
Assimilation and Struggle

Maghrebi Immigration and French Political Culture

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The story of the French state's relationship with North African immigration is both turbulent and complex. Migration from France's former colonies in the Maghreb into the French metropole has affected myriad aspects of the French political calculus, from the two world wars, the internal conflicts of the working class, and the mobilization in the French homeland for Algerian independence to integration policies and Islam in France. Moreover, these flows of North African peoples have played a crucial role in the framing of public policy and in the socialization of immigrant cultures in France.

Yet, North African (Maghrebi) immigrants form neither a homogeneous political group, nor an isomorphic cultural community. Indeed, the North African immigrant community continues to diversify with newcomers, elites, middle classes, and refugees from the Maghreb, as the second and third generations acquire French citizenship and, occasionally, break their links with their countries of origin. While a section of Maghrebis maintains invisibility in the social and political sphere, others fight for recognition. Most now play an ambiguous part, mixing traditional French republican values with Muslim community belongings. To elucidate the role of Maghrebis in French political culture, this article will first review the history and then explore the impact of Maghrebis

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on French politics, as well as the conflicts emerging from their participation.

Historical Background. France has been a recipient of massive overseas immigration, particularly compared with its European neighbors. Approximately 3.3 million immigrants live in France, including 650,000 Algerians, 550,000 Moroccans, 200,000 Tunisians, and 500,000 “harkis” (natives of Algeria who helped France during the Algerian war and were French citizens), and approximately one million second or third generation French-born citizens of Maghrebi origin. Much of the first generation was recruited after both world wars to support the reconstruction of France, mainly through work in mining and industry. The “thirty glorious years” (1945–1975) marked a period of heavy reliance on cheap, migrant labor to fuel a resurgent domestic economy. Employers directly recruited in many of the former colonies (particularly in Morocco) for workers in the agricultural and industrial sectors. During the economic contraction and recession of 1974, however, the state gradually moved towards a policy of tightened border control that reached its height in 1985–2000. During this time, the mass influx of North Africans diminished and became limited to smaller groups of the population: the gentrified and the feminized—refugees from Algeria and Tunisia, experts, seasonal workers, workers under short term contracts, and trainees—as well as those seeking illegal entrance and work.

Immigration to France from the Maghreb has been a gradual process throughout the twentieth century. The diverse social, economic, and political presence of North African immigrants, however, has made them unique among

immigrant groups. Until 1974, Maghrebi workers had a high rate of turnover, sending remittances to their families and organizing their existence around their places of work, hostel accommodations, trade unions with home country organizations (official or dissident), and visits to the coffee shop. Since 1974, the socio-political situation of the Maghrebis has slowly changed. First, family reunification in France has tended to accelerate because workers have feared that France would close its borders. Consequently, from 1975 until 1982, non-European immigrants, a majority of them Maghrebis, for the first time outnumbered European immigrants. Second, there has been an increase in migration from Tunisia and Morocco, much of it illegal, due to the decrease in labor migration from southern Europe. Third, as a result of family reunification, a second generation has begun to appear—many of whom were born in France. A proportion of the so-called “Maghreb” population has therefore neither migrated nor ever had the legal status of a foreigner.

By the end of the 1970s, immigration emerged as a political issue in which North African immigrants and their children played the central role, especially through their use of hunger strikes. The period 1981–1990 was a turning point for the immigrant issue in French politics. In the first half of the decade, politicians emphasized granting human rights and the freedom of association to foreigners. But the March 1983 local elections saw the nationalist and xenophobic National Front gain significant electoral backing, revealing that immigration had become a politically-charged issue. Social movements in 1983–1984 rose in response, stimulating new forms of political partic-

ipation among the second generation, who claimed both equal rights and the right to be different. Meanwhile, the extreme right hinted at the inability of the children of Maghrebis to integrate into society. Political debates focused on whether there could be an allegiance between French and Muslim culture. Some activists, such as the leaders of France Plus and SOS Racisme, gained access to the "Summits of the State," while

mobilization and segmentation of the Maghrebi community, particularly in the economic and political spheres. Socio-political mobilization by Maghrebi immigrants and their children has gone through distinct trends. Three are particularly important:

1) *Immigrants as Foreigners*. Migrant workers first became organized in relation to their country of origin in the 1960s and 1970s, with a focus on home country

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middle class elites emerged as mediators between the immigrant suburban groups and the bourgeoisie.¹

The structure of the Maghrebi immigrant population, meanwhile, had been transformed into two readily distinguishable categories: an older and a younger generation. The older group, although still active, was increasingly threatened by unemployment in the automobile, steel, and mining industries. The younger generation consisted mostly of French citizens, who, in spite of many difficulties—among them delinquency, unemployment, insufficient vocational training, relative failure at school, and gender conflict—was more disposed to economic, socio-cultural, and political self-organization and integration into French culture than the older. This diversity also led to the confrontation of two other sections of North Africans in France: Between the marginalized second generation and the largely-professional cadre of newcomers and refugees.

The diversity of interests among immigrant groups has caused increased

issues, sometimes with strong links to French or foreign unions. "Amicales," official organizations headed by foreign governments, attempted to control their nationals abroad, such as the well-known Amicale des Algériens en Europe, which disappeared only in the 1990s. Other examples include associations dedicated to the defense of foreign workers' rights in France and opposed to the Moroccan regime, such as the Association des Travailleurs Marocains en France (ATMF). Today, the situation has changed, with a re-centering of some formerly opposing associations, which have now built more links to their countries of origin. The ATMF (now AMF), for example, is involved in co-development programs with Morocco.

2) *Immigrant Children ("beurs")*. In the 1980s, the movement of the second generation of Franco-Maghrebis generated new forms of struggle and participation. The fight against racism, the struggle for civic rights and for a new definition of citizenship stressing socialization based on plural belongings, the promotion of

socio-cultural integration in the suburbs, and the mobilization against police and judicial discrimination all rose to prominence. Many Franco-Maghrebis became involved in local political life, and have been elected to municipal posts since 1989, when the civic association France Plus ran 550 "beurs" as candidates in municipal elections. About 150 succeeded in 1989, 1995, and 2001, but none achieved the rank of MP and only a few went to the European Parliament.

3) *Immigrants as Mediators.* Groups using the socio-political traditions of leadership from the colonial past, while exhibiting republican and secularized values, reappeared with the new urban policy of the 1990s. Characterized by their use of social and religious institutions for social peace, members of these groups are both more social and more local than the former civic associations, and are less covered by the media.

North African Immigration as a Political Stake. The emergence of North African immigrant activism has brought several challenges to the French political game. Most importantly, it has made citizenship one of the central issues in French politics. The theme of a new citizenship emerged in 1986 in response to the democratic crisis caused by the rise of individualism and the growth of collective identities contrary to the traditional French republican approach. Since 1985, Le Pen has led the charge against those he believes "do not deserve to be French"—spurring a national debate on the reform of the nationality code in 1987, as well as a reexamination of the link between nationality, citizenship, and loyalty.

For the "beurs" associations, Le Pen's instigation provided an opportunity to

call for a citizenship of residence, dissociated from nationality. The associations asserted that it was possible to be both French and Muslim. In the meantime, this public debate led many Muslim immigrants to embrace the dominant Socialist party in the presidential elections of 1988 (according to exit polls, more than 80 percent of the "beurs" voted for François Mitterrand). In the process, the "beurs" transformed themselves into a potent political force not to be ignored.

Maghrebi immigrants have also challenged the place of Islam in French institutions. This issue gained widespread attention during the "headscarf affair" of 1989, in which there was an intense debate over the legality of wearing traditionally "Muslim" garb in secular locales, such as public schools. With four million Muslims, France has the largest number of Muslim residents in Europe. Most of them practice a quiet Islam: rural, popular, with little obedience to the five pillars of the religion, in addition to staunch opposition to practices imposed from abroad, especially Wahabi or Salafi fundamentalism.

But Muslim identity in France is pluralistic indeed. For immigrants or "beurs" of North African origin, hard and fast identity boundaries do not exist. For example, although most Muslims celebrate Ramadan as a symbol of community belonging, few observe other obligations. Mixed marriages are frequent, especially among Algerians. As a result, one would have difficulty discerning the signs of a strictly "Islamic" vote in France. Neither during the Gulf War, nor during the present conflict with Iraq has there been distinct "Islamic-only" political mobilization. The 1,000 Islamic associations officially registered

in France are more involved in the institutionalization of French Islam than in the exercise of political influence.

The political mobilization of ethnicity has become a heated issue, given the general lack of public support for the collective rights of ethnic minorities. Many French are reluctant to support increased multicultural programming given the exclusivity of Jacobinist values: secularism, formal equality, legal freedom, civic values of living together (*fraternité*), with an exclusive allegiance to the state (*patriotisme*). Paradoxically, this model at once guarantees and is challenged by the right to be different, the pluralism of allegiances, the

The turning point for the expression of multiculturalism was the 1980s, thanks to the freedom of foreign associations and to the emergence of "beurs" leaders focusing on the right to be different (SOS Racisme), the legitimacy of mixed identities (France Plus), and the dissociation of nationality and citizenship. Many leaders fought against racial discrimination and social exclusion while aiming to recognize ethnic and religious belongings. Others were subsidized by the public for their civic values, while they managed their associations in a multicultural manner. This contradiction was raised by Pierre-André Taguieff, who

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plural citizenship model, intercultural relations, and the free expression of groups and minorities. North African communities, however, are often opposed to assimilation, integration (more used today in public policies), social cohesion (the term used by Jacques Chirac during the 2002 presidential campaign), republican and national citizenship (used by Jean-Pierre Chevènement), equality of rights (the French reference to the fight against discrimination), or the social contract of rights and duties.² The second generation of North Africans is challenging both the republican and Muslim separatist models, leaving some room for ethnicity while respecting the republican frame in which they and their parents have been socialized: a "multiculturalisme la française"—a citizenship resulting from a permanent compromise in a neocolonial management of differences.

argues that pleading for the right to be different would lead to the exclusion of the descendants of North Africans, and would convince the extreme right of the impossibility of Islamic assimilation into French society.³

Most Islamic associations rapidly came to understand the benefits to be gained from accepting civic and republican values—mainly, the achievement of social peace. Some expressions of dissent, however, have begun to appear in relations with the police, as well as with the refusal of allegiance to French symbols, such as the denial of the French flag during a friendly French/Algerian soccer match in 2001.

Conclusion. France has, for some time, managed the immigration flows resulting from its colonial past with the complicity of ethnic and religious mediators, who essentially conceded to republican values. In the generations

following colonialism, however, ethnic and cultural identity came more frequently from the representations and incentives of political parties and local public powers than from association leaders or locally-elected youth elites: they have been used to legitimize public policies such as the *Arabe de service* and are required to stick to multicultural aims in the republican frame—but not to apply for more ambitious and non-ethnic jobs or goals.

This ambiguous game in which the second and third generations play republican cards in their negotiation of identities is possible because Maghrebis have become the primary actors in shaping their own lives. They have been socialized into the French administrative culture and they increasingly know how to work within it. Ultimately, they set the tune for all French integration policy in a compromise that, in turn, continually redefines French identity.

NOTES

1 Catherine Wihtol de Wenden, and Remy Leveau, *La bourgeoisie, Les trois âges de la vie associative issue de l'immigration* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2001).

2 Dominique Schnapper, *La Communauté des citoyens* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995).

3 Pierre-André Taguieff, *La force des préjugés: Essai sur le racisme et ses doubles* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988).