperiness of the concept in the United States. The melting pot has been a moving target that has been in turn hailed, castigated, and now rediscovered by some in the United States at the end of the twentieth century. I will use the concept here to highlight the shifts over time in notions of national identity both in the United States and in France.

After noting the term’s polysemy in English, the heart of this article explores how social scientists as well as politicians have selectively imported differing definitions of American immigration history into France, at their own rhythm and within their own intellectual and political context. The French story is in two parts. We can see, first, how a French debate has been engaged about American immigration history and, second, how the interpretations of *American* immigration history emerging from that debate have been used to interpret *French* immigration history and national identity.⁶

Ultimately, the use and misuse of American history abroad can be seen as a form of transnational history. I would also argue that the French mirror is useful not just as a looking glass, but as a magnifying glass. American history as viewed from afar may exaggerate our faults and foibles, but it can also prod our own thinking on universalism and multiple identities.

⁵ For example, Christine Faure and Tom Bishop, eds., *L’Amérique des Français* (The America of the French) (Paris, 1992); Pierre Guerlain, *Miroirs transatlantiques: La France et les Etats-Unis entre passions et indifférences* (Transatlantic mirrors: France and the United States between passion and indifference) (Paris, 1996); Denis Lacorne, Jacques Rupnik, and Marie-France Toinet, eds., *L’Amérique dans les têtes: Un siècle de fascinations et d’aversions* (America on the mind: A century of fascination and aversion) (Paris, 1986); Jean-Philippe Mathy, *Extrême-Occident: French Intellectuals and America* (Chicago, 1993); Diana Pinto, “Immigration: L’ambiguïté de la référence américaine” (Immigration: The ambiguity of the American reference), *Pouvoirs* (Paris) (no. 47, 1988), 93–101; Jacques Portes, *Une fascination réticente: Les Etats-Unis dans l’opinion française, 1870–1914* (A reticent fascination: The United States in French opinion, 1870–1914) (Nancy, 1990).

⁶ I will focus less on French social scientists who specialize in the United States than on those who study France. The latter, I would argue, have more often constructed “an American model” as a foil for developing a “French model.” Those who have worked on American immigration history have, perhaps not surprisingly, a more nuanced understanding. See, for example, Sophie Body-Gendrot, “Melting-pot,” *Pluriel-recherches* (Paris) (no. 3, 1995), 47–50; Catherine Collomp, *Entre classe et nation: Mouvement ouvrier et immigration aux Etats-Unis* (Between class and nation: The labor movement and immigration to the United States) (Paris, 1998); Rachel Ertel, Geneviève Fabre, and Elise Marienstras, *En marge* (On the margins) (Paris, 1971); Lacorne, *Crise de l’identité américaine*; and François Weil, “Migrations, migrants, ethnicité” (Migrations, migrants, ethnicity), in *Chantiers d’histoire américaine* (Workshops in American history), ed. Jean Heffer and François Weil (Paris, 1994), 407–32.

American Interpretations of the American Melting Pot and National Identity

The problem with studying the migration of a notion across national boundaries is that the concept itself is not stable, either within a given place, over time, or even within a given period. As Philip Gleason pointed out perspicaciously years ago, the term "melting pot" contained a theoretical ambiguity from the start. I have argued that there have been at least five different uses of the term:

- (1) In its most basic, popular usage, the term is often simply a substitute for the history of immigration to the United States. "Melting pot" becomes shorthand for a country of immigration. That usage, curiously enough, implies diversity rather than the homogeneity inherent in the etymological root. And although that definition may be forgotten by academics today, it is still used in everyday contexts from popular parlance to multiethnic cookbooks.⁷ That definition must be kept in mind in what follows, since it is one of the first definitions used by many French observers.
- (2) More literally, the term has symbolized a process of homogenization, and it has been used as a synonym for assimilation. Yet there have been both positive and negative assessments of that process.
- (3) The initial, Zangwillian vision perceived the transformation of immigrants into Americans as positive both for the country and for the immigrants themselves. But there have been two sorts of negative assessments.
- (4) Writers such as Horace Kallen and Randolph Bourne challenged the melting pot early on, both as a play and as a concept. They did so on behalf of the immigrants, whose diversity was denied. Kallen proposed the counterconcept of "cultural pluralism," Bourne that of "trans-national America."
- (5) Conservatives such as Henry Fairchild (author of *The Melting Pot Mistake*) also criticized Zangwill's theme, disputing the value of the melting pot for the country and preferring an older ideal of Anglo-conformity.⁸

Indeed, over the last ninety years, the melting pot as idea and image has had its own career within the United States, often in conjunction with social change and evolving political climates. Zangwill's play was a success, and his catchy title defined the nation for a good half century for those who believed in a homogenizing model. In the 1960s, however, with the multiple attacks on the American nation-state, Kallen was rediscovered and Zangwill put to rest. With the ethnic revival, the latter's declamatory prose sounded naïve to anyone who reread the play and downright

⁷ Philip Gleason, "The Melting Pot: Symbol of Fusion or Confusion?," *American Quarterly*, 16 (Spring 1964), 20–46; Green, "Comparative Method and Poststructural Structuralism." The cookbook has separate chapters on cuisines from African American to Yugoslavian. Research Staff of the Institute of Texas Cultures, *Melting Pot: Ethnic Cuisine in Texas* (San Antonio, 1997). It is cited in Donna Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), 187.

⁸ Horace Kallen, "Democracy versus the Melting Pot," 1915, in Horace Kallen, *Culture and Democracy in the United States* (New York, 1924), 67–125; Randolph Bourne, "Trans-National America," *Atlantic Monthly*, 118 (July 1916), 86–97; Henry Fairchild, *The Melting Pot Mistake* (Boston, 1926); Gleason, "Melting Pot"; Philip Gleason, *Speaking of Diversity* (Baltimore, 1992); Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York, 1986), 88–99.

objectionable to those whose ancestors had not melted or, indeed, even come from Europe. By 1963 Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan had proclaimed that we had moved *Beyond the Melting Pot*.⁹

Ethnicity has mattered in the United States since the 1960s. Although early skeptics called the ethnic revival merely symbolic or mythic, it has been institutionalized in college courses, job listings and professorships, museums, and theme houses on campuses.¹⁰ From “Kiss me I’m —” buttons to ethnic studies programs, indicators have proliferated. Since the 1980s, however, two other trends, opposed to each other, have also continued the identity dynamic. On the one hand, ethnicity has often been reified with groups focusing on essentialist categories often in opposition to other groups, leading to what have become known as the “culture wars.” This more militant multiculturalism has bypassed the relatively tame cultural pluralism or transnationalism of a Kallen or a Bourne. That has led, on the other hand, to some frank nostalgia for the old, homogenizing melting pot among some scholars. Gary Nash has recently focused on the mestizo nature of American society; K. Anthony Appiah has reemphasized the extent to which there exists assimilation in the United States around common cultural references. There is a new groping for a term and a concept to combine consensus and difference. David A. Hollinger, using Werner Sollors’s term, has forcefully argued for a “postethnic America.” Mitchell Cohen has suggested the need for a “rooted cosmopolitanism.”¹¹

Thus “melting”—whether it occurred, whether it is good—remains contested. At any time, in the 1920s–1930s as in the 1960s–1990s, there have been debates

⁹ Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963). On this historiography, see Russell A. Kazal, “Revisiting Assimilation: The Rise, Fall, and Reappraisal of a Concept in American Ethnic History,” *American Historical Review*, 100 (April 1995), 437–71; and Gary Gerstle, “Liberty, Coercion, and the Making of Americans,” *Journal of American History*, 84 (Sept. 1997), 524–58. See also Alex Haley, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (New York, 1976); Michael Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics* (New York, 1977); Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (New York, 1992); and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Pan-daemonium: Ethnicity in International Politics* (New York, 1993). On the rediscovery of Kallen et al., see Olivier Zunz, “Genèse du pluralisme américain” (The genesis of American pluralism), *Annales ESC* (Paris), 42 (March–April 1987), 429–44.

¹⁰ Herbert Gans, “Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 2 (Jan. 1979), 1–20; Stephen Steinberg, *The Ethnic Myth* (Boston, 1981); Richard D. Alba, *Ethnic Identity: The Transformation of White America* (New Haven, 1990); Mary C. Waters, *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America* (Berkeley, 1990); Kathleen Conzen et al., “The Invention of Ethnicity: A Perspective from the U.S.A.,” *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 12 (Fall 1992), 3–41; Herbert Gans, “Comment: Ethnic Invention and Acculturation, a Bumpy-Line Approach,” *ibid.*, 42–52.

¹¹ For an example of strident defense of assimilation, past and future, see Peter D. Salins, *Assimilation, American Style* (New York, 1996). For more balanced references to melting and the process of Americanization, see Gary B. Nash, “The Hidden History of Mestizo America,” *Journal of American History*, 82 (Dec. 1995), 941–64. K. Anthony Appiah made this point in lectures at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris, May 17 and 19, 1999. James Barrett, “Americanization from the Bottom Up: Immigration and the Remaking of the Working Class in the United States, 1880–1930,” *Journal of American History*, 79 (Dec. 1992), 996–1020; David A. Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York, 1995); Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity*; Ewa Morawska, “In Defense of the Assimilation Model,” *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 13 (Winter 1994), 76–87. For warnings against a neonativism apparent in some of the new consensus theories, see Rudolph J. Vecoli, “Return to the Melting Pot: Ethnicity in the United States in the Eighties,” *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 5 (Fall 1985), 7–20. On the search for a middle ground, see Mitchell Cohen, “Rooted Cosmopolitanism,” *Dissent*, 39 (Fall 1992), 478–83; Mitchell Cohen, “In Defense of Shaatnez: A Politics for Jews in a Multicultural America,” in *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism*, ed. David Biale, Michael Galchinsky, and Susannah Heschel (Berkeley, 1998), 34–54.

among American intellectuals over American identity. There have been those for the melting model and those against it, those who denounce it and those who miss it. But over the century, we can also trace some long-term trends. The heyday of the melting pot seems to have lasted from 1908 to 1963, if we use Zangwill and Glazer and Moynihan as signposts, while its opposite, ethnic diversity, has predominated from the late 1960s through the early 1990s. As support for diversity has hardened in some arteries to a more reified multiculturalism, calls for a middle ground are being heard again. They imply, while rarely using the terms, notions of melting pots and assimilation, at least to a shared civic culture. Recognizing the periods in the American conceptualization of American immigration history—melting pot, ethnic revival, multiculturalism, and “postethnicity”—is important to understanding the selective importation of what the French refer to as an American model.

The American Melting Pot As Seen from France

Given the multiple meanings of the melting pot, it is not surprising that French historians and sociologists have been able to pick and choose, either by time period or by author. I would argue that the changing vision of the American melting pot, as seen from across the ocean, is a function both of this fundamental polysemy of the term in the United States, and, more important, of changing French politics and historiography. The concept of a melting pot may be an import, but it is a carefully chosen one, used as ammunition in a very French debate about France, a debate that itself has shifted over the last twenty years.

The French use of the American melting pot is twofold. First, French academics have disagreed about the definition of an American model: Is the United States a melting pot (in the fusional sense) or is it a bevy of warring communities? Second, there is the more heated debate about how fully France should follow the model, however defined. The second debate has led, as we will see, to the elaboration of a French model, defined against an American one.

French sociology and history of migration took off in the 1970s, roughly at the same time that new immigration of workers was halted (in 1974) in the wake of the oil shock and economic crisis. (Migration to unify families was still permitted.) Whereas immigrants had formerly been perceived as helping to rebuild postwar France, they were now coming to be constructed as “a problem.” The French Far Right in particular began making an anti-immigrant ideology—too many of them, too great a drain on resources, too “unassimilable”—central to its exclusionary politics. While (centrist) policy makers by and large held the line against reducing social services, plans for encouraging immigrants to return home were promulgated, and expulsions of illegal aliens increased. Most of all, the immigrant question became a prevalent feature of French political life.

It was in this period that French social scientists also turned to the question of immigration. They did so, one could argue with hindsight, in implicit and at times explicit defense of the immigrants. Historians had already begun searching for the roots of immigration in France; the presence of immigrants had already been

examined as a part of social and working-class history (without its being constructed as immigration history per se). A major research conference in 1972, several books on immigrant workers as workers, and, in the late 1980s, Yves Lequin's book *La mosaïque France* and the media attention surrounding Gérard Noiriel's *Le creuset français* helped forge a new consciousness of France as a country of immigration.¹²

In constructing this new history, French scholars perhaps inevitably discovered American immigration history. Most important, that discovery took place when the latter was in its full ethnic renaissance. The initial French view of American immigration history was thus greatly influenced by the interest in ethnic history prevalent in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s. Very quickly, this American model became a standard reference at conferences and round tables. However, just as quickly, it soon became apparent that there was no real consensus as to what that model represented. French analyses have evolved over the last twenty years from belief in an American model understood as a melting pot modified to include cultural difference to a vigorous denial of any harmonious workable model of coexistence. These assessments of the American situation have not been mere observations of the transatlantic scene; they have been articulated in discussions about whether an American model has any value for France.

The View from France – I: America Is a Melting Pot / Country of Immigration

At first, the term “melting pot” was imported and used as a simple shorthand for a country of immigration, the first of the multiple definitions mentioned above. As France rediscovered its own immigration heritage, its *creuset* (crucible or cauldron) was compared favorably to that of the more famous country of immigration. Yes, America was a melting pot / country of immigration, one whose history and historiography were to be admired.¹³ This position corresponded to a period of political agitation in the early 1980s in France on behalf of immigrants and their children. In 1983 a Marche des Beurs—a walk across France by immigrant children—made headline news. The following year a group called SOS-Racisme was founded, and in 1985 it organized an important public demonstration. It put the phrase “Touche pas à mon pote” (hands off my buddy) into the French vocabulary and defended the

¹² Yves Lequin, ed., *La mosaïque France: Histoire des étrangers et de l'immigration* (The mosaic France: A history of foreigners and immigration) (Paris, 1988); Gérard Noiriel, *Le creuset français: Histoire de l'immigration XIXe–XXe siècles* (The French crucible: A history of immigration in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) (Paris, 1988); André Kaspi and Antoine Marès, eds., *Le Paris des étrangers* (Paris of foreigners) (Paris, 1989). The 1972 round-table was published as Commission Internationale d'Histoire des Mouvements Sociaux et des Structures Sociales, *Les migrations internationales de la fin du XVIIIe siècle à nos jours* (International migrations from the late eighteenth century to the present) (Paris, 1980). For an early assertion of the importance of immigration for French labor history, see Michelle Perrot, “Les rapports des ouvriers français et des étrangers (1871–1893)” (Relations between French and foreign workers, 1871–1893), *Bulletin de la Société d'Histoire Moderne* (Paris) (no. 12, 1960), 4–9. Cf. Green, “Comparative Method and Poststructural Structuralism”; Green, “L'immigration en France et aux Etats-Unis”; and, most recently, Laurent Gervereau, Pierre Milza, and Emile Témime, eds., *Toute la France: Histoire de l'immigration en France au XXe siècle* (All of France: The history of immigration in France in the twentieth century) (Paris, 1998).

¹³ Noiriel, *Creuset français*, 19–20.

immigrants' "right to be different" in language that sounded very much like the ethnic revival breaking out of America's monolithic melting pot.¹⁴

As this implies, the term has often been used rather loosely, reflecting its basic malleability. Thus, the phrase *le melting-pot* has often been imported into France simply to define the United States (and, similarly, France) as a country of immigration that allows for persisting cultural diversity. The term "melting pot" has thus been used to defend immigrants per se and their place within France and French history. For example, the protection of one's "potes" has led to a bilingual pun used recently as the title of a neighborhood newsletter published in an urban renewal project, *Le Melting potes*. The first editorial showed how a syncretic notion of the term had evolved: "Why this name? To show the diversity of cultures among the members of our association."¹⁵

The best example of this view is the political scientist Denis Lacorne's optimistic assessment that the melting pot, in the sense of a workable cultural cohabitation, is still alive and well in the United States. In *La crise de l'identité américaine: Du melting-pot au multiculturalisme* (The crisis of American identity: From the melting pot to multiculturalism), Lacorne argues that tolerance has been a fundamental factor in American history since colonial times, that hyphenated identities are an accepted notion, that mixed marriages (and the resultant mixed offspring) are on the increase, and that, in any case, none of the ethnic separatists have a territorial basis from which to enact the logic of their position. Although he also details the negative (two long historical chapters cover nativism and xenophobia), he concludes with a positive view of a country of immigration where cultural diversity is symbolized by hot dogs, egg rolls, and tacos served at that eminently symbolic celebration of American melting: the Fourth of July.¹⁶

The View from France – II: The United States Has Not Melted at All

If for some French scholars the United States model to be emulated is a country where newcomers melt without losing their original identities, most such positive reference to an American melting pot had a relatively short political life in mid-1980s France. For others, increasingly numerous, the American model has come to mean something else, to be scorned: a frightening terrain of warring multiculturalism. Adopting this view, many French social scientists and politicians alike have increasingly criticized the American model for a decided absence of melting.

This interpretive shift must be situated within the French political context. With the Far Right's continued castigation of immigrants as unassimilated / unassimilable

¹⁴ For a history of *sos-Racisme* by one of its founders, see Harlem Désir, *Touche pas à mon pote* (Hands off my buddy) (Paris, 1987).

¹⁵ This newsletter is published in an urban renewal Project called the Cité des Provinces in Laxou, near the city of Nancy. *Le Melting potes* (no. 1, Dec. 1997).

¹⁶ Lacorne pleads for a moderate and republican multiculturalism, concluding, "The melting-pot may be in crisis, but it has not exhausted all of its resources." Lacorne's book, published in 1997, counters most 1990s interpretations, which see warring rather than melting in the American case. Lacorne rejects that frightened view of American multiculturalism. Lacorne, *Crise de l'identité américaine*, 354.



This photograph of young Maghrebis in Strasbourg taking part in an antiracist march across France in 1983 was originally published with the caption "The same situation as American Blacks in the 1960s."

Photograph by Dominique Gutekind. Courtesy Le Nouvel Observateur.

foreigners who were taking work from the French unemployed as a subtext, there were two moments in the late 1980s when French thinking moved strikingly away from a positive assessment of cultural difference. First, a heated debate over the nationality law took place in 1987. In November 1986 a law was proposed by the centrist-right government that would have increased the paper work necessary for children of immigrants to claim the French citizenship to which they were automatically entitled at their majority. Furthermore, there was talk of requiring an oath of allegiance. The proposal led to an outcry from immigrant defense groups. The symbolic meaning of an oath was hotly contested. The government, in an unusual move, appointed a Commission de la Nationalité (nationality commission) that held public, televised hearings. Questions of citizenship, integration, and cultural difference were aired. In a notable moment, the conservative historian Pierre Chaunu was visibly moved by tales of the difficulties of immigrant existence in France. He and others who had been skeptical of immigrants' ability to assimilate were impressed by hearing their spokesmen plead for the right to integrate. The direct political outcome was that the most stringent measures of the proposed law were dropped. The more subtle result,

which reverberated in the social sciences, was a shift among those sympathetic to immigrants from calls for the right to be different to calls for integration. Not long thereafter, the “scarf affair” broke out in 1989 when three adolescent Moroccan girls were expelled from school for wearing Islamic head scarves. The scarves were widely condemned, on the right and the left, as too visible a sign of religious identity that violated the separation of church and state in the public schools. Many feminists also denounced the scarves as a sign of female oppression. More generally, the affair became the symbol of a direct challenge to a certain “republican” (that is, in the tradition of the French Republic), assimilationist definition of French society and culture.¹⁷

In this context references to an American model took a sharp turn from calls for emulation to cries of castigation. The United States was no longer conceived of as a working melting pot, a model neither of fusion nor of cohabitating diversity. The Socialist Michel Rocard, prime minister at the time, referred in horror to the Anglo-Saxon multicultural cities. As reported in *Le Monde*:

According to him, France cannot be “a juxtaposition of communities.” It is a society in which “the adherence to a set of common values is primordial.” France does not have to follow the Anglo-Saxon models, which allow ethnic groups to barricade themselves within geographic and cultural ghettos, resulting in “a soft form of apartheid.”¹⁸

At the same time, another Socialist, Jean-Pierre Chevènement (then minister of defense and currently the minister of the interior leading a crackdown on undocumented foreigners), was explicit in his rejection of the American model:

Those who, for the last fifteen years, have been wanting to sell us the “right to be different” praise the charms of the “American model.” But it is not the United States they are preparing us for—assuming that that is even desirable—it is quite simply Lebanon.¹⁹

In this view, taken up in varying degrees by many social scientists, the United States was no longer defined as either a harmoniously fused melting pot or even as a working model of immigrant cohabitation, but rather a Beirut-to-be. Many French politicians, sociologists, and historians began describing the United States as a hotbed of competing communities. Indeed, much of the popular view from France has focused on American identity wars. Multiculturalism has crossed the Atlantic Ocean since the 1980s with an almost purely negative connotation, as a synonym for adver-

¹⁷ Whereas many school principals would have liked a clear court decision setting a national norm against head scarves, the supreme court handed down a more ambiguous ruling, defending private freedom of expression as well as the principle of separation of church and state. This left the issue up to individual principals, some of whom threaten girls in head scarves with expulsion, while others work out compromises with the girls and their families on a case-by-case basis. Marceau Long, *Etre français aujourd'hui et demain: Rapport de la Commission de la Nationalité* (To be French today and tomorrow: Report of the nationality commission) (2 vols., Paris, 1988); Françoise Gaspard and Farhad Khosrokhavar, *Le foulard et la république* (The head scarf and the republic) (Paris, 1995).

¹⁸ *Le Monde* (Paris), Dec. 7, 1989, p. 13.

¹⁹ David Beriss, “Scarves, Schools, and Segregation: The Foulard Affair,” *French Politics and Society*, 8 (Winter 1990), 8. See also Judith E. Vichniac, “French Socialists and *Droit à la Différence*: A Changing Dynamic,” *ibid.*, 9 (Winter 1991), 40–56.

sarial relationships, if not urban riots, to be avoided at all costs. Consequently, even such terms as “ethnicity” and “community” have come under attack by academics as reifications to be avoided. The demographer Hervé Le Bras has vigorously condemned what he calls “an obsession with origins.” Looking for roots and naming them is in itself a divisive act in this view. United States immigration history had shifted from a positive to a negative model.²⁰

What difference should it make to American historians whether the French interpret the United States as a workable model of a society historically shaped by immigration? The French analysis of an American “reality” is almost always linked to a notion of its desirability in France. The comparison is implicit if not explicit.²¹ Different “realities” associated with the American model—melting pot / country of immigration, cultural diversity, or race riots—have been enlisted to buttress optimistic or pessimistic visions of France’s own crucible. Books about French immigration refer time and again to the United States. America is thus used rhetorically and politically to interpret France. Indeed, decoding the United States is most often a way of encoding France: that France is a melting pot / country of immigration just like the United States; that the United States has renounced its literal melting pot to follow a dangerous path of diversity, which France should in no way copy; or that an American model of warring communities is not nearly as grim as some pundits like to point out and is therefore usable.

French Immigration History: Melting Pot or Not?

Although the attention surrounding Gérard Noiriel’s *Le creuset* helped bring the notion of France as a country of immigration to the fore in the late 1980s, there were both French and Australian precursors to that historiographic discovery. It was an Australian who seven years earlier explicitly used the term “melting pot” to recommend French immigration history as a subject worthy of study. In his article “Europe’s Melting Pot,” Don Dignan used the term (in its first definition) simply to highlight the fact that France was already *the* foremost country of immigration in Europe by the mid-twentieth century, well before other European countries began their guest worker programs. Dignan further argued that France’s immigration history was an understudied chapter of French history: “it is surprising, at first sight, that a country which has had an immigration experience of the same magnitude as

²⁰ Hervé Le Bras, *Le démon des origines* (The obsession with origins) (Paris, 1998). Another demographer has alternatively argued that naming prevents discrimination. Patrick Simon, “Nommer pour agir” (To name in order to act), *Le Monde* (Paris), April 28, 1993, p. 2. French anthropologists who have perceptively analyzed the exploitation of ethnic categories by colonial powers include Jean-Loup Amselle and Elikia M’Bokolo, eds., *Au cœur de l’ethnie: Ethnies, tribalismes et état en Afrique* (At the heart of ethnic definitions: Ethnic groups, tribes, and the state in Africa) (Paris, 1985); cf. Jean-Loup Amselle, *Vers un multiculturalisme français* (Toward a French multiculturalism) (Paris, 1996). Two sociology research groups interested in the more moderate aspects of American ethnicity are URMIS (Unité de Recherche Migrations et Société) and CADIS (Centre d’Analyse et d’Intervention Sociologiques).

²¹ Even Lacorne’s book, ostensibly about the United States, addresses its pertinence for France throughout. Lacorne, *Crise de l’identité américaine*.

the Australian has been so slow to address itself to the social implications of creating new Frenchmen out of foreign immigrants.”²²

There is a long history of French references to a concept of melting or explicit comparisons with United States immigration history or policy. Ernest Renan had spoken of the Frenchman as having been produced out of a “grande chaudière” (a great boiler) in his famous 1882 lecture “Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?” In 1914, Jules Mathorez was perhaps the first French historian this century to describe six centuries of foreign presence in France as a mixture of peoples. Referring to Joseph-Arthur de Gobineau in a talk given before the Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques, Mathorez set out to show how the French population originated in “a mixture of races that one finds no place else. . . . The French population is essentially sedimentary [*alluvionnaire*].” Presumably independently of Zangwill, he arrived at the same metaphor; there was no doubt about “the marvelous crucible [*creuset*] that is old France.” Mathorez went on to write a series of short studies of Armenians, Bohemians, Dutch, German Catholics, Greeks, Irish, Italians, Polish exiles, Saracens, Scottish intellectuals, Moors, Turks, Russians, and Spaniards in France from the late Middle Ages to the nineteenth century.²³

By the interwar period, French legislators were contemplating the American example. French politicians used the American quota laws in their arguments concerning the need for strict selection upon entry; a serious health inspection policy; a national immigration office linked to the naturalization service; preference for agricultural workers (in 1924); prohibition on the entry of illiterates; and expulsion of those whose papers were not in order. There was a general recognition that the French could not slavishly copy those United States strictures, but many wished parliament would take inspiration from them.²⁴

Interwar France was economically and demographically quite different from the United States, and French immigration policy in the 1920s was the opposite of American policy. While the United States was closing its borders through the quota acts of 1921 and 1924, France was opening its doors wide through bilateral labor agreements with other European countries, neighboring and distant. To be sure, there was often a racial discourse in French literature similar to the logic of triage behind the American closure acts. As one Radical Republican deputy argued:

Without being hostile, on principle, to the assimilation of Asians or Africans, without feeling toward them the rude hostility that is prevalent in the United

²² Don Dignan, “Europe’s Melting Pot: A Century of Large-Scale Immigration into France,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 4 (April 1981), 137–52, esp. 151. See also Gary Cross, *Immigrant Workers in Industrial France: The Making of a New Laboring Class* (Philadelphia, 1983).

²³ Ernest Renan, *Qu’est-ce qu’une nation? Et autres essais politiques* (What is a nation? And other political essays) (Paris, 1992), 48; Jules Mathorez, *La pénétration des étrangers en France* (The penetration of foreigners into France) (Paris, 1914), 5, 18.

²⁴ Jean-Charles Bonnet, *Les Pouvoirs publics et l’immigration dans l’entre-deux-guerres* (The state and immigration in the interwar period) (Lyons, 1976), 114–15. See, for example, a work by a former high commissioner for immigration and naturalization: Charles Lambert, *La France et les étrangers* (France and foreigners) (Paris, 1928), 95–100. See also Marcel Paon, *L’immigration en France* (Immigration in France) (Paris, 1926), 8, 17–18, 85–106.

States, we believe that in fact such a mixture is not desirable. The aim of any policy to renovate the French race must above all set out to assimilate similar individuals.²⁵

There were long discussions distinguishing which groups were more likely successfully to assimilate into France and should therefore be preferred as immigrants. Yet in spite of a comparable rhetoric on the desirability of some groups over others, no nations-based quota system was ever introduced in France. American immigration policy had its limits as a model; exclusion (“rude hostility”) through a quota law was eschewed.

Shortly after World War II, two political commentators explicitly rejected the American model from another point of view. In a work sympathetic to immigrants, François Nourissier and Alain Pillepich wrote:

[The American model does not apply to us] who pose the problem of welcome and assimilation at the level of European values and in the context of the French nation. This effervescence of young countries, this human warmth of the *melting pot* [in English with italics], the great demographic dynamism, that confidence in the future, all of which have made the United States what it is, are linked to circumstances that are far removed from those of Europe in 1951. Nothing is more foreign to us than that ease of transformation, that sociological dialectic of successive immigrations and their assimilation, which will remain in the history of the last century as a magnificent and isolated phenomenon. That is why the American example illustrates nothing at all for us.²⁶

Nourissier and Pillepich criticized the American melting pot as both unlikely to occur in Europe and too much of a one-way street. They went on to explain that they preferred the term stabilizing (*stabiliser*) to dissolving (*dissoudre*) the newcomer into the host society, and they proposed a rerooting or transplantation (*ré-enracinement*) of the immigrant, in a sort of Kallenian critique that, however, found little echo in France.²⁷

When in 1988 the historians Gérard Noiriel and Yves Lequin argued forcefully in two different books that France does indeed have a long history of immigration, from ancient times to the present, neither would use an American term in his title, but both have indicated to me that *le melting-pot* was in their minds.²⁸ The reference to the American history of immigration was by now explicit in any treatment of the subject. Nonetheless, the term “melting pot” remained ambiguous. In his preface to the 1988 volume edited by Lequin, Pierre Goubert wrote:

no more than the United States, where everyone recognizes and claims his origins, was France ever a marvelous *melting-pot* [in English with italics]; even at the third generation, those who came from elsewhere have rarely forgotten their roots, and, if need be, they are reminded of them. . . . the French today, often so proud of

²⁵ Lambert, *France et les étrangers*, 75.

²⁶ François Nourissier and Alain Pillepich, *L'Enracinement des immigrés* (Immigrants taking root) (Paris, 1951), 224.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 225–26.

²⁸ Noiriel, *Creuset français*; Lequin, ed., *Mosaïque France*.

their roots, have all come from a multitude of peoples who have mingled as often as they have slit one another's throats.²⁹

In his favorable review of Lequin's book, which labeled France a mosaic, André Burguière mixed melting pot and quilt in his description of those who had helped make France:

The reality is a complex and chaotic succession of migrations, some peaceful, others warlike, where the barbarian of yesterday, once in power, quickly became the defender of the Empire against the new invaders: an incredible melting-pot [no italics] in which you would have a hard time finding the trace of your blue-eyed Burgund ancestor or your far-removed flat-headed Gascon cousin [typical French stereotypes]. The biological mixing has been intense, but the cultural *mélange* has not really taken. . . . these peoples who came from all over have woven an extraordinary Harlequin coat of family, culinary, linguistic, and folkloric traditions, which still today make up the extreme diversity of the French landscape.³⁰

Le melting-pot, creuset, mosaïque, manteau d'arlequin. There is some question as to the implications of a term chosen. There may be purely functional considerations: the French language abhors repetition, and French editors, like editors everywhere, have their ideas about catchy titles. But there may be more substantive issues. For Dignan, the use of an English term to designate a French reality suggested that the French word *creuset* rendered the idea imperfectly. (He did not elaborate this point.) For Eric Fassin, a French sociologist long resident in the United States, however, the use of a foreign term revealed that the concept itself seemed alien, specific to the United States, from whence it came. Yet the term has been incorporated, as *le melting-pot*, and it has sometimes even lost its quotation marks. Lacorne, perhaps defiantly, dropped them when using the term in French. What better way to underscore the feasibility of incorporating the term, both as word and as concept, into the French language and spirit?³¹

The Melting Pot as France: Emergence of a French Model

The republican model of integration, to which France is profoundly attached, retains a considerable force of attraction, in spite of increasing difficulties. Doesn't it represent the sole alternative to the chaos and barbarity that would result from an unbridled multiculturalism imported from the United States?

—Back cover of French book, 1996³²

²⁹ Pierre Goubert, "Préface," in *Mosaïque France*, ed. Lequin, 12–13.

³⁰ André Burguière, "Des inconnus dans la maison" (Strangers in the house), *Le Nouvel Observateur*, Dec. 15–21, 1988, pp. 115–17.

³¹ Dignan, "Europe's Melting Pot," 150n.1; Eric Fassin, "La France des immigrants" (The immigrants' France), *French Politics and Society*, 7 (Spring 1989), 50–62, esp. 51; Lacorne, *Crise de l'identité américaine*; René Gallissot, "Creuset," *Pluriel-Recherches* (Paris) (no. 5, 1997), 46–49.

³² These first lines on the back cover of Michel Wieviorka's *Une société fragmentée?* strikingly set up an opposition between France and America, although the book itself then goes on to explore a middle ground between these two models. Michel Wieviorka, ed., *Une société fragmentée? Le multiculturalisme en débat* (A fragmented society? The debate about multiculturalism) (Paris, 1996).

Ultimately, there may be debate about the reality and desirability of an American model—whether of harmonious coexistence or identity wars—but it has had one important function: to help the French construct a French model. While references to an American model have largely shifted from the positive to the negative, French writing on immigration has perhaps come of age with its corollary assertion of its own identity. A French model has emerged that distances itself from what is perceived as rampant American “communitarianism,” the entrenchment of separate communities. Constructed in contradistinction to the American one, the French model ultimately claims to do better what many Americanizers have set out to do: create a melting pot.

Historians and sociologists have thus stressed the specificity of the French case, almost always in comparative perspective. Pointing to the higher per capita levels of immigration to France than to the United States in the 1930s and the 1960s, Noiriel has asserted that, “contrary to much common opinion, the immigration question has been more important, economically, socially, and politically [in France], for at least a half century, than in the United States.” The difference between the two models is due to several factors, according to Noiriel, including the fact that the French nation was already formed before mass migration occurred, whereas the creation of the United States was consubstantial with immigration. Drawing on Norbert Elias’s theory of the civilization of manners, Noiriel also claims that the French model of assimilation of foreigners can be traced to the aristocracy’s incorporation of bourgeois values and vice versa. As against André Siegfried and others, he argues that the American immigration tradition is the “archaic” one characteristic of all young and empty countries that need immigration to populate them, in contrast to the French pattern, which “illustrates the first example in the world of a ‘modern’ type of immigration, that is, one aimed at satisfying the needs of an industrial system rather than one destined to populate.” Whether or not those comparisons hold up on issues of timing or substance, Noiriel has helped put the assimilationist French model on the agenda, arguing that that model has created the more successful melting pot in the etymological, fusional sense of the term. It is the Americans who should look to the Old World for a model rather than the other way around.³³

Finally, most French historians and sociologists have emphasized the republican nature of French society, dating from the French Revolution. The state’s protection of individual liberty, theoretically brooking no intermediary groups and rejecting any form of quotas, characterizes the French model.³⁴ The sociologist Dominique Schnapper has been a particularly ardent exponent of this form of the French para-

³³ Noiriel, *Creuset français*, 21, 334, 341, 338, 339, 344. Other interpretations, on the contrary, link late-nineteenth-century American immigration to industrialization and immigration to France in the same period to population concerns. See, for example: Fassin, “France des immigrés,” 54–55; Lequin, ed., *Mosaïque France*; and Nancy L. Green, “Filling the Void”: Immigration to France before World War I,” in *Labor Migration in the Atlantic Economies*, ed. Dirk Hoerder (Westport, 1985), 143–61.

³⁴ This commonplace of French political theory, often used to contrast France with the United States, does not satisfactorily account for the roles of trade unions, religious consistories, and a proliferation of mutual aid societies and other organizations.

digm. She emphasizes that the making of modern France has been an act of political will and that the social contract minimizes the importance of blood ties. This widespread argument stresses that the incorporation of foreigners as individuals has worked relatively smoothly due to the importance of voluntary identification with the French polity rather than essentialist references to ethnic origins.³⁵

I have alluded to the specific political context for the elaboration of a French melting pot model. The short period of defense of immigrants' right to be different in the early 1980s was followed by a retrenchment to an emphasis on integration. Positions crystallized by the late 1980s as migration experts divided into those defending difference (a minority) and those insisting on republican integration. Sociologists (such as Schnapper) and historians (such as Chaunu) were on the Commission de la Nationalité that in 1988 published its report *Etre Français aujourd'hui et demain* (To be French today and tomorrow). The Haut Conseil à l'Intégration (high-level committee on integration) was subsequently set up in 1990. Confronted with the threatened change in the law on the status of children born in France to immigrant parents as well as the continually escalating xenophobia of the Far Right, a new immigrant defense group emerged that represented a shift in tactics. France-Plus began calling for integration rather than using slogans emphasizing difference.³⁶

In a recent book, the demographer Michèle Tribalat marshaled the resources of the official demographic institute (Institut National d'Etudes Démographiques, INED) to prove the successful French transformation "from immigration to assimilation." Stating that ethnic origins are "at the core of personality development" and underlining the importance of the "ethnic variable," Tribalat nonetheless concluded:

In France, the "assimilatory model" is secular and egalitarian in its very principle and is founded on the autonomy of the individual in relation to the state. The creation of intermediary bodies based on community groupings is therefore antagonistic to the French model.³⁷

As seen from across the Atlantic, then: the melting pot is dead (in the United States); long live the melting pot (in France).

³⁵ Noiriel, *Creuset français*, 333–38; Dominique Schnapper, *La France de l'intégration* (The France of integration) (Paris, 1991); Dominique Schnapper, *La relation à l'autre: Au coeur de la pensée sociologique* (The relation to the other: At the core of sociological thought) (Paris, 1998). Françoise Lorcerie has criticized the implicit republicanist assimilationism of many contemporary social scientists in Françoise Lorcerie, "Les sciences sociales au service de l'identité nationale" (The social sciences at the service of national identity), in *Cartes d'identité: Comment dit-on "nous" en politique* (Identity cards: How do we say "we" in politics), ed. Denis-Constant Martin (Paris, 1994), 245–81.

³⁶ Long, ed., *Etre français aujourd'hui et demain*; Haut Conseil à l'Intégration, *Pour un modèle français d'intégration: Premier rapport annuel* (For a French model of integration: First annual report) (Paris, 1991). For a general history of French immigration politics, see Patrick Weil, *La France et ses étrangers* (France and her foreigners) (Paris, 1991); and Vichniac, "French Socialists and *Droit à la Différence*."

³⁷ Michèle Tribalat, *De l'immigration à l'assimilation* (From immigration to assimilation) (Paris, 1996), 254; Michèle Tribalat, ed., *Cent ans d'immigration: Étrangers d'hier, Français d'aujourd'hui* (One hundred years of immigration: Foreign yesterday, French today) (Paris, 1991). Although, as an American, I have read Tribalat as an assimilationist, she has been fiercely attacked in France for her use of ethnic categories as . . . racist. See, for example, Le Bras, *Démon des origines*.

And What about Race?

Finally, there is one category that—from an American perspective—has been conspicuously absent from most French discourse about minorities: race. As the sociologist Emmanuel Todd has repeatedly insisted: the United States has a major problem with race, France does not. American historians who have attempted to address the issue of race (like that of ethnicity) in France have often been roundly criticized for importing American categories.³⁸

American views about race in France have varied over time. African Americans who sojourned in France were perhaps the most engaged in a comparative analysis of French racism. As Tyler Stovall and Michel Fabre have shown, many of the black (and white) soldiers sent to France during World War I were surprised at the relative racial tolerance they noted on French streets and in Parisian cafés. The black Americans were delighted; many white soldiers and later interwar tourists were scandalized. The several hundred African American writers and musicians who lived in Paris during the interwar period furthermore benefited from the French fascination with jazz and Josephine Baker. Yet post–World War II France and increasing awareness of French colonialism have brought French race relations and discrimination against Africans and North Africans in France into sharper perspective. William B. Cohen's important *The French Encounter with Africans* was published in the United States in 1980. When it was translated into French, Emmanuel Todd wrote a scathing review claiming that Cohen was thrusting an American concept onto French history.³⁹

For many years, the majority of French researchers simply ignored the subject of racism in France. Only a handful of French social scientists have more recently confronted racism and discrimination; they point to the fallacy in a color-blind belief that all citizens are equal before the law and in the labor market.⁴⁰ For the most part, however, French researchers have insisted that racism is a peculiarly American institution, which is absent in republican France. They have rightly castigated American racism but have further used it both as a contrast to a French (nonracist) model and as a warning about the dangers of an American model. From group identities to multiculturalism to identity wars to actual street fighting: race riots are often seen as the logical end point on a perilous continuum. American racism represents the epitome of the American model *not* to be followed.

³⁸ A major proponent of the no-racism-here school is Emmanuel Todd, *Le destin des immigrés: Assimilation et ségrégation dans les démocraties occidentales* (The destiny of immigrants: Assimilation and segregation in the Western democracies) (Paris, 1994).

³⁹ Tyler Stovall, *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light* (Boston, 1996); Michel Fabre, *From Harlem to Paris* (Urbana, 1991); Philippe Dewitte, *Les mouvements noirs en France pendant l'entre-deux-guerres* (Negritude movements in France during the interwar period) (Paris, 1985); William B. Cohen, *The French Encounter with Africans: White Response to Blacks, 1530–1880* (Bloomington, 1980); Emmanuel Todd, "Français et Africains: Les Noirs dans le regard des Blancs, 1530–1880" (French and Africans: Blacks in the eyes of whites, 1530–1880), *Le Monde* (Paris), Feb. 19, 1982, p. 16.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Philippe Bataille, *Le racisme au travail* (Racism in the workplace) (Paris, 1997); Véronique De Rudder, Christian Poiret, and François Vourc'h, *Reconnaître les discriminations: Ethnicisme et racisme en acte* (Recognizing discrimination: Ethnicism and racism as daily acts) (Paris, forthcoming); René Gallissot, *Misère de l'antiracisme: Racisme et identité nationale, le défi de l'immigration* (The poverty of antiracism: Racism and national identity, the challenge of immigration) (Paris, 1985); and Michel Wieviorka, *La France raciste* (Racist France) (Paris, 1992).

On Transnational History

In 1930, France had a higher per capita number of foreign-born than the United States. But American historians and sociologists who study American immigration are little aware of this figure and have remained largely indifferent to the view from the other side of the looking glass. When an article of Schnapper's defending the French melting pot was translated and published in an early issue of the journal *Diaspora*, it was introduced by the editors as a polemical essay that would "startle" the readers of a journal generally opposed to melting pot theories. Noiriel's Franco-American comparisons have also elicited skepticism in some American journals.⁴¹ There are, of course, American historians, sociologists, and political scientists who have studied immigration to France. But what is of interest here is whether American analysts of the United States are at all interested in comparison in order better to understand an "American model." The imbalance is striking. American historians of American immigration, unlike French historians of French immigration, have rarely contemplated the case across the Atlantic. American categories are internally produced and certainly provide lively enough debate as it is. Is there a point in getting a second opinion? Clearly, my answer is yes. American history is already being written abroad by specialists well versed in our historiography and debates as well as by non-specialists who, using implicit or explicit comparisons, sometimes create powerful images. We need to investigate such extraterritorial uses of American history, perhaps to rectify, more modestly to understand.

With regard to melting pots and multiculturalism, there are perhaps three readings of the French use of an American model that may be useful to an American audience. My own first reading of the French literature stresses the differences and hears the dissonance in many French interpretations of American history. The Franco-American comparative perspective certainly has something to provoke high blood pressure on either side: French exasperation with American racial categories, quotas, and obsession with ethnicity; American eye rolling at the insistence of the French that there is no way they can count ethnic groups and impatience that they cannot accept a little diversity. We may think they are intolerant when excluding head scarves; they counter that no one is more racist than Americans. The French emphasis on American communitarianism as opposed to French individual rights may seem odd to Americans used to copious references to individualism in American society. The vision from abroad of chaos and barbarity may make even the most pessimistic American defend a sense of unity rather than disunity.

Yet even if use is misuse, a second interpretation of the dissonance, as I have argued above, is that it emerges, after all, from an internal French debate. To the extent that it can be understood as a story more relevant to French history and politics than to American, it may not be of great matter to readers of the *Journal of American History*.

⁴¹ Dominique Schnapper, "A Host Country of Immigrants That Does Not Know Itself," *Diaspora*, 1 (Winter 1991), 353–63; "In This Issue," *ibid.*, 232. For a review of *Le Creuset français*, see Jeremy Hein, "The French Melting Pot," *American Journal of Sociology*, 102 (May 1997), 1751–73. Fassin, "France des immigrés."

However, beyond Franco-American differences of interpretation and internal French politics, a third reading, more attentive to similarities, offers a cautionary tale to American historians. The French discourse on immigrants and immigration history may exaggerate their universalism and our culture wars, their individual rights and our group rights. But it is via that magnifying glass that we can examine both ends of the spectrum and recent calls for a middle ground. Indeed, immigration has taken place in both countries within the context of inherently complex systems both of which appeal to individual rights. I have argued that the French and American histories of immigration are in fact closer than most of the historiographic and sociological analyses of them would lead us to believe. If the discursive models have diverged, and if the American example has become a rhetorical device helpful in constructing French national identity, both countries comprise within their politics and histories universalist discourses *and* discriminatory practices. Both have long histories of patchwork populations, tensions at the seams, and common colors.

Ultimately, the comparative study of (themselves migrating) concepts can lead to two historiography-prodding conclusions: the possibility of ethnicizing or racializing French historiography; the necessity of reintegrating issues of the republican whole into the more fragmented American historiography of minority groups. Yet, in both cases, neither the historical theme of individual rights nor that of diversity need be sacrificed.

Finally, an examination of the comparative gaze has several more general implications for the doing of history. First, the choice of comparison in itself has an impact on both the argument and the conclusions. As we have seen, comparative questions are often asymmetrical. French sociologists and historians much more frequently compare France to the United States than do American writers. In analyzing the French situation, French scholars have also undertaken other comparisons. Schnapper has qualified the United States (like the Antilles and Africa) as a “rigid plural society” in comparison with Latin America, a “flexible plural society.” But she has also contrasted all immigrant-based nations overseas with “the old” European nation-states generally and with the French model of integration more specifically. Didier Lapeyronnie contrasts British and French rhetoric—the French rejecting the British “communitarian” logic, the British disdaining the French “assimilationist model”—only to conclude that their political and social practices are more alike than dissimilar. With regard to France and the United States, Eric Fassin ultimately concludes that the difference is less between the history of the two countries than between two discourses, one more pluralist, the other more unitary.⁴² Each comparison—with the United States, Latin America, Great Britain, Germany, or anywhere else—can be used to bring forth specific, distinct points regarding the French case.

Second, although much attention has been given recently to the historical invention of national identities from within, a comparative perspective can show how

⁴² Schnapper, *Relation à l'autre*, 231–35; Schnapper, *France de l'intégration*, 88–104; Didier Lapeyronnie, *L'individu et les minorités: La France et la Grande-Bretagne face à leurs immigrés* (Individuals and minorities: France and Great Britain and their immigrants) (Paris, 1993); Fassin, “France des immigrés,” 57.

national images are also constructed in relation to external references. Models can be held up for emulation just as they can be castigated and used to emphasize independence.⁴³ When Tocqueville came back from the United States with a book about the American system in particular and about democracy in general, his was already a comparative (emulating) vision implying certain prescriptions for France. French views of the American melting pot and multiculturalism have a similar comparative (yet castigating) function today. Insofar as American models are used abroad, they are often used as foils within other national debates about everything from the economy to national identity. Understanding the use of such models implies a form of transnational history that goes beyond the national in order better to understand and critique it.

Third, to study a concept as it travels abroad can help sharpen our understanding of the uses of historical categories and the relationship between history and politics. Historical interpretations are affected by contemporary concerns. Politicians draw on historical references to make points. It is perhaps easier to see how politics and history use each other across the Atlantic than at home.

Finally, a transnational examination of American-born concepts can also urge us to contemplate the reverse. How have we used and constructed other countries' histories within our own writings? To what extent have American historians used, say, industrialization, class relations, or socialism in other countries in order to help construct the specificity of an American model?

The internationalization of American history, as done abroad, offers a sobering mirror on the wall. The excesses of the Other's views of our excesses must give pause. But above all, the looking glass should be a call to modesty rather than to who's-the-fairest-one-of-all.

⁴³ See, for example, Alice Kessler-Harris, "In the Nation's Image: The Gendered Limits of Social Citizenship in the Depression Era," *Journal of American History*, 86 (Dec. 1999), 1251–79.