



HAL
open science

France: immigration since 1945

Rygiel Philippe

► **To cite this version:**

Rygiel Philippe. France: immigration since 1945. Immanuel Ness. The Encyclopedia of Global Human Migration, Wiley-Blackwell, 2013, 978-1-4443-3489-0. 10.1002/9781444351071.wbeghm239 . hal-01154196

HAL Id: hal-01154196

<https://hal.science/hal-01154196v1>

Submitted on 3 Mar 2023

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

France and immigration since 1945, In Immanuel Ness (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Global Human Migration*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2013

Philippe Rygiel
Université Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne/CNRS

In march 1945, Charles de Gaulle, then head of the french government told the national assembly that France needed to « introduce, with care (...), desirable immigrants into its midst », in order to rebuild the country and rejuvenate an aging population. These words encapsulate some of the original traits of the french experience.

Mass migration was nothing new then to a country that harbored during the interwar a very large foreign population. Then, as in 1945, many politicians and experts saw at least part of the foreign residents as future french citizen and parents of much needed french soldiers.

This, combined with the fact that the most vocal advocates of restrictive immigration policies, who had been associated with nazi-Germany, were not in a position to take part to post-war debates, meant that it only took a few months for various committees, drawing from past experience, to devise an immigration policy that would meet the needs of the time. Most of their proposals quickly became legal rules. The “ordonnances de 1945” created a state driven and controlled system of mass immigration that, contrary to pre 1939 rules, recognized the right of most foreign workers, after a few years of stay, to sojourn permanently in France, opened access to citizenship to most of them and made most of their children french.

The most immediate effect of this new deal was to place long term foreign residents on a much safer stand. They could no longer be expelled when unemployed.

Nothing else worked quite as planned. Few foreign migrants came to France during the next decade, 250 000 entered the country, mostly Italians, far less than expected. French economic recovery was slow, and it had to face the competition of other western countries that offered far better conditions. Private companies also tended to favor another type of migrants. Inhabitants of Algeria were, as french subjects, free to move to the mainland since 1945. Hiring them allowed companies to avoid dealing with a slow bureaucracy, namely the office national de l'immigration, that had been created in 1945 to control foreign migrations. This unexpected turn of events did not attract then much attention. Some demographers, linked to official circles, even commended these new migrants for their quick and efficient adaptation to the french context. Dangerous migrants were still at the time the red spanish, suspected of preparing a violent overthrow of the Franco regime.

The beginning of the algerian war, which coincided with the beginning of a period of quick economic growth, was a rupture and made the algerian immigration, in french eyes, at the same time the symbol of all migrations and a somewhat unique one. Algerians, whose work was needed to build the new roads and buildings of modern France, quickly became politically suspects, and the targets of new institutions meant to foster their loyalty and/or monitor their political activities. The Sonacotral (later Sonacotra), was created in 1956 to house single migrants and the Fas (fonds d'action sociale) in 1958 to cater to their social needs. Torn between the various factions of algerian nationalists who considered their financial contributions vital and fought each other on french soil, killing many, Algerians benefited from specific and quite unique forms of social help that also set them apart. Housed, for some, in public hostels, frequently manned by former colonial staff, usually situated on the outskirts of town, they were placed under the watchful eyes of the guardians of these premisses and police forces who ruthlessly fought any one supposed to support algerian nationalists. In 1961 police forces viciously repressed a peaceful demonstration of Algerian workers in Paris leaving several dead and many wounded.

The end of the algerian war caused a quick reorganization of french migration policies. Algerians lost quickly their ability to enter France freely and institutions created for them survived but dealt then with all foreign migrants. Algerians became foreign migrants, save the fact that were not desired and not expected to stay. Soon the french authorities tried to limit the number of algerians

entering France. In 1964 an agreement was signed with Algeria (Nakkache-Granval agreement) limiting the number of yearly entries. The french government also looked for alternative sources of migrants to feed a still booming economy. Agreements were signed with Spain in 1961, Marocco in 1963, Tunisia and Portugal in 1963, Yougoslavia in 1965 and despite its own regulations, the french administration readily allowed portugese and spanish migrants, who often entered the country without a visa or a passport, to stay and work. As a result, by the mid-seventies, France had again a very large foreign population, more than half coming from european countries (62% of them according to the 1982 census)..

Foreign population in France. Main countries of origin 1954-2006 (all datas from census except *)

	1954	1975	2006
Portugal	20	759	491
Italy	508	463	177
Spain	289	497	160
Algeria	212	711	475
Tunisia		140	154
Marocco	11	260	506
African countries south of the Sahara	< 20*	93*	331
Turkey	no data	59	224
	1765 (4,1% of total population)	3425 (6,5%)	3542 (5,6%)

The terms of the new political debates on immigration from the late sixties onwards show that the french situation is, from that date, very similar to the one prevailing in other european countries. Far left groups started labeling the migrants, specially the ones coming from Algeria, the most over-exploited segment of the population. Attentive to strikes and demonstrations by migrants asking for better housing and working conditions, they denounced xenophobia and violent racists acts - several workers from north-africa were killed in Marseilles in 1973 - poor housing conditions - many migrants then had to make do with fragile barracks in the shanty towns (Nanterre, Champigny-sur-Marne near Paris) that popped up around many major french cities - opposed overexploitation at work and center-right politicians who wanted to strictly control immigration from Algeria, before deciding that the best remedy for the economic woes facing France after 1973 was to oppose further immigration and facilitate, or impose, the departures of as many of them as possible. On the third of september 1974, the french government decided to block immigration until further notice. Migrants were encouraged to foster ties with their country and culture of origin, and offered, in 1977, ten thousand francs if they accepted to definitively leave France. The same year the government denied migrant families the right to be reunited in France, causing a major political uproar. Migrant associations, civil rights organizations, religious authorities and most of the left-leaning political forces opposed what they saw as a xenophobic policy denying migrants basic human rights. The government of Valery Giscard d'Estaing had to renounce its plans, but immigration had become, which it was not during the previous decades, a major political topic, with the Algerian worker symbolizing it. As in other european countries, questions associated with immigration will after that stay front news material and the object of endless political and ideological battles, the migrant being, partly as a side effect of european integration, defined by many as a postcolonial subject and an impossible citizen, who appears to have a right to be present only as long as he is economically useful and is thought by most to present the host society with unprecedented challenges.

This matrix is still there today, but the protagonists of the debates and some of its main themes have changed. The seventies saw political actors situated on the center right of the political spectrum dream of significantly and quickly reducing the numbers of foreigners living in France, while the center-left, specially the *parti socialiste*, promoted policies meant to grant foreign migrants more political rights, refused deportations and opposed the idea of tightly closing borders. In 1981, soon after the socialist François Mitterand was elected president of the republic, a law gave foreigners the right to form and head associations and the right to stay was granted to most undocumented migrants then residing in France.

Faced with the rapid progress of a far right party, *the Front national* that recorded its first electoral success during the 1983 local elections using a violently xenophobic rhetoric, persistent mass unemployment and a massive influx of migrants, the socialist party soon gave up its pre-electoral plan of giving foreigners the right to vote in local elections, while the center-right, refusing after some hesitations the perspective of an alliance with the far right, slowly accepted the idea that international agreements and political resistance made it impossible to pursue a very aggressive policy.

From 1984 onwards, both major political forces, who alternated in power, followed very similar policies, defined par Patrick Weil as “the rules of the games”. Borders stayed closed, allowing mostly entries of small numbers of refugees, among them many coming from south east Asia during the 70's, relatives of people living in France and skilled migrants. An average of 100 000 foreigners entered France each year until the late nineties, after which time the numbers slightly went up, with a growing but still modest proportions of migrants coming from sub-saharian Africa. Both sides rejected massive deportations of long time residents and claimed the need to integrate migrants already there.

Integration became the catch word of the eighties, and soon meant not only the social participation of foreign migrants but also the process by which their children could become fully french.

Arrival of the so called second generation on the scene was partly the product of grass root activism. Stimulated by the long awaited electoral victory of the left, several organization and activists, among them children of foreign migrants of various origins, successfully set up demonstrations and protest marches, the prototypal one being the “marche pour l'égalité et les droits civiques” in 1983, demanding equal treatment from french institutions and political bodies.

Integration of french citizens born of foreign parents, and mainly of the one of north-african background was then defined as a national priority. A high council for integration was set up in 1989, experts multiplied and a considerable amount of money was invested in the *politique de la ville* whose aim was to renovate the dilapidated suburbs where lived a large number of the ever growing number of families trapped in poverty and unemployment, among them many with a foreign background, and give their inhabitants slightly preferential treatment. As in Germany or England policies of this type are routinely declared today to have failed. Unemployment is high among young people of north-african parentage and in the *banlieues*, that have known quite a few violent riots since the 1970's, the latest in 2005, prejudice against muslims and people of north-african parentage is ripe, fueled by the anti-muslim feelings that spread the western world after 9/11 and the wedged politics of small islamic groups targeting french muslims as a promising clientele and quick to exploit any event, like the headscarf and the burka affairs, that demonstrates that french secularism is not compatible with muslim values. They feed in return the far right whose main political arguments are violent attacks on anything that can be labelled unfrench and who has succeeded in making medias and mainstream political groups use some of its vocabulary and transform some of its themes into legitimate political questions.

Some scholars see in this developments the birth of a new social group, defined by its origin and religion, facing widespread and multidimensionnal discrimination, a new phenomenon in french history and judged by some to be the most important sociological and political question of the last decades. The paradox is that many more children of algerian migrants graduated from university than children of other foreign migrants who arrived during the same period, that a sizable elite of north african background has long been influential in business or the cultural industry and that they

probably form the most secularized group and the one having the weakest ties to the country and language of their parents, and now quite often grandparents, of all groups defined by a national origin. In other words they would look very french in the eyes of a cultural anthropologist.

French historiography has just begun to approach this theme. Born in the eighties, out of civic interest more than stemming from a quest for roots, it has been, and still is, very directly linked to political debates. History was a way to define what was new in the late twentieth century situation. Digging up past episodes of violent xenophobia and state racism, historians decided that there was nothing new in the situation faced by north african migrants, but some consider today that France might have entered a new era, a “cycle de la différence”, leading to the birth of ethnic groups. The original question that was “what's new about this ?” sometimes becomes today “what's postcolonial about it?”. The first conference set up by the new immigration museum (CNHI) was titled “”. This very political history placed the state at the center of the stage and was conducted in a national context, leading many to wonder what was specifically french in this history, most looking for answers in the legal traditions of a nation that since the end of the nineteenth century easily grants citizenship to migrants and their children (despite attempts by center-right government since the eighties to restrict access to it) but does not as easily as common law countries tolerate cultural differences. One would argue today that it looks more and more like a french version of a common european history.

References

Further reading

- Blanc-Chaléard M.-C. (2001). *Histoire de l'immigration*. Paris, La découverte.
- Bruno A.-S. (2011). *César, Azzedine, Zouiza et les autres. Marchés du travail et trajectoires sociales des migrants de Tunisie en région parisienne (de 1956 à nos jours)*. Paris, Éditions de l'ÉHESS.
- Hargreaves A. G. (2007). *Multi-Ethnic France: Immigration, Politics, Culture and Society*. Taylor & Francis e-Library.
- House J., MacMaster N. (2009). *Paris 1961: Algerians, State Terror and Memory*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Lapeyronie D. (1987). *Assimilation, mobilisation et action collective chez les jeunes de la seconde génération de l'immigration maghrébine*
- Laurens S. (2009). *Une politisation feutrée. Les hauts fonctionnaires et l'immigration en France*. Paris, Belin.
- Noiriel Gérard (1989). *Le creuset français*. Paris: Le Seuil.
- Noiriel Gérard (2009). *Immigration, antisémitisme et racisme en France (xixe-xxe siècle)*. Discours public, humiliation privées. Paris: Fayard.
- Ponty J. (2003). *L'immigration dans les textes. France, 1789-2002*. Paris, Armand Colin.
- Rygiel P. (2001). *Destins immigrés 1920-1980*. Besançon, Presses universitaires de Franche-Comté.
- Schor R. (1996). *Histoire de l'immigration en France de la fin du XIXe siècles à nos jours*. Paris: Armand Colin.
- Spire A. (2005). *Étrangers à la carte. L'administration de l'immigration en France (1945-1975)*. Paris, Fayard.
- Stora B. (1992). *Ils venaient d'Algérie*. Paris: Fayard.
- Weil Patrick (1991). *La France et ses étrangers. L'aventure d'une politique de l'immigration, 1938-1991*. Paris: Calman-Lévy.
- Weil Patrick (). *Qu'est ce qu'un Français*
- Winter B. (2008). *Hijab and the Republic: Uncovering the French Headscarf Debate*. Syracuse, NY, Syracuse University Press.