

**Racism, Assimilation, and Immigration: A New Culture in  
France?**

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Albert Camus, the famous French Algerian writer, commented in a 1947 essay that “it is doubtless that France is a country much less racist than all those that I have been so fortunate to have seen. It is for this reason that it is impossible to accept without revolt the signs that appear, here and there, of this stupid and criminal malady.”<sup>1</sup> Camus’ remarks were motivated by a revolt on the island of Madagascar but it seems that sixty years later, one still sees the same signs of which he spoke, with no hope of solution. The popularity of France’s principal nativist political party in the most recent elections, the public harassment of Jews, the vandalism of their synagogues, and the riots of this past October and November are all symbols of a national problem that is slowly becoming an epidemic concerning what it means to be French and who is included or excluded from this definition.

In a cultural context, this racism represents a negative reaction to the threat, either real or imaginary, that immigrants present to France. The problem of immigrants in France is aggravated, however, by the immense contrast between traditional French culture and its *gaulois* heritage, and that of its North African immigrants. The cultural rift that is playing out in contemporary France has quite dangerous and serious consequences that exist for both sides if they are not able to find a way of reconciling the disparities. In his essay, Camus presents us with the example of Hitler-era Germany to demonstrate one possible outcome of racism left unchecked. Clearly, the majority of the French would be scandalized by this comparison but, as Camus explains, in so far as their apathy permits such racism to be socially acceptable, the people share a certain level of

complicity in a situation like World War II Germany.<sup>2</sup> If they refuse to recognize the presence of the aforementioned signs of racism, it is impossible to find a resolution. I suggest that the signs of racism have become so acceptable in France that no one even realizes they exist and therefore, if the signs of racism cannot be identified, neither can they be avoided. While the recent riots in France certainly have brought the issue of what defines “frenchness” to the national forefront, the riots also stirred up a lot of old resentment and mistrust on both sides. It is very difficult to tell at this point in the reconstructive process whether any positive reforms will ultimately come to fruition thanks to these riots. Public debate does little good if consensus cannot be formed and in the end, this task rests in the hands of the politicians. Unfortunately for France, jousting for political influence and using the riots to garner popular support may be more important to France’s leading policy makers like Dominique de Villepin and Nicolas Sarkozy (the two most likely candidates to succeed the ailing Jaques Chirac as France’s president) than actually creating effective solutions to France’s problem of racism and assimilation.

Algeria, a former French colony that gained its independence in 1962, is the originating country of the majority of immigrants who come to France. Tunisia and Morocco are the other two former French protectorates who, together with Algeria, comprised France’s North African colonial empire. Both Morocco and Tunisia gained their independence in 1956, in the middle of the “*les trentes années glorieuses*”, a thirty year cultural and economic golden age that followed the end of World War II in France. Algeria followed suit in 1962 after a long and grueling war of independence that many historians cite as a potent source of some of today’s resentment and disaffection.

Following this period of decolonization, North African immigrants began to arrive in France in force, forming the new wave of immigrants who were all searching for a new life with more opportunity, stability and freedom. Particularly during the first several years of tumultuous independence in France's former colonies, the economic stability and comparative affluence of France was very alluring. But even this bubble of prosperity could not sustain such a large influx of immigrants<sup>3</sup>.

The North Africans, many of whom lacked formal education, found the process of assimilation to be very difficult, if not impossible. For the most part, they lived in the suburbs of France's big cities (Paris, Lyon, Marseille, for example) in developments called "*les HLMs*" (*habitation à loyer modéré*) or low-income housing. As Jean-Benoît Nadeau and Julie Barlow, two Canadian journalists who spent two years in France researching their book on contemporary culture, explain in their chapter on France's immigration problem, "*Cités* stated out as giant housing projects built throughout suburban France to answer urgent housing needs in the post-war period. The government meant well, but many of the projects quickly fell into decay thanks to poor design, poor building standards, and poor management."<sup>4</sup> Today, the *cités*, like La Courneuve in Paris, or La Bricarde in Marseille, have become completely lawless areas (*zones de non droit*) full of crime and violence.<sup>5</sup> French authorities often renounce their responsibility for this problem and defend their apathy by saying that enforcing the law in these neighborhoods is too dangerous. In this way, the *cités* have become a constant and vivid reminder of the problem of immigrants in France and "have made a lost generation out of children of France's first wave of Muslim immigration."<sup>6</sup>

Never has this sad state of affairs been more apparent than during October and November of last year when the death of two young immigrant youths in a working class Parisian suburb (*Clichy-sur-bois*) touched off nearly a month of violent rioting. What started initially as a response to a single perceived slight by the French system (the death of the two boys) spiraled into a very public and very costly (some French agencies estimate the total cost of the damage at over \$23 million) display of urban disaffection and the frustration of the immigrants over the way they feel excluded and marginalized from French society. For many people, the burning of cars was the most tangible and visible effect of these riots. In an article in the *New York Times*, journalist Mark Landler relates an interview conducted with French sociologist Michel Wierviorka who explains, “Today, the image of a car in flames is emblematic of France’s restive suburbs, with their disaffected populations, predominantly French of African descent. Far right political groups use the pictures to dramatize the supposed dangers of immigration. But wrecking cars speaks to more than a simple urge to deface property or demand attention. Cars offer-and symbolize-mobility, [...] something the resident of these projects lack in French society.”<sup>7</sup> Mr. Wierviorka’s assessment is not only poetic in his analysis but also completely accurate in his assertion that most immigrants to France, particularly those from former African colonies, at least feel like they have very limited social mobility. And even more, they often feel ostracized by the French system, which in their minds, favors native French citizens, with French sounding names and French physiognomy. In another interview reported by the *New York Times*, Moussa Diallo, a 22 year-old first generation “French citizen” whose parents emigrated from Mali explains to a journalist why France’s urban population acts out in such a violent, malicious way. He quips,

almost prosaically, “If you’re treated like a dog, you react like a dog.”<sup>8</sup> Diallo, in a somewhat cryptic way, makes a very perceptive point about how a lot of European countries treat their immigrants and the problems this sort of treatment leads to. If immigrants are treated like a problem, they often quickly become one.

In response to the problem of these new “invaders”, Jean-Marie le Pen, a little known French politician at the time, established *le Front National Pour l’Unité Française* (abbreviated in French as *le FN*) in October of 1972. This movement, often grouped with the extreme right, fashioned itself to be the defender of French and Gaullist values: values which, according to the party, are being made obsolete thanks to the new generation of immigrants. In practical terms, the party suggests that the presence of such a large percentage of immigrants (particularly Arab immigrants) in France poses a very serious risk to the cultural integrity of traditional France. Thanks to the charisma of Le Pen, the party has achieved some remarkable success with relating this vague and conceptual risk to the everyday lives of the average Frenchman.<sup>9</sup> And it is only natural that should a man feel himself to be under attack, he would want to protect himself. The majority of political analysts have commented that this “calls to arms” has achieved success for the party thanks to Le Pen’s ability to appeal to members of the middle and working classes. The founding of the party corresponds chronologically with the end of *les trentes glorieuses*, and also with the 1973 oil crisis which, together, caused a rapid rise in levels of unemployment. Le Pen and his party were adroit at exploiting the financial crisis and unemployment to foment anti-immigration and isolationist sentiment amongst France’s working classes. The official party dogma suggests that the newcomers were stealing jobs away from the French, but the reality is that the immigrants,

much less educated and at the bottom of the command chain, were often the first to be laid off.<sup>10</sup> However accurately or inaccurately they were perceived, economic factors contributed much to the initial popularity of the party, but then one must still consider the question of the FN's recent success. For those who foretold that the party was doomed to failure after disappointing returns in elections during the early 1980s, it appears that the most recent presidential elections, in which Le Pen nabbed 16.8% of the popular vote (during the first round) compared to the incumbent Chirac's 19.88%, have proved the long lasting appeal of Le Pen and his politics. For many French, the preliminary election was a very clear sign of the real political climate in France. Although Chirac went on to win the final election without a problem, the whole debacle of Le Pen's shockingly high poll returns started a serious dialogue in France and the rest of the world concerning the attitudes of the French vis à vis immigration.<sup>11</sup>

In 1989, it was estimated that France was home to two million Arabs. Today, that number has skyrocketed to nearly six million, although exact statistics are impossible to obtain thanks to the laws concerning separation of church and state. Promulgated in 1905 to protect the secularism of the state and to assure the French concept of *laïcité*, the laws dictate that no one should receive any privilege based on religious affiliation. Essentially, as Jon Henley explains in his article for *The Guardian*, "Secularism compels France to regard immigrants in a different way from that of many other countries. The idea that ethnic and religious groups might enjoy rights and recognition due to their minority status is unthinkable."<sup>12</sup> The Vichy government got rid of these laws to reinforce the connection between the church and state and to disseminate nationalist ideology, but when the Fourth Republic was declared at the end of World War II, Charles de Gaulle reestablished them.

Thanks to these laws, it is impossible to know exactly how many North Africans or Arabs live in France because it is illegal to ask this sort of information concerning ethnicity on official forms. The unavailability of exact figures and the profound secularism of French culture make the process of assimilation all the more difficult because the immigrants can receive neither special recognition nor state aide, and as a consequence, they become even more marginalized. Henley makes a good summary of the problem of secularism in his article:

But while [the secular approach] may have worked with previous waves of mainly European and Catholic immigrants from Italy, Spain, and Portugal, the demands of the secular state and the “republican model of immigration” have not worked for the increasingly disaffected Muslim families from France’s former North African colonies.<sup>13</sup>

A recent example of this polemic is the debate on the question of *hijabs* in school. Two years ago, the National Assembly of France decided that the wearing of *hijabs* (the traditional scarves that Muslim women use to cover their hair) would be forbidden in public schools because they are potent religious symbols and in a public school, one that is subsidized by the government, this sort of overt display of religion is illegal. Many Americans, even President Bush, have decried the hypocrisy of this piece of legislation pointing out that the 1905 laws are meant to protect freedom of religion, not impinge upon it. There were equally virulent debates in the Muslim community, with many orthodox Muslims vehemently opposing the decision despite the fact that 49% of Muslim women supported the ban on head scarves. In the end, all efforts to subvert the ban were futile and the new law went into effect at the beginning of the 2004-2005 school year.<sup>14</sup>

Henley, analyzing the situation several months after the legislation was passed, opines that “the real issue, as most Muslims, Christians, and Jews in France agree, runs far deeper than school dress. It is about how society integrates its immigrants. If the law ends up marginalizing France’s already disadvantaged Muslim community further, it could ultimately lead to the question of whether being Muslim is compatible with being French.”<sup>15</sup> Maybe the French aren’t seeing this sign, or maybe they are ignoring it, but regardless, *hijabs*, for many French and non-French alike, have become clear symbols of the problem of assimilation.

The violence and vandalism of October 2000 serve as yet another sign of this same problem. During the Jewish holiday season which lasts from October to January, there were several shocking incidents of harassment and violence directed at French Jews, which are just the most recent and striking examples of the very real conflict that exists between France’s nearly six million Arabs and six hundred thousand Jews. Anti-Semitic graffiti has become so ubiquitous in France that the young perpetrators have started to abbreviate it: instead of writing “*nique ta mere les juifs*” (which means screw your mother, you Jews), street artists now use the acronym NTM. These letters are scrawled on walls and in metros all over Paris and other French cities. Concerning the October 2000 incidents, the National Representative Council on Jewish Institutions in France have concluded that the acts were committed by “predominantly delinquents without ideology, motivated by a diffuse hostility to Israel, exacerbated by the media representation of the Middle East conflict (...) a conflict which, they see, reproduces the picture of exclusion and failure of which they feel victims in France.”<sup>16</sup> Once again, one sees an example of the consequences of marginalization. If someone feels that they are not an equal part of a

society, the person is unlikely to participate and contribute to the culture in a constructive manner, and thus the cycle of exclusion continues.

Although the 1905 laws make precise research impossible, strong evidence does exist that despite all of the factors of exclusion, many immigrants are managing to assimilate themselves into French culture. During the years immediately following the new wave of immigration, the North African birth rate was the subject of much speculation and criticism. Conservative politicians, particularly Le Pen, predicted that the North Africans (birthrate of 4.0 children per woman versus the French rate of 1.9) would overwhelm French society, effecting a fundamental cultural change essentially by sheer force of numbers. However, the evidence of rates in recent years has refuted this incendiary theory and it appears that the birthrate of immigrants reached its zenith in the 1960s, and has stabilized by now. In his book, John Tuppin approaches this subject saying

In recent year new trends have emerged. It is now clear that many foreigners see France as their permanent rather than temporary place of residence, an attitude reinforced by the continued arrival of dependents; and with such permanency the number of second generation migrants, the children born in France of foreign parents, has risen substantially while birthrates overall continue their progress towards equilibrium.<sup>17</sup>

Up to this point, I have analyzed the negative signs: those that predict disaster and represent threatening omens about French society. However, one must realize that there are also signs of hope like the triumphant run of *le Tricolore* (the national soccer team)

during the 1998 World Cup which was hosted by France. It has often been said that football possesses a mystical power to unify diverse peoples and the case of France in 1998 is no different. In an a story as unlikely as it is uplifting, France won the World Cup on its home turf and the team's captain, Zinedine "Zizou" Zidane became a national hero. Zidane, an ethnic Algerian, "became a house-hold name and a role model for hundreds of thousands of French youngsters."<sup>18</sup> After the championship match, the streets of Paris resonated with cries of "Black, Blanc, Beur," a poignant representation of the relationship between France and her immigrants. At the same time that the 1998 victory cultivated a tentative hope for a harmonious future, there were still negative manifestations of the old conservative attitudes. Before the start of the tournament, the French team met a significant amount of criticism for its multi-cultural roster. Le Pen was particularly outspoken with his criticism of the selection of so many Africans to the team. Apparently, he would have preferred that Beurs like Zizou had been excluded from the French nation team even though their inclusion would have held obvious benefits for the whole country. Unfortunately for Le Pen and his party, France (with its diverse roster proudly touted in team promotions) won the tournament and the players became irreproachable as far as the French public was concerned, regardless of their country of origin. According to the head of the Parisian office of *Time* magazine, "The soccer team [did] more to promote racial tolerance in France, and pride and a sense of belonging amongst its immigrant population, than anything the government could have ever done."<sup>19</sup>

And Zizou isn't the only indication of the positive assimilation of North African immigrants in France. Thanks to their determination to form their own traditions, a rich

subaltern culture has emerged in France of literature, art, and music, all influenced by the immigrant experience. They have even developed their own language, called Verlan, derived from the inversion of existing French words. Moreover, rap, a genre of music that hardly existed in France before the arrival of the North Africans, has become almost synonymous with “youth culture” in France.<sup>20</sup> But it must be said that this new culture, like the majority of changes associated with foreigners in France, is not well received by the native French. In fact, they have reacted with disdain and have constructed their own vocabulary to talk about these new immigrants. “*Les jeunes*,” a neutral phrase that literally refers to “younger people” has come to signify in everyday French, “Arab youth”. “*Banlieue*” which literally means “suburb” has been corrupted by the presence of the housing projects, primarily inhabited by immigrants, and now is taken to mean “ghetto”. The French often discuss the “*benladerisation des banlieues*” (the benladerization of the suburbs), a phrase which perfectly captures the transformation of the meaning and context of “*banlieue*” since the 1950s.

In the end, to understand the actual state of immigrants in France, it is obvious that one must analyze every detail to see what sort of sign it gives. And when one analyzes the evidence presented in French culture today, one sees that there are signs everywhere: the attacks of October 2000, the success of the FN, the *hijabs*. According to Camus:

It’s not a question of fixing the colonial problem, or of excusing anything. It is a matter of detecting the signs of a racism that dishonors so many countries already and from which we must preserve our own. There should be and must be our true superiority and several of us fear that we are losing it.<sup>21</sup>

Here, in this passage, one sees the challenge that faces France. Essentially, Camus attests that the responsibility rests with the French to allow the Arabs to assimilate, not with the Arabs themselves to force this to come about. In my opinion, over the years, the Arabs will complete the natural process of assimilation but the speed of their progress on this path depends on the French.

It is no longer necessary to be being always vigilant of the signs of racism as Camus stresses in his essay. Everyone with access to the internet is most likely aware of the problem that France is now facing with its immigrants. But the issue has truly now reached a critical juncture. With the world watching, and openly passing judgment thanks to modern technology, France must now decide how to include these new elements into its cultural narrative. To me, as I've suggested in my essay, it is no longer even a question of whether or not they will be included: their presence and traditions have already seeped into French society and every day life from the taboulleh and cous cous readily available in every grocery store small or large to the presence of one of the world's greatest football players on their national team bench. It cannot be refuted that France's immigrants have had and will continue to have a profound impact on their society. But it is up to the French themselves to determine what kind of impact this will be. The task of France in 2006 is not unique: many countries, European or otherwise, have faced the task of integrating dissimilar immigrant communities into their cultural fabric. Many countries, like France, have struggled, but many more have ultimately succeeded. It is my hope and belief that French society, which has inherited a healthy sense of social justice from its storied Revolution, can right these wrongs within the

framework of self-determination and that these most recent riots will be the only sign they need to address the problem and find a solution.

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<sup>1</sup> H. Jay Siskin, Cheryl L. Krueger, Maryse Fauvel, Tâches d'Encre, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004) 84.

<sup>2</sup> H. Jay Siskin 85.

<sup>3</sup> John Tuppen, Chirac's France : 1986-88 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991) 87.

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Benoît Nadeau, Julie Barlow, Sixty Million Frenchmen Can't Be Wrong (Naperville IL: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2003) 297.

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Fenby, France on the Brink (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1998) 220.

<sup>6</sup> Nadeau 297.

<sup>7</sup> Mark Landler, "A Very French Message From the Disaffected," The New York Times 13 Nov. 2005, 6 March 2006 <[www.newyorktimes.com](http://www.newyorktimes.com)>

<sup>8</sup> Craig S. Smith, "10 Officers Shot as Riots Worsen in French Cities," The New York Times 7 Nov. 2005, 6 March 2006 <[www.thenewyorktimes.com](http://www.thenewyorktimes.com)>.

<sup>9</sup> Fenby 223.

<sup>10</sup> Minelle Verdié, L'État de la France et de Ses Habitants (Paris: Éditions la Découverte, 1989) 383.

<sup>11</sup> Fenby 230.

<sup>12</sup> Jon Henley, "Liberty, equality, fraternity...secularity," The Guardian 12 Dec. 2003, 25 April 2005 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,,1105097,00.html>>.

<sup>13</sup> Henley.

<sup>14</sup> Nadeau 306.

<sup>15</sup> Henley.

<sup>16</sup> "Exclusif: le Rapport Non Publié sur l'Antismitisme en Europe," Conseil Représentatif des Institutions Juif en France 25 April 2005 <[www.crif.org](http://www.crif.org)>

<sup>17</sup> Tuppen 286.

<sup>18</sup> Nadeau 296.

<sup>19</sup> Tony Karon, "Soccer Success Challenges French Right," Time 10 Jul. 1998, 25 April 2005 <<http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,13989,00.html>>.

<sup>20</sup> Nadeau 300.

<sup>21</sup> H. Jay Siskin 85.