

WHAT IS IT TO BECOME FRENCH ? NATURALIZATION AS A REPUBLICAN RITE OF INSTITUTION

Didier Fassin et Sarah Mazouz

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Didier FASSIN
Sarah MAZOUZ

What Is it to Become French? Naturalization as a Republican Rite of Institution*

ABSTRACT

There are two thrusts to French immigration policy: restricting new arrivals and, simultaneously, facilitating access to French nationality. In the recent period, the public authorities have focused closely on naturalization, and this has led to a significant increase in number of persons naturalized French, and to the development of a solemn ceremony for conferring on them the certificate officializing their new status. On the basis of a three-year study conducted in the Paris region, we show that naturalization may be considered as a rite of passage that transforms the foreigner into a citizen after a long selection test, whose positive outcome is then celebrated by an integration ceremony. Above all, it may be considered as a rite of institution that brings about a dual separation: among immigrants who are candidates for citizenship, the test distinguishes those deemed worthy of joining the national community, but the ceremony also differentiates *within* the nation those who came from elsewhere. The ambiguity of naturalization thus inheres in the fact that at the moment it produces sameness, it introduces otherness, as is brought to light by a comparison of the celebrations observed in the state administration of the prefecture with those observed in municipalities. Nevertheless, the ritual is a performative act that brings into existence what it utters and ties the national community together through the promise of a genuine contract.

“What is it to be French?” asks Patrick Weil (2005) in a work retracing “the history of French citizenship”. For this question, which Weil answers in primarily legal terms, we would like to substitute another, sociological one: **What is it to become French?** In other words, what is involved for a foreigner in acquiring French citizenship, and what is involved for the state in granting

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it? To answer this question, we will consider a particular process: naturalization. There are several ways of acquiring French citizenship, including through marriage (four years after marrying a French person) and by birth (if one is born in France to foreign parents who are legally residing on French territory when one reaches legal age). In these situations, as in others concerning children adopted by a French person or with one naturalized parent, obtaining French citizenship is a right; the person is either declared or decreed French, and only exceptionally can this change in status be contested. Naturalization is different: the foreigner expresses his or her wish to become French, and the public authority has discretionary power to grant or refuse that request. As the Conseil d'État (the state's highest administrative jurisdiction) has repeatedly recalled (namely in the Abecassis ruling of March 30, 1984), meeting the various conditions required by the *Code de la nationalité* [Citizenship code] does not grant a person a "right" to be naturalized; naturalization remains a "favor" in connection with which "the administration has broad evaluation powers". The "acceptability criteria" that an applicant for French citizenship must meet, as defined in Article 21 of the *Code civil* [Civil code], constitute necessary but in no way sufficient conditions. Naturalization in France therefore results from the encounter between a personal wish and state sovereignty.

This process –during which complex relations develop between the state, the nation, and its immigrants, since it is on this occasion that the public authorities decide what proportion of the immigrant population is to be integrated into the national community– is one that the French government has recently shown new interest in. First, greater numbers of people have been granted French nationality through naturalization. In the 1970s and 1980s, an average of barely 20,000 foreigners were naturalized annually. That number rose in the late 1990s, reaching 56,000 in 2004 –the highest figure in more than half a century. Second, collective ceremonies have been instituted for conferring naturalization certificates on approved applicants. In compliance with a 1993 interministerial circular urging prefects [state representatives at the *département* level] to hold such ceremonies in the prefectures –a circular whose content was reiterated in 2004 in application legislation authorizing prefects to delegate the organization of such ceremonies to the municipal level– 77,900 adults partook in such ceremonies in 62 prefectures and a number of city halls between February 2004 and July 2005.

These two related developments reflect the new importance the state attributes to this mode of acquiring French citizenship. First, the increase in number of new citizens indicates a shift in French policy for "integrating immigrants" –"integration" that Gérard Noiriel (1988, p. 341) describes as a euphemized form of "social assimilation": naturalization has become the favored instrument of such assimilation, at precisely the moment the state is applying tighter immigration controls to reduce the number of new arrivals. Second, staging the event in a ceremony reflects a concern to turn the moment at which the person's legal status changes into a "republican welcoming ritual", to quote Jean-Philippe Moinet (2006, p. 7), writing in a report

commissioned by the special minister in charge of social cohesion and parity. These two developments actualize and exalt the idea of a “*nation à la française*” founded on a contract (*jus soli*). Dominique Schnapper (1991), among others, has contrasted this to the “German-style nation”, based on belonging (*jus sanguinis*). France is thus understood to integrate its immigrants and their children –the first through naturalization, the second through *jus soli*– by facilitating their access to French citizenship but also by conferring symbolic value on the moment they join the French nation.

But above and beyond this image and the rhetoric that produces it while seeming merely to describe it, what is at issue in French naturalization policies? Consider the two facts we have just recalled; *i.e.*, increasing the number of naturalizations while restricting new immigration, and “consecrating” the event through a ceremony celebrating the new citizen’s entry into the nation. The conjunction of the two is significant. It says that France’s integration policy rests on two pillars; *i.e.*, reducing the number of immigrants by controlling immigration flows, and reducing the number of foreigners in France by legally assimilating them. But it is also performative, creating categories by naming them –starting with “the naturalized”, who are distinguished from both foreigners who do not have access to the national community and French people who did not have to choose their nationality because they possessed it at birth.

This was clearly expressed by the prefect of the *département* of the Hauts-de-Seine in a speech he delivered during a naturalization ceremony: “In requesting French citizenship, you have expressed the desire to adhere to the fundamental values of the Republic and the rules of democracy. Some of you come from countries where, traditionally, inequality between men and women is the rule. You have now chosen your society. The fact that your request was accepted shows that you have sufficiently adopted the lifestyle and customs of our country –not to the point where you entirely resemble native French people [*Français de souche*], yet enough so that you feel at ease among us. You are the tie between foreign communities and people of French origin.”

A double dividing line can be discerned in this speech (similar to many others heard during these celebrations): one between before and after naturalization, which is therefore also a dividing line between the “new French people” and “foreign communities” that have not made or were not permitted to make the same “choice of a society”; and another one between “you” and “us” that separates the naturalized from “native French people”, whom they do not “entirely resemble”. An internal memo at the prefecture where we did our study designates the naturalization ceremony as a “rite of passage”. This term must be taken seriously. The expression, originally from ethnological literature, is here used with its common meaning of going through a ritual that “passes” an individual from one state to another and consecrates this passage.

When Arnold Van Gennep ([1909] 1960, p. 3, p. 18, p. 31) identified a set of “ceremonies whose essential purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another which is equally well defined”, he included “rites incorporating a stranger” into the society that receives him, but

added that these are preceded by “rites of separation” that mark the fact that the traveller is distancing himself from his group of origin. According to Van Gennep, “rites of passage” start with separation from the community one is leaving and end with incorporation into the community one enters, with a lapse of time between the two, during which the individual “wavers between two worlds” –what the author calls a “transition”. From this perspective, the ceremony in the French prefecture actually only condenses a much longer period, ranging from the moment a foreigner requests and is given a naturalization application to the moment he or she is awarded a certificate of French citizenship. For persons acquiring French citizenship, the rite of passage encompasses the test they are subjected to and by means of which they are separated from their group of origin (*i.e.*, one of the “foreign communities” mentioned by the prefect, though they may in some cases keep that first nationality) and ultimately incorporated into the receiving society (*i.e.*, the one made up of “native French people”, which they will never entirely be an integral part of). The ceremony of being “welcomed into the Republic”, as it is often called, presents a shortened version of this test or ordeal, namely in the brief speech by a state representative, which can be seen as expounding the meaning of that ordeal. Questioned on this point, a just-naturalized person explained: “The speech as it was here is just a brief word to say that your procedure was long but you have to understand why.” It is precisely this “why” that we seek to apprehend here by inquiring into the meaning of this rite.

It is useful to recall Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis ([1982, p. 48] 1991, pp. 117-118): “With the notion of rites of passage, Arnold Van Gennep named, indeed described a social phenomenon of great importance. I do not believe that he did much more... In fact, it seems to me that in order to develop the theory of rites of passage any further, one has to ask the questions that this theory does not raise, and in particular those regarding the *social* function of ritual and the social significance of the boundaries or limits which the ritual allows one to pass over or transgress in a lawful way. One can ask oneself whether, by stressing the temporal transition, [...] this theory does not conceal one of the essential effects of the rite, namely that of separating those who have undergone it, not from those who have not yet undergone it, but from those who will not undergo it in any sense, and thereby instituting a lasting difference between those to whom the rite pertains and those to whom it does not pertain.” According to Bourdieu, it is in this perspective that we can speak of “rites of institution”, whose purpose is to “consecrate or legitimate an *arbitrary* boundary by fostering a misrecognition of the arbitrary nature of the limit and encouraging a recognition of it as legitimate”. The example he cited was circumcision, which not only distinguishes non-circumcized children from circumcized adults (*i.e.*, a before from an after) but also boys and men, who can be circumcized, from girls and women, who will never be circumcized (*i.e.*, an inside from an outside). For Bourdieu, then, the difference between the sexes, while being inscribed in nature of course, is legitimated and consecrated by ritual, with the result that the entirely arbitrary

social consequences of that difference in terms of respective degrees of power and authority no longer appear arbitrary.

With regard to naturalization, there is of course nothing arbitrary about individual decisions to request citizenship, and there is certainly nothing arbitrary in state decisions to grant it. The first is voluntary: it is the right of any foreigner to request French citizenship. The second is discretionary: it is in the state administration's power to rule on whether a person can obtain such citizenship –and until recently, it did not even have to furnish the reasons for its decision. Though today it is required to give those reasons, state agents still have a great deal of maneuvering room when it comes to interpreting a notion as essential as “assimilation” in connection with a given naturalization application. However, at the collective level, the years-long ordeal that applicants go through legitimates a dividing line that is then consecrated by the citizenship-awarding ceremony; a dividing line between citizens and foreigners, a line inscribed as a sort of obvious natural fact (as suggested by the very word “naturalization”) that is really only the product of conventions that have accumulated over time. This becomes obvious if we consider the wide variations in how naturalization criteria have been defined over history and in diverse national contexts. By presenting the matter as indeed natural, French authorities efface the conventional –rather than arbitrary– dimension of naturalization.

We therefore have to attend not so much to what the ritual institutes as to the people it separates from each other, and we observe that these people belong to two quite distinct categories whose meaning differs in connection with the meaning of naturalization. The first category is made up of persons who acquire French citizenship as a right: through marriage or birth, as an adopted person or the child of a new citizen. These persons are not (and to this date have never been) included in the ceremony. By contrast, the public authorities stress that “the naturalized” have been granted a legal “favor” and that conferring citizenship on persons who request it is a sovereign act. The second group is made up of persons who do not have to acquire French citizenship because they have had it since birth and therefore appear “naturally” French. Not only do they not have to be naturalized, but because they are native French people and incarnate the nation (“we” as opposed to “you”), they can actually be thought of as the group that grants naturalization to others. In other words, in the second category the sovereignty of the state is affirmed, while in the first, the identity of the nation is recalled. As for “those who have not yet undergone” the rite, they are often identified with the “foreign communities” of people who come from places where laws other than those of the Republic are in effect (countries where “inequality between men and women is the rule”). It is precisely these ties that have to be broken in order for the person to become integrated into the nation and its values. And it is the presumably long amount of time required for this liberation (separation) and this appropriation (incorporation) to occur that justifies the considerable amount of time the procedure takes (transition). Through a series of stagings and speeches –a slide show presented to new citizens and their

relatives, the speech delivered by a representative of the state— the final ceremony reflects and reiterates this game of distinctions.

It is this naturalization “double-speak” that we seek to grasp in studying the ritual that institutes citizenship. That ritual must be understood as both a process of putting the applicant through an ordeal that lasts from the moment he or she requests an application to the moment the written decree granting French citizenship is conferred on him or her (long version), and the ceremony itself, which summarizes and “consecrates” the fact that the applicant has successfully overcome all the obstacles (short version). In fact, it involves two contradictory types of logic. First, it announces the new citizens’ integration into the national group by separating them from foreigners who have not been granted this favor, for the former have been judged worthy of becoming French after passing tests that attest to their merit. Second, it recalls the continuing difference between two categories of French citizens —a difference defined in terms of how French citizenship was obtained, a difference perpetuated at the very moment it is supposed to disappear. Through this two-part performative operation, the naturalized are distinguished both from other foreigners and other nationals. Still, into this schema consolidated by a set of regulatory texts, official reports and memoranda, the actors themselves introduce variations. In naturalization ceremonies, state representatives (prefects or sub-prefects) are particularly inclined to mention the distance the newcomers must still cover in order to become genuinely French, whereas local government officials who have been delegated to organize the celebration sometimes point out that it is the society itself that will continue to see the naturalized as different from other citizens. In this regard, the distinction that emerges in our study between prefects’ and sub-prefects’ speeches on the one hand, mayors’ and deputy-mayors’ speeches on the other, is quite telling.

We studied the naturalization ritual for three years in a *département* of the greater Paris region. We observed procedures in the state bureaux in charge of preparing naturalization decisions, ranging from the bureau windows where citizenship applicants are first received to the interviews the state calls them in for, officially to ascertain their level of linguistic integration. We attended around twenty naturalization ceremonies, approximately half of them on prefecture premises, the other half in one of the two *département* cities that chose to celebrate the event for its residents. We questioned eight actors involved either in the public authorities’ decision-making procedures or in preparing prefect or municipal ceremonies. We also interviewed ten persons residing in the *département* and accepted for naturalization, and had more informal exchanges with many others after the ceremonies. On the basis of this material we have analyzed naturalization as a rite of institution that celebrates those immigrants whom the nation has chosen —from among all its immigrants— to become a part of it.

The ordeal: “a favor the Republic has granted you because it thought you deserved it”

Naturalization office statistics on proportion of applications approved give an image of the nation as increasingly willing to take in new French persons. In 2003 and 2004, the naturalization application approval rate was 79% (for 84,000 and 82,000 requests respectively) whereas in 1998 it was only 69% for 55,000 applications. Clearly, then, both relative and absolute figures are rising. One often hears it said that as long as an applicant meets the acceptability criteria, naturalization is really just a matter of patience (application processing usually takes several years) or perseverance (having one’s application turned down once does not prevent one from reapplying). What is more, a candidate’s insistence on being naturalized becomes a sign of his or her attachment to the nation: the difficulty of the ordeal seems a means of testing the authenticity of his/her commitment to the project of becoming French. The understanding is that all one has to do is want French citizenship; the strength of the desire is actually considered a guarantee of success. Each immigrant is thus simply realizing the French nation’s collective project in his or her own personal trajectory: the nation wishes and is capable of integrating any and all who are willing to assimilate. As Abdelmalek Sayad has written (1987, p. 127): “By law, and if we push the intrinsic logic of the national order to its furthest limit, we can say that the only real immigration is immigration that, by way of naturalization, melts the person into French ‘nature’ or ‘naturalness’, especially when, contradictory to what immigration should be, the person’s immigration actually proves permanent. Conversely, the only real naturalization is naturalization that ‘naturalizes’ applicants considered ‘naturalizable’, a quality that must be checked beforehand by ensuring that the conditions required for acquiring it have been met.” Paradoxically, then, the point is to integrate generously while being highly selective about who one integrates.

We should first recall the application acceptability criteria (*Code civil*, 2006, Article 21). Applicants must be of legal age and have a regular, stable place of residence; the latter is assessed both in terms of how long they have been living there and what signs there are of their attachment to the place. They have to have sufficient means, which cannot be welfare benefits or money sent from abroad. They have to demonstrate that they are of “good conduct and morals”, which in practice often means not having a criminal record. Lastly, they have to show they are sufficiently “assimilated” both linguistically and in terms of their knowledge of the rights and duties of a French citizen. On each of these legally defined points, the possibilities of administrative variation are infinite. There is a prolific body of judicial precedent at hand, all of which explores the details of ever-singular situations. Alongside restrictive clauses, there are situations in response to which the procedure is actually accelerated. This is the case for foreigners wounded while serving in the French army (it is the defense minister’s prerogative to indicate cases that fall into this category). It is important to remember that in

April 1939, after several years of tightening restrictions on naturalization rights, foreigners who enlisted in the French armed forces were immediately granted citizenship (in the United States today a similar privilege is granted foreign conscripts fighting in Iraq). The same is true for French-speaking persons who contribute to the cultural renown and influence of France (in this case, it is up to the foreign affairs minister to indicate relevant cases). Prominent athletes have benefited from this clause on the eve of major international sporting contests, particularly since the 1990s (a similar logic prevails in all rich countries, beginning with the Arab Emirates).

To summarize, the set of application acceptability requirements and the conditions indicated for accelerating the procedure suggest that much is expected from the applicant, and this is confirmed by the reiterated themes of being done a favor (by the state and more broadly by the receiving society) and being selected on merit (the merit of the candidate, whose request is assessed to see whether it should be granted). As the prefect of the department we did our research in put it at one ceremony, “It’s a favor the Republic has granted you because it thought you deserved it.” In fact, this formula was heard in nearly all prefecture ceremonies. As one new citizen pointed out to us with a mixture of irony and indignation, the terms “favor” and “merit” can actually be thought of as contradictory: if merit has been discerned, then this is no longer a matter of granting a favor but rather of recognizing worth. While associating the notions of favor and merit in the same synthetic statement may raise serious problems of logic, it nonetheless has strong symbolic meaning, for it simultaneously posits the greatness of France –the notion of merit suggests one has to be worthy of the country– and the unexpendable debt the successful applicant has incurred, as suggested by the idea of being granted a favor.

Self-censure

Given these conditions, it makes sense that a kind of negative self-selection should occur. Potential naturalization candidates exclude themselves because of what they know or imagine to be a social expectation they are too far from meeting. The new French citizens of 2004 had already spent on average 16 years in the country. Persons of Portuguese, Cambodian and North African origin wait the longest before applying for French nationality. Though 65% of these candidates did not have to show they had “done five years” on French soil because they were originally from French-speaking countries or former French colonies, fewer than 8% of candidates were being naturalized after less than five years in the country. Alexis Spire (2005, p. 313) is right to recall that “acquiring a new nationality should be apprehended as a stage in a social trajectory that began in the country the person left”; this means that the amount of time that elapses before a person decides to apply depends on multiple personal and collective factors. Nonetheless, foreigners wishing to obtain French citizenship clearly assess their own chances before undertaking the relevant administrative procedures.

A man of around 30 originally from Congo explained that he preferred not to submit an application while unemployed: “It’s true that we hesitated a long time, because when we arrived here my wife was working but I was not. I was hesitant to submit, believing that it would be easier if I had a job. That way the application would be cleaner than requesting citizenship as an unemployed person. So we waited a long time before asking for this citizenship.” We see how individuals use tactics for reducing the risk of being turned down, sometimes postponing for several years a move that might reveal their illegitimacy to their relatives and, perhaps even more significantly, to themselves. In suggesting that his application would not have been “clean”, this man indicates his understanding that he had not yet done what was required to have a place in French society; we could say **he recognized the fact of not being recognized**. In his case the illegitimacy was temporary, but in other cases it is probably definitive. An Algerian man living in France for several decades said he had never felt “worthy of becoming French”, becoming an heir to a culture he admired but that seemed too heavy a burden to bear for an immigrant like himself. Though, as Sarah Losego and Raphael Lutz warn (2006), we must be careful not to interpret projects related to migrant trajectories in mere “political and ideological” terms, it is also true that immigration as a policy matter and naturalization as the expression of an ideology are realities that affect those projects and trajectories.

The **dual psychological mechanism whereby people project a demand on themselves and internalize the notion of their inadequacy is reflected in the decision not to commit oneself to a procedure that is both time-consuming and emotionally costly**. People do not exclude the possibility of becoming French, but a kind of denial that is actually quite common to foreigners (D. Fassin, 2006, p. 145) moves them to postpone that possibility, and they justify the postponement by saying that they are still in **the uncertain position of an immigrant who is no longer entirely “there” but is not yet entirely “here” either**. The decision to request naturalization gradually comes to seem the right one as the prospect of returning to the country of origin grows remote and the reality of having a place in French society is confirmed, namely by the birth of children who have no other nation.

A man of Algerian origin who came to France in 1963 and whose wife arrived in 1979 but who only applied for French nationality in 2003 says: “After forty years, you’re living in the country. A country that has practically brought you up –despite the low level of training I received– a country that gave you work, raised your children. After a time, you say to yourself: I’m here, I’ll stay; I feel good here. What’s more, I’ve got three children who were born here, went to school here. And having French citizenship also is... because after a time... Here you’ve got the right to vote, you want to express yourself. You pay your taxes, but when it’s time to elect a mayor or representative, you don’t have the right.” When all these favorable conditions seem to be in place, starting with the existence of family ties to France as represented by one’s children, then one allows oneself to imagine French citizenship as a reality that could apply to oneself.

Likewise, for other men in late middle age who applied for French nationality after several decades of life in France, the gradual choice of this path reveals, like a photographic negative as it were, the changes that were being made in French immigration policy. Those men had come to France as laborers, so they were thought of as only temporarily settled (as indicated by the fact that they lived in workers' hostels). Later the policy allowed them to bring their wives to France and they started a family (this generally implied a move to state-subsidized housing). It ultimately became clear to them not only that they would not return to the country of their birth, but also that they were beginning to have a place in the society that had received them. They had changed from "work immigrants" to "settlement immigrants", to use the classic categories; they would end up becoming assimilated and naturalized –this is how they describe what could be called, to paraphrase Abdelmalek Sayad (1977), the three ages of immigration in France. The cycle would be complete when they demanded rights that would mark the end of their illegitimacy.

It is often in these terms that the length of the ritual ordeal is justified. "The length of the procedure is explained by the fact that becoming French is a choice, a process of reflection that has to ripen very slowly, and all that time that went by enabled you to reflect, to move through different stages", said a sub-prefect during a naturalization ceremony we attended, expressing an idea that is to be found in most state representative speeches. Clearly, the commonplace holds that what is at issue in the naturalization rite of passage is not just selection on merit, but also having time to deliberate and therefore to reach a decision that has been fully thought out. However, there are two important qualifications to be made to this justification of why the application evaluation procedure takes so long –three years, in the case of one "40-year immigrant". First, the better part of the thinking takes place before the application is requested rather than while it is being examined; second, time that elapses before applying to be naturalized has less to do with any "ripening" decision than with assessment of the right moment to apply, the moment that will maximize one's chances of being accepted.

Preselection

Once the choice has been made to request French *nationalité*, there are the administrative procedures. The candidate requests, compiles and submits an application and the state assesses it. The optimism that seems appropriate the rule when noting the high application approval rates coming out of the prefectures (prefecture services are responsible for evaluating applications) overlooks one major point: those percentages, as well as the length of time it takes to handle or process applications, were calculated on the number of completed applications actually submitted. When it is said that 79% of naturalization applications are approved, the denominator used is applications that made it through the steps leading to approval for application *submission*. The

fact is that before the administration agrees even to receive the application, it performs a kind of screening or preselection, either outrightly refusing to let candidates submit applications or stalling before receiving them. The administration may even refuse to give an application form to candidates it deems unacceptable; or it may multiply the requirements for and obstacles to completing an application. Alexis Spire explains: “The first step in the procedure, though considered an insignificant technical operation, is actually fundamental in that it consists in checking that the foreigner may in fact become French according to the conditions set forth by law; in other words, the applicant has to be made naturalizable.” Spire then recalls that in the 1930s only one application in five made it from the prefecture to the national level. While the proportion is much higher today, prefecture agents in charge of giving the would-be candidate an application and determining whether the application ultimately submitted is valid and may be sent up to the national level still have massive discretionary power.

Consider the case of students. Though the amount of time students are required to have lived on French soil before applying for citizenship is shorter than for other applicants –two years rather than five if those two years have been successfully spent in an institution of higher education– students are actually penalized by the transitory nature of their status and the fact that they are not financially independent, as this leads them to be thought of as not meeting the stable residence and regular income criteria. Working students are acceptable, as confirmed by several Conseil d’État rulings (Perahia ruling of 1982, Gamska ruling of 1986), and the very legitimacy of excluding non-working students is debatable according to a ruling by the Cour administrative d’appel [Administrative appeals court] of Nantes (April 14, 2000, ruling in the Ajomiwe case). However, agents at prefecture windows usually refuse to give application forms to students requesting to be naturalized. As a couple who had come from Algeria in the mid-1990s recounts: “At first they told us at the prefecture level that as long as we were students we did not have the right to an application. Later, they realized this was not true.” We have observed cases of refusal on this basis: *e.g.*, a Chinese student was assured that he had to show he had a job: “We’re asking you to show us pay slips. Come back for an application then [when you have some].” This restrictive interpretation of legislation and judicial precedent, which actually amounts to denying people their rights, is encountered in many situations where administrative agents come face to face with foreigners, particularly in the areas of health care and social protection (D. Fassin, 2004). Agents do so either knowingly and deliberately, because in their opinion the law is too generous, or –more often– out of ignorance, in which case we can assume they have internalized a sense that the request is illegitimate to such a degree that they do not even check what the legislation says.

This kind of logic is likewise operative in the stalling maneuvers whereby some prefecture clerks delay the moment an application can be submitted by adding local requirements, such as bank account statements (a requirement whose origin is difficult to determine) to those specified in the texts, or by

asking in the middle of the procedure for more recent versions of documents already submitted and accepted but henceforth considered out of date. A woman originally from Ivory Coast explained thus the setbacks she experienced: “The problem is that it changes every time. They don’t ask for the same application. You get the impression you’re the one who’s messing up. When the others bring in their file, it’s ok, but then when it’s your turn, they ask you for something different.” Depending on agent’s degree of good will, the absence of an administrative document can result either in delaying official submission of the application file because it can only be considered after it is complete, or agreeing to take the application file because in fact it is legally possible to add missing papers to the file for six months after it has been submitted. These small variations in administrative practice have major consequences for applicants. They are part of the life of any bureaucracy in charge of running a social service (Dubois, 1999), but they proliferate in this case because foreigners are perceived as illegitimate.

Clearly we cannot know or measure how effective these dissuasive tactics are: would-be candidates whom agents decline to give an application to or who are discouraged by particular requirements are of course not registered anywhere. Our decision to interview only naturalized persons obviously rendered invisible all persons whose applications did not make it to any stage of the process. Some situations –an imbalance within a couple, for example, because one member has been naturalized while the other has stopped trying due to the obstacles encountered– suggest the effects of such dissuasion. Without exaggerating their reality, we can say that this preselection operation –occurring, that is, before applications can even be submitted– reinforces the idea of an ordeal whose stages have to be gotten through one by one. It is only after this first set of steps has been accomplished –and it can extend over quite some time– that the application file at last enters the processing stage. In some cases it is immobilized for several months before being opened. In the prefecture we studied, once the file is considered complete, it gets put away for a year. After this burial period, it moves into the analysis process, which ultimately leads to its being sent on to the national ministry, together with a written comment and recommendation.

Evaluation

During this phase, known as the prefectural phase, the application is studied by both the police and administration, except in Paris, where the prefecture of police handles both procedures and holds a single interview (Gisti, 2000). The police investigation (an investigation performed by gendarmes in rural areas where that institution is in charge) aims primarily to determine applicants’ “good conduct and morals” and whether they have a criminal record. Though only what are reputed “serious” facts can lead to suspension of the application process or rejection of the naturalization request, matters related to immigration control are now included among those

facts; *e.g.*, having been official witness to a “marriage of convenience between a male foreigner illegally present in France and a French woman”; having been “notified of one’s expulsion from French territory, if that expulsion notice has not been explicitly revoked, or officially prohibited to stay in France if that prohibition has not been fully executed” –the last two situations generally imply that the person does not have a residence permit and that this has been aggravated by a refusal to be deported. This stage also includes investigation of any prior run-ins with the law; evaluators may also check in with the Renseignements Généraux [the French intelligence service], and the applicant may be required to meet with a police officer or gendarme to check the information he has submitted or get further details. The assimilation interview –conducted by the prefecture administration– allows for assessing applicants’ language proficiency, degree to which they are integrated into French society, degree to which their lifestyle fits with the norms of French society, and their knowledge of the rights and duties that go along with French citizenship. The applicant’s ability to use the language must be “sufficient given his condition”. The integration criterion tends to disqualify “foreigners who withdraw into their community of origin or family”.

Submission to “social rules” refers above all to polygamy, which “if shown to obtain, may constitute an obstacle to acquiring French nationality”. Lastly, verification of citizenship-related knowledge involves matters such as the right to vote –the authorities want to be sure new citizens know of it. A summary of the interview answers is appended to the substantiated recommendation on approvability and the file is finally sent up to the interior ministry’s naturalization sub-department. Though by regulation, the prefectural stage can last up to six months, there is virtually no oversight of length of processing time, which often goes way over that limit.

For applicants, the assimilation interview is the crucial moment of the ordeal. It is generally experienced as a sort of final examination, a decisive stage in which state agents will form an opinion of them. Applicants willingly spend on dressing for the occasion. The four-page document that the agent fills in during the interview does suggest a formal evaluation, and the type of questions asked suggest that there are right and wrong answers. Usually the interviewees can readily guess what is expected of them. This is particularly the case for exploration of language abilities and, by extension, social integration: “Do you speak French at home or are you more likely to speak your language?”; “What language do you speak at work?”; “Are you more likely to spend time with French people or foreigners?”; “Are your neighbors French people or foreigners?” Still, there are times when applicants do not understand what they are supposed to reply. Asked to give an example of a right he would acquire with French citizenship, one man was seized with panic and threw himself into lauding the Republic. This only irritated the agent, who broke in: “Ok, fine, but in simpler terms?” Agitated and embarrassed, the man continued evasively until the agent interrupted him a second time to explain that he was referring to the right to vote –an answer that was perhaps so

obvious to the applicant that he had not thought to utter it, preferring instead to make a more general, deferential statement.

Practice of the French language is generally presented as the essential component of the assimilation interview. According to the head of the naturalization office of the prefecture we studied, "If people speak well, there is no problem. If they speak poorly, we suspend for two years." She then explained the warning that some state agents give to certain applicants when they come to the window for the first time: "It's crucial, we tell them. That is, often when they come to get their application they already don't understand what we're saying to them, so we tell them, 'Be careful, because you don't speak French the way you need to. Take a course so you can learn to speak better when we call you in a year from now.' A year later they still don't speak very well, so we tell them they don't speak very well and that they need to take a course, and then we tell them this again at the meeting, but then often what they want is not to take courses but to be French, so they go through an appeals process, saying, 'Me speaks good French.' Then we receive them for an interview and they haven't made any progress. So they get turned down." The language is a means of evaluating not only their ability to express themselves correctly but also their willingness to learn. By extension, it allows for examining their degree of cultural assimilation. The same administrative official specifies: "At the end we ask them if they know their rights and duties and what their interest is in becoming French. That's when we see whether they really know they're living in a democracy, if they see the difference between France and their country." Clearly, state agents are just as interested in seeing whether applicants recognize the *value* of French citizenship as whether they are familiar with civic values. Furthermore, the two quotations above reveal the distance constructed during the interview: on the one hand, foreigners who "speak poorly" are imitated using the classic "*petit nègre*" model, and any attempt they may make to appeal decisions is ridiculed; on the other hand, a "difference" is instituted between France and the applicant's country of origin, reputed non-democratic, and perhaps even more between French people and the applicant, the latter suspected of not being fully aware of that difference and not really grasping the extraordinary opportunity that may be offered him/her to live in a democracy or understanding the obligation s/he now has to abide by new rules.

Though assessment of social integration is related to assessment of language skill, since the possibilities available to applicants to make contacts outside their original milieu are indeed correlated with the degree of difficulty they have expressing themselves in French, more subjective considerations also play a role, namely in connection with a question that has been at the center of public debate in France in recent years: the "headscarf" (Bowen, 2007). In theory, the headscarf is not to be mentioned in the prefecture recommendation, but the information is systematically noted in the application file and transmitted to the ministry. As a prefecture department official put it: "When a woman with the headscarf comes in, if she has a decent level of French, if she's working, if the children attend school, if all the rest is in

order, it's not a sufficient motive for turning down the application. We note that she wears the headscarf, but that doesn't change anything. But if she's got a headscarf and doesn't speak, we note that she wears the headscarf but we also note that she doesn't speak French. And often women who are really covered like that don't speak." Our observations confirm both the attention given to this point and the claim that it is of secondary importance. With regard to a woman who expressed herself poorly in French, the agent receiving her wrote that she recommended suspending the application because of her language difficulties, but added: "And in any case, she wears the headscarf, so her integration into our habits and customs is defective." Above and beyond the matter of assimilation, the issue of security is sometimes raised, though rather indistinctly. This issue is of course not specific to the French situation; it encompasses the diffuse threat of terrorism linked to Muslim fundamentalism (Mamdani, 2002). Though agents have received no specific training on this point, it is not absent from administration concerns. "For myself, I'm not too familiar with the distinctions, but some women wear gloves, you can't see their faces and there's not a hair to be seen either. In that case we know she could belong to a fundamentalist movement. So we *are* careful, because we know there could be more serious things. We turn to Renseignements Généraux. We wouldn't really want them to be planting bombs in France." Here the shift from the female singular to the undifferentiated plural refers to a threat usually associated with a particular group and the idea that women in that group play a particular role.

The entire application file is transmitted to the Interior Ministry's sub-department of naturalization, which is the only institution with the legal power to make the decision, but in practice it follows prefecture recommendations, while reserving for itself the prerogative of examining the file in greater detail and obtaining additional information. The law specifies that the whole procedure, from submission of the application file to the Ministry's decision, cannot take more than eighteen months. For the ten naturalized persons we interviewed, the average length of time was three years, with a minimum of two and a maximum of five. Once again, these figures refer by definition only to applicants given positive answers; we know that it usually takes less time to receive such an answer if there is no additional examination. The length of time is part of the ritual ordeal. As the prefect for new citizens put it during a ceremony organized for them in the *département* we studied: "It's a procedure that takes a long time –I think you can all attest to that. But that is the only way to ensure that the applicant not only meets the administrative conditions fixed by law but also gets integrated into the French nation so he or she can become a full-fledged citizen." The "price" thus defined suggests the same polysemy of "merit" and "favor" in the earlier quotation. The point is not merely to evaluate applicants' merit in terms of the qualities assumed necessary for naturalization, but also for applicants to prove that they deserve to be naturalized by showing they can persevere or remain constant for the length of the procedure. You can't get something for nothing.

The ceremony: “a civic appointment with diversity that the Republic has inscribed on its agenda”

There is nothing new in celebrating the solemn moment of joining a nation by means of a ceremony (Wunderlich, Worbs and Heckmann, 2003). In North America such ceremonies have long been practiced, particularly in the United States, and include swearing an oath of allegiance to the nation one is joining. In Europe they are a much more recent practice, but one that is developing quickly. Some German cities began using them as early as 1999; Great Britain first set up such rituals in 2004; the Netherlands organized one for the first time at the national level in 2006; Belgium and Switzerland hold local celebrations. Above and beyond differences in “citizenship and nationhood” cultures (Brubaker, 1992), European immigration policies are being aligned in two ways: first, a concerted policy of controlling migration flows –the Schengen area is the culmination of this policy, further consolidated by the Tampere summits– and a converging policy of staging integration through naturalization ceremonies celebrating the newly acquired national identity and, in the same move, instituting a dividing line between the different ways of being a member of the national community. A two-part approach, then, and a double ambiguity. The first intention is restrictive but has to take into account economic needs; in the French context this is formulated by means of the slogan “chosen immigration” (the “chooser” being above all France). The second intention is inclusive but works to produce distinctions between prior citizens and new ones, qualified as “nationals”. In contrast to the United States, France is not conceived by its members as “a nation of immigrants” (Coutin, 2003); the French preference is to emphasize and valorize France’s roots.

Depending on the country, the procedures involved in the ritual for joining the national community differ, and the choices made reflect specific traits: a number of targeted signs whose purpose is to mark out a cultural and ideological heritage (Centlivres, 1990). In France the ceremonial follows a relatively standardized procedure, particularly at the prefecture level; prefectures have a general protocol they seldom depart from. The state representative, usually the prefect or a sub-prefect, delivers a speech that concludes by inviting the public to rise and listen to an instrumental version of the French national anthem, *La Marseillaise*. The new French persons are then called up one by one to receive their naturalization certificate. Increasing efforts are being made to present them with their national identity card at the same time. In contrast to the United States, Canada and Switzerland, the French ritual does not include swearing an oath. Variants can be introduced into the general outline. At one place, personalities understood to represent a kind of model of integration are invited (at a ceremony held in the town hall of the Seventeenth *arrondissement*, Paris, the singer Enrico Macias, who identifies himself as a Jew of Algerian origin, was invited to speak after the right-wing mayor of the *arrondissement*, Françoise de Panafieu); in another, didactic written materials are added to the French nationality certificate that successful applicants are

handed (in Seine-Saint-Denis, a *département* with a large immigrant population, the file that new citizens are handed at the end of the ceremony includes a copy of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* of 1789, excerpts of the Constitution of 1958, and three verses of *La Marseillaise*). In the prefecture we studied, a slide show designed by the communication service is shown before the state prefect's speech. As for the town that has chosen to organize its own ceremony, it has introduced slight yet significant innovations, primarily in the content of the mayor's speech and the form of the welcoming celebration, as will be seen below. The following description of the event—a moment termed by Jean-Philippe Moinet in his report “one of the finest occasions, one of those civic appointments with diversity that the Republic has inscribed on its functional agenda and that deserves to be firmly valorized” because it allows for “celebrating the Republic and renewing ourselves through this appointment with its ‘newest’ citizens”—is thus based on our parallel observations of ritualized arrangements in prefecture and town hall. The naturalization ceremony has proven a situation for trying out a new state discourse in connection with the unlikely encounter between “diversity” and French republican values, an encounter that would have seemed unimaginable even ten years ago and that is now the leitmotiv of the struggle against discrimination (D. Fassin, 2002), has found in the naturalization ceremony a situation for trying out a new state discourse.

Representing the nation

Wherever naturalization ceremonies have been created, they not only display new citizens entering the receiving community but also offer an occasion for that national community to proudly display what founds it. Through the integration of naturalized citizens, the ceremonies celebrate the grandeur of the nation, and in the images and words chosen for expressing that grandeur, they deliver something of the national “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983). The slide show developed by the prefecture we studied purports to present new French citizens a synthesis of what needs to be known about France: “A country, a history, a culture, and values”, notes the title. It has already been described in detail (Mazouz, 2008); here we will just give an outline. To the insistent rhythm of Ravel's *Bolero*, the show presents a graphic survey of France's “*lieux de mémoire*”, with a sense of pedagogical purpose that repeatedly brings to mind Pierre Nora's analyses (1997) of Lavissee, the “national schoolteacher”. In 14 minutes the main facts about the population, geography and economy, historical events, figures and institutions are recalled. The viewer is transported in a few instants from Vercingétorix fighting the Roman troops to General de Gaulle as first president elected by direct universal suffrage, arriving there by way of Joan of Arc, the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre and the Edict of Nantes, the Revolution and the *Dix-Huit Brumaire*, the Commune of Paris and the Dreyfus Affair, the two world wars and the Fifth Republic. A panorama of great writers and artists opens with the startlingly juxtaposed portraits of Marguerite Yourcenar,

Georges Brassens, Simone Signoret and Jean d'Ormesson, before taking up a more classical line running from Ronsard and Rabelais to Sartre and Camus. This accelerated course concludes with a review of constitutional principles and republican symbols. The accumulation of information and list of men –and some women– who “made” France may understandably leave viewers confused –a condition that does not really attest to the show’s pedagogic effectiveness. The images scan the great themes constituting what the viewer is meant to see as the national identity.

More than battles (from Marignan to Verdun) and resistance (from Alésia to de Gaulle’s Appel du 18 Juin 1940), which represent a heroic France; more than heralds and symbols of the country’s greatness (François Ist and the Château de Chambord, Louis XIV and the Château de Versailles); more than great scientists and technological inventors (Pasteur and his vaccine, Blériot and his biplane), what is emphasized are the values and objects that new citizens should appropriate for themselves. The wars of religion and the coming to power of Henry IV, also the signing of the Edict of Nantes at the end of his reign, are given a considerable amount of space. Viewers are made to understand that the religious question was definitively resolved with the law of 1905 on the separation of church and state, and the founding of the secular Republic. The decision to make French the country’s official language in 1539 with the *Ordonnance de Villers-Cotterêts* is given special emphasis, as is Article 2 of the Constitution of 1958 stating that French is the language of the Republic. The celebrated principles of liberty, equality and fraternity –illustrated rather conventionally by a city hall pediment and a postage stamp– are elaborated on in connection with today’s France. The show recalls the country’s democratic roots, which it is said to owe to the Revolution of 1789, and displays its emblems, from the tricolor flag to *La Marseillaise*. It resembles a sort of ultimate make-up session for a course in civic and moral as well as historical and cultural education that new citizens are supposed to pass. At precisely the moment their assimilation is being attested to in that they have passed all the tests, they are reminded once again of what they are supposed to know. This only looks like a paradox. Through this last “lesson”, the new citizens are reminded once again what France is and what it is to be French –reminded, that is, that they are not entirely French yet, as the prefect or sub-prefect will reiterate a few moments later.

Still, the final note of the slide show is meant as a gesture of openness. It begins with the words “France is a long tradition of receiving and integrating that has been the source of many national feats and successes” and continues with a list of personalities indicated as being of foreign origin –scientist Marie Curie, singer Charles Aznavour, football player Zinedine Zidane, journalist Françoise Giroud, physicist Georges Charpak, playwright Eugène Ionesco, athlete Eunice Barber, comic Coluche, actress Isabelle Adjani, boxer Marcel Cerdan, filmmaker Henri Verneuil, and a few others– and it concludes with the words “And now, with you, history continues”. The point of mentioning these famous names is to exalt both the French nation’s hospitality and the contribution that immigrants have made to the country’s

intellectual, scientific, artistic and sports elites. This is a strong line in official discourse on immigration, as promoted, for instance, by the High Council for Integration, the idea being to abolish the “social” image of immigrants –an image that is both miserabilist and anti-establishment– and emphasize instead an image of success. This is done by means of numerous events; *e.g.*, awarding medals to business persons “with origins in diversity” on an official “anti-discrimination day”; holding a ceremony specially designed to honor “French people who came from far away”. The necessary effect of celebrating successful men and women, a celebration that can be assumed to be positive, is of course to efface not only more ordinary contributions and the manual workers who have accounted for the bulk of immigration for the last century and a half, but also the colonial origin of most of those immigrants. Of that past the slide show offers only two images: Senegalese *francs tireurs* gunman who died at the front in World War I, and the Evian Accords ending French rule of Algeria, described as an important moment of decolonization. This is selective memory, of course, but it is intended above all to be consensual memory.

New citizens are not taken in by this old-fashioned presentation of France. “The little film they show us is somewhat outmoded. Are people really interested in that?” said one. A woman originally from Ivory Coast expressed regrets: “They don’t say much about Africa, after all it gave. Really, you’ve got to recognize certain things and give a name to something.” A man originally from Congo showed similar disappointment on this point: “What I regret is the fact that there are African countries that *made* the history of France but are not included in the film. I was expecting to see the Congo, that’s where de Gaulle took refuge after London. I mean really, it’s a part of history that no one talks about. He made his appeal on Radio Brazzaville, which should be a historic radio station today.” When the mayor of the town we were working in spoke after the slide show, he said repeatedly that colonial history and the reality of immigration had not been given the place they deserved in it, and that to break with this vision, which he found conventional and partial, he had called for a film that would be better adapted to the message it was intended to convey.

Incorporating values

In the speeches delivered by state representatives immediately after the slide show, the message the Republic wishes to convey becomes even more explicit. A blueprint for the speech may be found in a document drafted by a temporary trainee who was also a student at the École Nationale d’Administration. The blueprint is used by prefects and sub-prefects. The author first states the objectives of the brief speech: “1) solemnity (this should be a rite of passage); 2) pedagogy (recall republican values, rights and duties); 3) welcome (speech of welcome into the national community); 4) do not repeat what was said in the slide show (history, institutions).” After an

introduction stressing that “you are acceding to the attribute of French citizen, and this is a unique event in your life”, it is recalled that “naturalization is not a right”. This opens the way for saying “how precious French nationality is” and that “the French have a demanding idea of citizenship” that amounts to “a way of thinking, a way of debating, a way of acting –in sum, rules of the game that are common to us all”. The three republican principles are each presented briefly, the most important point being to distinguish them from other values. “Fraternity” is an occasion for saying that “French tradition is hostile to communitarianism” and that “the loyalty and respect we bear our *Patrie* should be stronger than the loyalty and respect we feel toward our neighborhood, religion or country of origin”. “Equality” implies that “children –brothers and sisters– are treated the same way by their parents” and that “equality between men and women (a fundamental value of our culture if compared to others)” must be respected. In matters of religion, “liberty” presupposes that “no group of people imposes its beliefs on others”. Lastly, all these rights “are also duties” that require “abiding by the laws of the Republic”. The first of these is “the principle of secularity for oneself and one’s children”. The general tone of this reference document –a document that state representatives are entirely at liberty to depart from but that is in fact followed quite closely in the speeches actually delivered– is clearly meant to warn listeners and recall the seriousness of the law. The prefect and sub-prefect do sweeten it with words of welcome, expressed with varying degrees of warmth, and expressions that make it a little less harsh, but there is always the idea that the new citizens might be inclined not to abide by the principles of the nation they now belong to.

The fact is that the speech is implicitly constructed as a response to a competing model, never named but easy to discern: Islam. The mention of France’s hostility to communitarianism, the stress put on equality between men and women and freedom of religious practice, together with the mention of “other cultures” and the insistence on the secularity principle are addressed first and foremost to Muslims, who, during the ceremonies we observed, did in fact account for a considerable proportion of the persons being naturalized, and their presence was made more visible by religious signs, beginning with the headscarf, often worn in traditional fashion by older women. Still, one wonders what this rather indirect rhetoric can have meant to the persons of Portuguese, Congolese, Sri Lankan and Chinese origin waiting to receive their certificate. More importantly, one may inquire into how such a message is received by Muslims who do not at all recognize themselves in the target of the state discourse; that is, who do not recognize themselves in what is assumed to be their sense of “community”.

In this connection it is significant that the naturalization ceremonies have been set up in the context of a series of well-publicized social controversies –“the headscarf”, “gang rapes” said to have been perpetrated by young men of North African origin, “caricatures of Mohammed” denounced by Muslim groups– which seem to have called into question the foundations of the Republic in France to an even greater degree than the issue of terrorism in

neighboring European countries or the United States. As Abdelmalek Sayad has remarked (1999, p. 404): “There is never more talk of ‘republican values’ than when it is a matter of denouncing behavior by Muslim immigrants that is deviant in relation to the social and political mores of French society: the headscarf, discrimination against women, the political use of religion that is called fundamentalism, etc.” And for the immigrant, “conscious of the suspicion weighing on him, a suspicion he cannot escape”, this means having to be “constantly dispelling that suspicion, precluding it, dissuading people from it by repeatedly demonstrating his good faith and good will”. It is remarkable that at the same moment the state celebrates new citizens’ entry into French nationality, it reminds them of this difference –paradoxically, in the name of the Republic– thereby taking the risk of eliciting hostile reactions, including, as we have seen, from persons with an extremely favorable attitude toward France.

This is because the ceremony, a performative act in the sense that Austin’s priest (1962) produces a Catholic subject by saying “I baptise you”, is in fact an ambiguous performative act because the two things it utters are contradictory: it celebrates integration while noting a gap; it affirms “You are now French” while indicating the distance still to be covered to become French. The frequent distinction between “us” and “you” in speeches by state representatives, sometimes doubled by an opposition between “native French people” and “new citizens”, marks this insurmountable difference. Even when one of the two terms is lexically absent, it is always present semantically, as in the following statement uttered by the sub-prefect of Sarcelles (quoted in Moinet, 2006): “Equality is a cherished ideal for us. And it is translated in concrete terms in the framework of relations between men and women. For example, in our country men and women have exactly the same rights.” Everyone understands that what is being insinuated is that this is not the case “in your countries” (some speeches say so explicitly). Moreover, in their effort to eliminate this asymmetry, state representatives often end up accentuating it, as did the assistant director for citizenship at the Paris prefecture of police (quoted in Moinet, 2006) when he declared: “In joining us, you are becoming part of a long history. To you –as to us– now belong Chartres and Versailles, the Eiffel Tower and Chambord, the Mont-Saint Michel and the Louvre, Victor Hugo and Debussy, Delacroix and Rodin. From now on, be proud to be French, just as we are happy to receive you among us.” Paradoxically, by choosing what is assumed to be the most “typically French” cultural material, this speech actually constructs an identity that is difficult to share in, no matter how generous the welcome is meant to be.

Some of the state actors involved today are probably aware of this, and they have begun to limit or eliminate sharper references to what separates new French people from the others. In a speech heard on our fieldwork site, a woman state representative said: “We are going to learn to live together just as we are –that is, different– and to appreciate the treasures of each one. It is thanks to you that we are opening up to the world.” The difference here is stated simply, as a fact. It is also made symmetrical, and it is no longer

described as a gap that the newcomers are going to have to overcome by drawing closer to the men and women who have possessed French citizenship before them. The speech suggests that the difference is to be shared. This way of putting the matter in the ceremony situation may be seen as a first move toward getting beyond the “diversity-and-the-Republic” dialectic promoted by the High Council for Integration, namely in its response to the report drawn up by the Cour des comptes [independent audit court] (2004, p. 451). While the High Council recommends using “the affirmation of a common culture” as a means of countering “communitarian segmentation”, the overture made in the woman sub-prefect’s speech suggests that we can simultaneously recognize the difference between histories and believe that value-sharing is possible. Our interviews with new citizens confirmed that this is indeed what they are hoping for from their new citizenship.

Shifting the lines

While naturalization ceremonies held by municipalities follow the now routine program of prefectural celebrations, they differ from them on a set of points which, though relatively discreet, end up giving those ceremonies a somewhat different meaning from prefectural ones. The fact that municipal ceremonies involve a fewer number of people obviously gives the event a warmer atmosphere. Here between 30 and 40 new citizens are honored instead of the 100 to 200 at the prefecture. But above and beyond the numbers, we observe a clear choice at the town hall to make the occasions convivial rather than solemn. The mayor and his or her deputy give each person a hug and ask briefly about his or her origin and itinerary. Everyone is photographed in the company of the town officials and the photo is later sent to each new citizen. He or she, as well as his or her children, are offered a gift, and the ceremony ends with a “refreshment for friendship” that all town councilors partake in. All these features differentiate municipal ceremonies from prefectural ones. In the prefecture, once *La Marseillaise* has been played, the names are called –often mispronounced, sometimes even commented on. Each person comes up to one of the three tables and is handed his/her naturalization certificate by a state agent; he/she then moves toward the exit under the gaze of the state representative, with whom no word or handshake has been exchanged. At the back of the room, a naturalization official is available to indicate to new citizens how to obtain their identity card from the municipal administration of the town they reside in. The warm atmosphere of the municipal ceremony is therefore quite different from the impersonal form of the prefectural one. As a young woman of Algerian origin observed, comparing her own experience at the municipal celebration to that of her relatives, who had not been offered any ceremony, “I thought it was great, because I have friends who got French nationality but the day they received their papers, they just signed and left, that was all. They were disappointed, and they said to me, ‘Don’t expect anything at all.’ We were really pleased, and we’re actually sorry not to have brought our older son. Not the

little one, he doesn't understand, but the big one. The day would have really marked him. We weren't expecting to see such a fine ceremony. Because, in fact, it's no small matter to get French nationality." Rather than diminishing the solemnity of the event, the convivial feeling the mayor's office infuses it with seems to give it more substance and depth.

The presence of a female deputy-mayor of African origin is largely responsible for the feeling of closeness achieved by the municipal arrangement. The mayor likes to recall that his deputy experienced naturalization herself –without being given any such welcoming ceremony, the deputy herself is likely to add. She is not there merely as a token, but instead offers a sort of living example of the full political citizenship that is acquired through naturalization. While the speech given by the state representative, prefect, sub-prefect, or mayor (the last by legislative delegation) almost always emphasizes the new right to vote conferred by French nationality, this deputy-mayor, in charge of “integration, cooperation and the solidary economy” for the city, incarnates by her very presence another right, one that prefectural authorities never mention but that the mayor always does; *i.e.*, the right to be elected. In a country where one well-publicized failure of “diversity” is that blacks are virtually absent from the political elite (Thomas, 2007), the deputy-mayor (who is not the only elected official of African origin in this municipal team) recalls that while the new French citizens have been symbolically “elected” in that they have been deemed worthy of being part of the French nation, they are also politically “electable” –*i.e.*, that what they have become exceeds the right to vote. “Seeing her gives you courage, a lot of courage”, says a woman of Mauritanian origin.

But it is probably in the mayor's speech that we observe the greatest distance from the remarks of state representatives at the prefecture. The mayor marks this difference in two ways: first, by giving a political dimension to the speech; second, by mentioning the future difficulties the new citizens will encounter. The speeches of this mayor, an elected Socialist, link up with current political debate. For example, in the speech he gave December 12, 2005, during the controversy raised by the French parliament's passage of a law declaring that colonization had had some “positive effects”, he said, regarding the slide show: “It's true that the film leaves out part of this country's colonial and economic history. I heard an MP of the right-wing majority party on the radio a while ago speaking in the colonization debate, and he obviously had a problem, because he was explaining that one of the positive effects of colonization was that someone like Léon Bertrand –who is from French Guyana, if I'm not mistaken– and Azouz Begag could become ministers thanks to colonization. If I took the paradox a bit further, I could say that you are living attestation to the positive aspects of colonization.” This move to extend the speech to include immediate political issues gives it a kind of timeliness and even a concrete investment in the question of citizenship, making the new French citizens he is addressing actors in the public debate and its tensions. And this mayor's speech highlights the difficulties those new citizens are sure to encounter. At the May 19, 2006, ceremony, he concluded

thus: “I can’t tell new French citizens they won’t get discriminated against –discrimination that will call into question their attribute of citizenship because they will not be seen as having all the rights and duties of citizens of this country. They will be looked at, tested, and sometimes rejected merely because of the color of their skin. So this ceremony, for us, is to affirm that you do partake of this republican equality, and that we will all be here –elected officials in our political diversity– we will be here at your side with the state services to sustain this principle of republican equality.” This demystification of the magic of naturalization constitutes a moment of truth: it does not suffice to become French to put an end to all differences in treatment, differences of the sort that the new citizens have already fallen victim to. They were targets of discrimination not only because they were foreigners, but also and perhaps above all because of what they were or represented. This observation is quite realistic if we note that for the year 2004, 43% of newly naturalized persons for the city we studied were of North African or Middle Eastern origin and 34% of sub-Saharan or Haitian origin, representing the most stigmatized foreign groups.

The speech by the city official, anchored as it is in both the tensions of the public space and the contradictions of the social world, introduces a form of subversion into the ritual by introducing a reality principle that breaks with what could be called the “ideality” principle of the state representatives’ speech. In doing so, it “shines some light onto the blind spots”, to use Éric Fassin’s expression, of the republican naturalization ritual; on both the blind spot of the past, by recalling the colonial history absent from the national narrative, and of the present, by announcing the discrimination that new citizens will surely experience. And it points up, at least in part, the doublespeak characteristic of many naturalization ceremonies.

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“The promise of a new life”

Naturalization is a rite of institution. It involves two stages. First, the ordeal applicants have to get through institutes deserving subjects; *i.e.*, foreigners who deserve to become French because of their qualities and abilities, but also because they have demonstrated perseverance in the long, difficult road of gaining recognition. It thus separates immigrants worthy of being naturalized from those who are not, even though the latter –except in special cases, namely those linked to a defect in “morality”– can still hope to become French too. Second, the ceremony marking their new status institutes French subjects, or more exactly, new citizens who have become integral parts of the national community –except that they are reminded on the same occasion that a virtually uncrossable distance continues to exist between them and native French people, those who have “always” been French. The rite therefore also

separates French people as a function of *how* they belong to the nation: native and by right, on one hand; “from elsewhere” and as a state favor, on the other.

All the ambiguity of naturalization –which, though not specific to France, is nonetheless redoubled in that country by the fact that the state, in the very name of the values of the Republic, claims not to see that ambiguity– thus inheres in this two-part move instituting same and other and same-as-other. This is what Françoise de Panafieu, right-wing MP and mayor of the Seventeenth *arrondissement* of Paris and a great promoter of these ceremonies in her *arrondissement*, sought in vain to avoid expressing when she exclaimed at one of the ceremonies conferring naturalization certificates: “I sincerely think that becoming French –and the same is true for those who, like me, were lucky enough to be born French– is a joy because it’s the culmination of an individual intention, the end of an administrative journey, and the promise of a new life.” Obviously, what differentiates the individuals she was standing in front of (addressed as “you” in her speech) from individuals like herself who did not have to be naturalized (whom she speaks of as “we”) is precisely that the latter were “lucky enough to be born French” whereas the former had to show an “individual intention” and undertake an “administrative journey” before getting a glimpse of that “promise of a new life”. It is this “promise” that we must discuss in conclusion.

Naturalization is not only a ritual that institutes a separation; it is also a contract that ties two parties together by a promise. As Hannah Arendt put it (1958, pp. 244-245): “The unpredictability which the act of making promises at least partially dispels is of a twofold nature: it arises simultaneously out of the basic unreliability of men who never can guarantee today who they will be tomorrow, and out of the impossibility of foretelling the consequences of an act within a community of equals where everybody has the same capacity to act. The function of the faculty of promising is to master this twofold darkness of human affairs.” Turning next to what enables people to live together, she adds: “The force that keeps them together, as distinguished from the space of appearances in which they gather and the power which keeps this public space in existence, is the force of mutual promise or contract. Sovereignty, which is always spurious if claimed by an isolated single entity, be it the individual entity of the person or the collective entity of the nation, assumes, in the case of many men mutually bound together by promises, a certain limited reality.” Her analysis is relevant for naturalization as well.

Whatever the ambiguity that the ordeal and the ceremony that institute naturalization are founded on, the act of joining the nation is itself performative in that it contains a promise signified by a contract. New French people have the same rights as other French people, and they have the power to demand recognition of those rights before the French state. The public authorities, meanwhile, are legally bound to ensure that those rights are respected. “With the visa card, I was really not at home, because people said to me, ‘Go back home!’” explained a woman originally from Ivory Coast. “Now that I have *this* card, I say to myself, ‘I’m home, I’ve been accepted.’ If they decided to give it to me, that means they think I can participate in lots of

things –so it’s for that.” That the reality of the situation is not so simple, and significantly harsher, for the new citizen is surely a truth that should be recalled, as the mayor of the city we studied does. But it is just as essential to remember that the sovereignty consecrated by the act of naturalization only becomes effective when the promise is kept. It is in this that the contract binds the national community to its new members.

Didier FASSIN

*Institut de Recherche Interdisciplinaire sur les Enjeux Sociaux (IRIS)
CNRS-INSERM-EHESS – Université Paris 13
96, boulevard Raspail – 75006 Paris – France*

didier.fassin@ehess.fr

Sarah MAZOUZ

*Institut de Recherche Interdisciplinaire sur les Enjeux Sociaux (IRIS)
CNRS-INSERM-EHESS – Université Paris 13
96, boulevard Raspail – 75006 Paris – France*

sarah.mazouz@ens.fr

Translation: Amy Jacobs

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