The Assimilation of Immigrant Groups in France—Myth or Reality?

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The Assimilation of Immigrant Groups in France
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**Introduction**

Since the French Revolution of 1789, the French state has emerged as an entity designed to manage a civic nation in which anyone who wants to be French can in fact become a French citizen. For centuries, the French territory has been inhabited by people of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Napoleon Bonaparte and his followers led the struggle to unify, in many cases forcibly, these various groups in order to transform the former kingdom into his nationalistic vision of “la République Française”. A specific type of French would become the official language of the state, the educational system would become the tool of the state to mold and condition future citizens, and an increasingly homogeneous French culture would emerge over time. Although some of these unifying measures might be considered extreme by today’s standards, many of the underlying concepts are still being used in the transition from foreigners to French citizens. France has had a long history of immigration, both from neighboring countries as well as from many other parts of the world. The reasons for the emigration of various peoples from their countries of origin are often quite different in both scope and circumstance. Despite these differences, immigrants in France have all shared some of the same experiences, difficulties and benefits. The question that needs to be answered is whether the integration of particular immigrant groups is a myth or reality. The French state has been relatively successful in nationalizing many of its immigrants, but the degree to which each group has been assimilated into French society varies and much work remains to be done to ensure that none of them becomes marginalized in the future.

In order to understand the way in which French immigration and assimilation have evolved over time, it is essential to examine the historical background that has laid the foundations of today’s French state and society. A historical overview will also provide the appropriate context in which to analyze the complex social, economic and political dilemmas that have emerged and affected both immigration and integration. As previously mentioned, the French territory was occupied by various linguistic and cultural groups that settled in this region more than two thousand years ago. Although the Celtic tribes originally occupied “la Gaule”, the conquest of this territory by the Romans opened the doors to the immigration of the other groups. As the Roman Empire began to weaken, the Franks began to take control of Gaul. By the middle of the first millennium A.D., the Franks had managed to not only unify the Visigoths, Burgundii and other groups, but they were also relatively successful in converting these peoples to the Christian faith. Later, the Merovingian and the Carolingian kings would continue the mission of unifying, and in many cases subordinating, various local and foreign groups. These events set the stage for the kinds of policies that Napoleon Bonaparte would eventually adopt one thousand years later to create the French Republic.
By the last part of the first millennium, Viking invaders managed to weaken the Franks and split the country up into various regions, each ruled by its own set of nobles. In fact some regions, including Aquitaine, Burgundy, Flanders, Anjou, Blois and Normandy, actually considered themselves completely independent states. Ignoring many of the claims to independence, the Capetian kings established themselves in Paris and set out to rule over the entire French territory. During the period of Capetian rule, immigration occurred mostly in the upper echelons of society, particularly because the French monarchy was constantly seeking to acquire allies in other parts of Europe. Nevertheless, those foreigners who did settle in France were expected to adopt Christianity and accept the rule of the King as conditions for their assimilation. Throughout the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, immigration was fairly limited, but would eventually begin to expand along with the French colonial empire in the 1700th.

The outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 and the collapse of the French monarchy were inevitable consequences of the turmoil and unrest that plagued the masses. One of the most important vestiges left behind by the French monarchy, however, was the extensive colonial acquisitions made during France’s glorious days under Louis XIV. Although, for the most part, it was French nationals who initially emigrated to these territories to establish settlements, this wave would eventually be reversed in the 1800s, as natives of these colonies would begin arriving in France in search of better opportunities. Napoleon Bonaparte’s rise to power would create the foundation of the modern French state, in which immigration has played and continues to play an integral role.

Napoleon Bonaparte, a native of the island of Corsica, arrived on the French mainland with a vision of a unified France. Following the revolution and the failure of the interim government to address the nation’s problems, Bonaparte played on the vulnerability of the state to seize the power. He traveled throughout the country, convincing people that his vision of the new French Republic would provide benefits to all Frenchmen, not just the nobles. His claims were appealing to the masses and Bonaparte crowned himself emperor of France in 1804. Among the various reforms and policies he implemented, some of the most important included the nationalization of the educational system so that all citizens were granted the opportunity to attend school, the implementation of the “Declaration de Droits de l’Homme et du Citoyen” and the passage of laws allowing foreigners to become citizens of the French civic nation. In other words, this provided immigrants the possibility of acquiring French citizenship if they chose to do so. This approach to nationality was not only unprecedented but it was also far ahead of its time. Napoleon Bonaparte’s contributions to the French state and society as well as to the immigration policy are invaluable and would eventually have a significant impact on the decisions made throughout the 19th and 20th centuries.

The French Empire collapsed shortly after Bonaparte suffered defeat in his expansionist endeavors. Although France would continue to experience political instability until the end of the Franco-Prussian war in 1871, on the economic front there was no doubt that the industrial revolution was well under way. Machinery and technological advancements that greatly facilitated production and dramatically increased
output were introduced to make business more profitable. One of the major consequences of this phenomenon was the fact that the workers were desperately needed to operate the machines. Because the number of French workers was limited, industries began offering incentives for workers from other countries to move to France and run their factories. The direct result of this shortage of workers was the first wave of contemporary immigration to France. At first, Italian and Belgian laborers arrived to meet the needs of French industries. As the revolution continued to expand, however, natives of French colonies, particularly those of Algerian or Maghrebian descent, also began seizing the opportunity to emigrate in order to lead a better life. This trend would continue to dominate French immigration all the way up until the Second World War.

The industrial revolution continued to demand the import of labor and, by the outbreak of the First World War, workers in France were needed more than ever. The French state required foreign workers to sustain the wartime economy, but by 1932, the first French law establishing quotas for immigrants was introduced, (Braziel, Chapter 4). The limits on immigration would continue because France was in no position to give up domestic jobs to foreign workers during the period of hardships and devastation brought about by the Second World War. Indeed, France was ravaged by the war, lost thousands of troops and members of its civilian population, (many of them Jews handed over to the Nazi killing machine by the collaborative Vichy government), and suffered the destruction of much of its infrastructure. With the United States’ financial aid provided after the war in the form of the Marshall plan and other programs, the French state would embark on a mission to rebuild the country and the economy. This was a monumental task and could certainly not be accomplished without the aid of the foreign workers that had previously provided France with the help it needed to overcome the obstacles posed by the First World War and the Industrial Revolution.

Rebuilding France was an effort that began almost immediately following the declaration of the victors of the war in 1945. “The government instituted a more active immigration policy in order to reconstruct the post WWII economy and to increase population growth. The National Office of Immigration was created and it allowed for three different types of residence permits: temporary (valid for 1 year), ordinary (valid for 5 years) and privileged (valid for 10 years). The new law also permitted the government to expel all immigrants who were deemed to pose a “threat to public order” ”, (Braziel, Chapter 4). These kinds of policies might seem too arbitrary in nature by today’s standards, but during a time that still witnessed racial segregation in the United States, it is no surprise that some of these laws contained particularly unfair stipulations. The French population was nevertheless in dire need of manpower to help build and run the industries it had lost during the war and it was in equally desperate need of something to aid its population to grow. France had lost so many of its youth during the war that the population that remained was too old to provide the reproductive capacity necessary to keep the French population level at a stage of positive growth. The children of foreign workers would therefore become French, since they were born on French territory, and they would also represent the future workforce of the French economy—two elements that would help to ensure the prosperity of the French state in the long run.
By the early 1950s, Robert Schumann had made his famous declaration about the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) making “war unthinkable and materially impossible” and this organization would be in part responsible for spurring surprisingly high economic growth in Western Europe. Economic cooperation among the founding members of the ECSC and the pooling of major resources under a high authority created a tremendous boom in France and an “economic miracle” in Germany. By the mid-1950s, France was yet again in desperate need of manpower and decided to reopen many of the doors to immigration it had closed during the Second World War. In 1954, the Algerian Civil War broke out when hundreds of guerillas representing the FLN (National Liberation Front) launched attacks in cities and strategic points all over the French colony’s territory. In an effort to retain its control of the Algerian political and economic systems, the French government sent troops and entered into a much longer military engagement than they had initially expected. Those Algerian nationals that chose to fight on the side of the French were granted political asylum in France once Algeria had been declared officially independent. In the 1960s, the number of North Africans that sought asylum, accounting for a few hundred thousand immigrants, combined with about a million invited workers and hundreds of thousands of reunited family members, also from this region, resulted in a dramatic increase in immigrant communities all over France (Viorst, 1).

The largest immigration wave in French history lasted from approximately 1956 to 1973, followed by sporadic granting of asylum to political refugees that fled Southeast Asia, or more precisely Siam. After the worldwide OPEC oil crisis and an international economic slowdown, however, France’s suffering economy could no longer sustain the levels of immigration from the 1950s and 60s. “Since the 1970s, France—like much of Europe—has enacted “zero immigration” laws, but its Muslim population continues to rise, thanks to high birth rates, illegal entrants, and an exception allowing the reunion of immigrant families. The exception makes clear that French policy is to legitimize the Islamic community, integrating it into the society”, (Viorst, 1). Although immigrant family unions are permitted and often facilitated, this is a relatively poor measure of the degree to which these families have been aided by the French state to assimilate into French society. French immigration policy remained fairly restrictive throughout the 1980s and would undergo substantial changes as a result of the deepening and widening of European Union integration. The 1992 Treaty of Maastricht implemented the Schengen Agreement, which allowed EU citizens to travel and work in any other member state, and this would change the concept of the French borders and the way in which the government would approach future immigration policies.

The Schengen Agreement provided citizens of the less wealthy EU member states to travel and find work in countries like France and Germany. Coupled with the immigration from other European countries that began in the 1920s, France’s European-born immigrant group has also been able to flourish and both of these represent a significant portion of the total immigrant population. For immigrants coming from other European countries, that often spoke Latin languages, and that practiced Christianity,
they were more easily assimilated into French society. Other groups, like those who were offered political asylum following the dissolution of French-controlled Siam, were often able to nurture their entrepreneurial spirit. What made other groups have a more complicated and bitter experience with integration than others? What is the French state doing about this developing problem? How has immigration policy affected French politics and the economy? How deeply affected has French society been by immigration and how are immigrants reacting to some of its attitudes? What role do cultural and religious elements play in the national debate on immigration? There are many questions that need to be answered in order to explain why some immigrant groups have integrated more effectively into French society than others. In an effort to determine whether immigrant assimilation is a reality or a myth in France, it is necessary to assess the political, economic and social consequences the presence of immigrants in France has brought about.

The effects of the kinds of policies that Napoleon Bonaparte implemented in the early 1800s are still evident in the French government, political system and perceptions about what it is to be “French”. “Whereas French “national identity” has received considerable attention from modernist historians since Eugen Weber’s germinal Peasants into Frenchmen (Stanford, 1976), these have typically emphasized the various themes of French identity to emerge during the Revolutionary interlude between 1789 and 1815—centralization, grandeur, universal citizenship, etc”, (Pack, 1). Such themes are precisely the characteristics that make up the foundation of the French state and an extensive body of immigration law and French national tradition has been added to it over the years. So, what does it mean to be French? Many originally French citizens argue that, in the context of the assimilation of immigrants, being French entails learning the French language, adopting French cultural and societal norms, being able to accept a strictly secular state and developing the desire to integrate on a psychological level. The role played by the French state and political system is one of the elements that need to be closely examined in order to determine the effects it has had on immigrant assimilation.

The French government has allowed several waves of immigrants to enter its borders and has simultaneously sought to encourage newcomers to work towards becoming French. In the 1920s and 30s, Italians and Belgians were at an advantage in terms of their ability to assimilate because they were predominantly Catholic and spoke languages that facilitated their learning French. The immigration policy reflects this assimilation trend and represents part of the reason that some groups have been able to integrate while others have not. “The current French immigration policy promotes greater access to French citizenship and this citizenship policy came into force on the 1st of September 1998. The main aim of the act was to integrate foreign nationals into the French culture. This act states that children of foreign nationals would be given French citizenship when they reach adulthood”, (French Immigration Act, 1998). Of course, children born to French parents are automatically given their French nationality at birth, even though France’s characterization as a civic nation is contingent upon the fact that it allows ‘anyone’, including those simply born on French territory, to become a citizen provided that they fulfill a certain amount of requirements.
The fact that children of foreign nationals, who were born in France and often only speak French and not their parents’ language, are forced to wait until the age of 18 to become French has been a subject of intense debate among many immigrant groups, particularly those who represent the second, third and even fourth generation of immigrants who have settled in France. On the other hand, the adoption of the 1998 French Immigration Act is also a reflection of the kinds of attitudes that have been developing not only throughout French society, but also in the political world. The French, in their culture as well as their laws, have been notorious for their conviction that possessing the French nationality and adopting a French identity are privileges and that those people lucky enough to arrive in such a developed and cultured part of the world should strive to do what they can to imitate the native culture and customs. The traditional sense of French nationality plays an important role in this pressure placed on immigrants by the French government—having been among the first nations to develop such a strong sentimental attachment to everything that defines ‘Frenchness’, the state has been far less reluctant to impose it because it believes that the myths of the French nation justify it. After having opened its doors to immigration for so long, France now has to face many challenges in terms of determining whether or not their policies are compatible with the struggle of many to assimilate.

After having dealt with the Nazi regime and its atrocious crimes against Jews and other minority groups, there was a period during which nationalism in many places in Europe was suppressed—from Germany to the Soviet Union. In France, it was masked with patriotism and pride and this passed relatively unnoticed until the 1980s, but nationalist sentiment began to gain strength and intensity in the 1990s in response to ethnic clashes on everything from soccer to immigration to police brutality. The French political system is under the control of the more Conservative faction of the French parliament and has been for the past decade. The Social Democrats, and one of their key party members, Lionel Jospin, were completely unable to convince the French voters that they were capable of resolving France’s economic stagnation and problems with immigration. Instead, in the national elections of April 2002, the National Liberation Front, founded and represented by Jean-Marie Le Pen, received about 17 percent of the vote. “Although France has had its own specific tradition of a radical Right, it might be assumed that the events of the Second World War (occupation, Vichy etc.) would have discredited it and debared any such party from playing a major role in France’s postwar politics,” (The Rise of Le Front National, 1). This came as a shock to many analysts around the world who immediately saw France’s image as a tolerant country be challenged by the amount of support offered to the far-right, anti-immigration, nationalist party.

Jean-Marie Le Pen was born in a small French town and has always stressed his humble roots as part of his strategy to appeal to average French voters. Le Front National’s party platform, on the other hand, is anything but average, considering that the vast majority of French citizens have labeled him everything from a bigot to a racist. The rise of such a powerful nationalist movement is nevertheless an indication that French citizens, particularly those who support this platform, have come to demonstrate some of the fear that their culture, and very existence in some cases, is being threatened by the
steady growth of the immigrant population. Stuart Kaufman explains that “a fundamental factor causing ethnic conflict to escalate to war is that first one side, then eventually both sides, come to fear that the existence of their group is at stake. Such extreme fears justify hostile attitudes toward the other group and extreme measures in self-defense, including demands for political dominance”, (Kaufman, 31). Although France remains relatively far removed from the kind of conflict that broke out, for example, in the former Yugoslavia, many people, especially from older, traditional French generations, espouse these fears. They often feel like immigration is the root cause of many of the problems France is facing today, including a staggering economy and an increase in violent crimes. These kinds of attitudes run parallel to the same type of rhetoric used by the Nazi regime to justify the murder of millions of Jews, albeit the fact that there are legal measures in place to day designed to prevent such opinions from transforming into government policies.

The rise of Le Front National (FN) had a number of causes, many of which were deeply rooted in the discontent of the French population. The economic difficulties of the 1970s made issues such as immigration, “insécurité” (the breakdown of law and order), and unemployment come to the forefront of political debates that were occurring in the early 1980s. France’s traditionally strong political parties were accused by many voters of not having addressed their concerns and this dissatisfaction with the government is precisely what led many French voters to support the far right. In an effort to address these problems and offer an explanation for their development, Le Pen founded the FN in 1972 and began to run for extreme right political office in the mid-70s. “The Front National exploited this failure and the popular discontent with the government and indeed with France’s major political parties, which Le Pen dismissively termed la bande des quatre (the gang of four, i.e. PS, PCF, RPR, UDF). To put it simply then, the Front National was quick to say out loud what large sections of the French population were thinking,” (“The Rise of Le Front National”, 3). That Le Pen was able to play on this discontent and gain more support than even he thought possible was not nearly as surprising as the fact that such a large portion of supposedly tolerant, educated and liberal French citizens actually believed his propaganda.

The Front National’s platform has traditionally consisted of the abolition of the European Commission and of the Maastricht Treaty, the revival of the franc, the imposition of trade barriers between France and other European Union member states, the separation of French families’ funds from those of foreigners, a ban on building mosques in France, the reintroduction of the death penalty, the criminalization of abortion, the isolation of AIDS sufferers and, of course, the strict enforcement of a “zero immigration” policy coupled with clamping down on immigrants already living in France, (“The Rise of Le Front National”, 1). Aside from positions like those on abortion or the death penalty, most of the support that Jean-Marie Le Pen received came from people who were voting on immigration-related issues. So, what does this say about French society? Are people anywhere near as tolerant as the French state would like to have others believe? How has the existence of such strong anti-immigration sentiments contributed to the way in which certain groups of foreigners have been able to assimilate into French society? These questions set the stage for developing an accurate answer to
the central question: is the assimilation of immigrant groups in France a myth or a reality?

The French government has been entirely responsible for the waves of immigration that have occurred in the past century, offering asylum to political refugees as well as inviting citizens of other states and former colonies to work in and populate France. As a civic nation, it had also established citizenship guidelines that were relatively easy to follow and that has resulted in the nationalization of millions of immigrants. France’s immigration policy has been compared to those of the United States and of the United Kingdom in terms of their willingness to accept people from different countries and cultures to settle on their territory. After World War II, the invitation extended to workers from former French colonies, in particular Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, seemed like the most feasible way to address the shortage of manpower while fulfilling an obligation to peoples that the French government had managed to subordinate and control for decades, if not centuries. It was not until the economic crises of the 1970s, which affected the international economy as a whole, that the kinds of attitudes Le Pen shares with his supporters became fundamental issues of concern in French politics. Just like in Nazi Germany, immigrants, particularly those from North African countries, began to be blamed for the rising unemployment, high taxes and poor performance of the French economy. The issues of culture and religion are perhaps far more relevant than ever imagined when attempting to determine what the intentions of the French state are in terms of immigrant assimilation.

Instead of addressing the politically sensitive issues of race, religion and ethnicity head-on, the French government has taken a completely different approach. Its national census does not include questions about people’s religion or ethnicity because this type of information would be considered inappropriate for the state to have. The French state is entirely secular and there is a strict enforcement of the separation of the church and state. This means that the estimated amounts of immigrants and their descendants living France are arbitrary, ranging from 6 to 8 million. If the French state, which conducts a relatively accurate census, does not even know how many immigrants there are, it is impossible for Le Pen and his party to justify his ludicrous claims that immigrants are at the root of French problems without any concrete evidence of the general makeup of the French society. The extremist leader has claimed that the differences between the native French population and immigrants are precisely what prevent assimilation from occurring in French society. Nevertheless, Le Pen has continued to give the kind of explanation that most French politicians have disassociated themselves with in order to retain an image of open-mindedness and tolerance. Despite the French state working hard to separate itself entirely from religious, ethnic, cultural or any other kind of influence, it has made some decisions that have been the source of much debate in the past few years.

Most of the immigrants that have come to France from the rest of Europe, as mentioned before, practice Christianity and represent a Caucasian ethnic background. Before immigration from other countries began arriving, the largest minority group in France was the Protestants. Religious tolerance has been a policy of the French state since its modern creation, but it is evident today that this tolerance is much more easily
applicable when the religious minorities are still Christian. Since the religious holidays of most Christians are the same and often because European countries share many of the same customs and similar views of history, it has been easier for European immigrants to assimilate in the French culture. Another element that should be taken into account is the image of the French that has been cultivated around Europe: in many countries in Europe, speaking French, learning about the French culture, and traveling to and living in France was evidence of a high education and perhaps even belonging to an elite within other European societies. Coupled with the more obvious advantages of assimilation, this image has also contributed to the facility with which particular groups have integrated themselves. In terms of French politics, European immigrants have been able to attain political office provided that they showed a mastery of the language, popular appeal and a willingness to address the issues of all people, regardless of their background. Although this has been the case for European immigrants, immigrants from other countries, particularly North African and Sub-Saharan African countries, have had a completely different experience with assimilation.

The European Union Accession Monitoring Program (EUMAP) has recently conducted a study on human rights, the rule of law, and the political, social and economic treatment of minorities in several of the new EU member states as well as in the five largest EU countries. When addressing French minorities, “the report points to widespread discrimination. It states that “though the majority of Muslims living in France are French citizens, segments of the public continue to consider Maghrebi Muslims—unlike immigrants from other countries such as Italy, Spain or Portugal—to be immigrants even after four generations in France.” And French Muslims report unfair treatment as a result of education policies and practices that are insufficiently sensitive to their background and culture”, (EUMAP.org, 1). With such studies being released to the public, it no surprise that the recent decisions made by the French government, in an effort to maintain a strictly secular state so as to promote national cohesion, have had a tremendous impact on the immigrant population in France.

At the beginning of this year, the French government passed a law prohibiting Muslim girls from wearing headscarves in public schools. This law also applies to wearing the Jewish yamaka and crosses that are deemed too large. “The French ideal of strict separation of church and state has pushed the government to ban this “conspicuous” display of religious identity in state schools. Moreover, some feminists and government officials consider the veil to be a repressive symbol, directed at subjugating women,” (Islam, 1). These attitudes have served to fuel the debate as to whether or not the French government is truly doing everything it can to promote the assimilation of the Muslim minority into such a secular society. Shada Islam, a journalist based in Brussels and specializing in EU policy, believes that “French officials should concentrate instead on integrating the country’s Muslim population, a group which has been marginalized economically, socially and politically. Feelings of discrimination have pushed many younger Muslims to embrace a more radicalized Islam that is difficult to reconcile with many European values. Until France and other nations learn to embrace their growing Muslim populace, she concludes, this divide will only deepen,” (Islam, 1). Whether or not Shada Islam is right about what the French government should do, the reality of the
situation is that Muslims in France do feel marginalized to some extent and bans on cultural and religious symbols only add to insecurities about issues like the political intolerance of Le Front National and widespread nationalist sentiment.

Today, Arab Muslims make up, by far, the largest portion of France’s immigrant population. This group also happens to represent one of the highest birthrates in France, contributing to the country’s future generations. “France’s Muslim community is probably the first in history that has contemplated integration into a Christian society. Its proclaimed objective is to become French while keeping faith with Islam, but France’s Muslims find few precedents for cultural adaptation”, (Viorst, 1). Alongside all the cultural, religious and social elements associated with their assimilation, Muslims are also poorly represented in the French government. They have relatively weak ties to Chirac’s Conservative party; the Social Democrats, who have supported assimilation, have not been able to gather much support in the government; and the Right has been gaining in popularity and shifting the power away from liberal groups. Many of the local and national representatives of French Muslims are tied to religious organizations, making it difficult to enter politics, again, because of the separation of church and state.

The fact that Muslims are underrepresented in the French government might also be one of the contributing factors to the difficulty in assimilating. The few respected leaders have had a hard time making legislation get passed and initiating policies because they have often encountered opposition within the government for a number of different reasons. Ethnic origin and religious dissimilarity have proven to be important factors in French politics. “About 23 percent of French citizens—14 million—are of foreign origin, but most are Christians from Italy, Spain and Poland. Mr. Sarkozy, France’s interior minister, is the son of Hungarian parents”, (Borowiec, 2). Mr. Sarkozy’s position is one which is relatively high in the hierarchy of the French government and it also makes a political statement that European immigrants have had a much easier time integrating not only into French culture, but also into the political system. With these kinds of challenges in mind, it is understandable why Muslims have not been very successful at fighting for their cause within a political framework. In all of France, there are approximately 300 elected city officials, a handful of regional officials and not one member of the French Parliament that are Muslim. On the other hand, the fight for Muslim rights and antidiscriminatory policies has been led by academics, intellectuals and political activists, such as Tariq Ramadan, who have lobbied French politicians. This is not to say that the academics, intellectuals and activists have not made significant progress in terms of integration, but it becomes evident that more political control would facilitate Muslim integration. The French society is, however, more reluctant to let this kind of control slip into the hands of immigrants.

The French as a whole have become less and less religious over time, replacing those kinds of values with the interests of the nation state. “Similar to the general population, only 10 or 15 percent of France’s Muslims regularly practice their religion; most identify with the faith socially, chiefly by celebrating its major holidays. Yet in the French mind Islam is linked with fundamentalism. A recent poll found that two-thirds of the French associate Islam with religious fanaticism. To say the least, the Muslim
community lives uncomfortably in France, distant from the goal of becoming truly French,” (Viorst, 2). This study was particularly poignant because it demonstrates some of the same fears that Kaufman argues form the basis for ethnic conflict. Although ethnic conflict is relatively rare in France, the general fear that members of the Muslim minority are capable of committing crimes in the name of religion is still strong.

During the investigation to uncover the perpetrators of the September 11th terrorist bombings in New York and Washington D.C., the French government handed over a number of suspected terrorists that were all Arab Muslims. At that point, the French realized that they were not exempt from the type of attack that religious fundamentalists led against the US—they were equally as vulnerable and France was just as fertile a breeding ground for religious-based hate. At that point, the French press ran headlines, such as “we are all Americans”, that indicated French support for the US efforts to find and punish the terrorists. It did not however believe that the US had the right to enter into Iraq one year later without the proper evidence to justify an invasion, particularly that of a predominantly Christian country entering a Muslim country. Perhaps one of the reasons the French government has clearly expressed its disagreements related to the war in Iraq is that any sign of support for this war would have caused deep political and social rifts in France and might have pushed vulnerable members of immigrant groups to act in protest. The train bombings that occurred in Madrid served only to intensify this feeling of uncertainty in regards to Muslims and the extent to which they are willing to go to defend their faith.

The political sentiments shared by many Arab Muslims in France go beyond a desire to be more effectively represented in the government. There is much disagreement about the way issues related to Islam are being handled not only on a national level, but in the realm of international politics. Although the French government has been a supporter of the creation of an independent Palestinian state as a means of resolving the ongoing conflict with Israel, many Muslims feel like their concerns associated with this issue have not been adequately addressed. Lacking the proper tools to deal with this in a diplomatic fashion, some Muslims have taken it upon themselves to make their opinions heard. In 2002, a group of young boys of North African descent viciously attacked a young Jewish soccer team that was practicing on a field in Paris. “Anti-Semitism is nothing new in France. But the current burst of virulence has given it a new twist: the perpetrators are not the traditional extreme-right-wing white supremacists. They are more often boys from North African immigrant families who say they are avenging the Palestinians’ plight in the West Bank,” (Ford, 1). This is the type of behavior that has been at the root of some of the French society’s fears about the relationship between Muslims and fundamentalism. Unfortunately, the reputation of the majority of law-abiding Muslims is tarnished in the public eye and fears of fundamentalism operate in a vicious circle with Muslim accusations of discrimination on the basis of religion and ethnicity.

The political arena is one area of French life in which immigrant groups, regardless of their origins, have not had an easy time infiltrating. Often, beliefs or values
that cannot be conveyed on a political basis have been communicated instead through economics. The extent to which immigrant groups have assimilated economically in France varies almost to the same degree as those that have integrated on a cultural level. Italians, Spaniards, Portuguese and immigrants from South East Asia have been able to make their mark on the French economy, whether it entails working for French firms, particularly those that offer various services, or pursuing their own business that caters to both immigrant and French communities. Immigrants from North and sub-Saharan Africa were, for the most part, invited to work in France during the 50s and 60s and then decided to settle in Europe. The first generation workers, although by no means integrated in society, were able to accept the French way of life in exchange for employment and a higher standard of living compared to what they would have had in their country of origin.

When the French economy started to slow down in the 1970s, many immigrants were left without work and were forced to depend on the government for their survival. Initially, the French government had built large housing projects, dubbed “HLM”, in order to accommodate all the new workers. Over time, however, the living conditions in the HLM began to deteriorate because the government was not investing enough funds into their maintenance. Workers living in these projects brought their families into the country, based on the law that allows for family reunification, but the space in which they lived often remained the same. This led to the overpopulation of many of these housing projects and, coupled with the difficulty of finding a job in the midst of an economic recession, the outskirts of major cities like Paris and Toulouse began becoming crowded with unemployed, discontent minorities.

In a sense, many of the people that live in the “banlieues” feel that it is the responsibility of the French government to ensure that they have a decent standard of living because it was the government who had invited them to move to France in the first place. “Thus the question of Islam and Muslims residing in France has spilled into the grimy urban ghettos of immigrants from former French colonies in North and sub-Saharan Africa—breeding grounds of crime, despair and anger nourished by poverty and unemployment,” (Borowiec, 2). This description might seem a little bit harsh, but the truth is that, once outside the beautifully maintained French metropolis of Paris, one cannot help but notice that the buildings are deteriorating; that the wealth that characterizes the cities does not spill into these outskirts; that young people are often just sitting on the sidewalk with nothing to do in what appears like a concrete jungle; that apartments are crowded with multiple generations of family members; and other signs that certain immigrant groups have not been assimilated into the French economy, much less into the society. Employment studies conducted in immigrant communities have also shown that the situation is not getting any better. In fact, “according to recent figures, about thirty percent of men of Algerian origin between the ages of 25 and 39 are unemployed—or three to five times more than the jobless rate for men that are of native French origin,” (Borowiec, 2). These figures are indeed alarmingly high, yet they come as no surprise when some French firms are doing whatever they can in an effort to avoid having to hire immigrants, such as secretly asking employment agencies not to send them the requests submitted by Muslim workers.
European immigrants and their descendents have been able to find jobs in the government and public sector, “fonctionnaires” as they are known, in the educational system, in social services, as well as in the private sector. South East Asian immigrants have come to represent a large portion of private sector businesses, especially when compared to the numbers currently residing in France. Asian immigrants actually represent a sizeable immigrant group that has been assimilated into French society in economic terms. Asians have also had far fewer problems with cultural integration that Muslims. This is an interesting trend to note: Asians are considered foreign in France based on both their ethnicity and their religion. Yet, the kind of ethnic tensions that characterize the relationship many Arab Muslims have with the French have not affected Franco-Asian relations. What did the Asians do differently in terms of facilitating their assimilation? Although this is probably the subject of extensive research whose conclusions cannot be determined in the context of this analysis, one possible answer is that economic success has encouraged the Asian minority to accept French laws and customs, while minority group dynamic has made sure that their own roots and traditions are not forgotten. This leads to another central question: can Muslims adopt the same methods and apply them to their own process of assimilation or are there simply too many obstacles to overcome?

Academics, social leaders and politicians alike have been striving for decades now to answer such questions, but it has become increasingly apparent that economic solutions are not the only ones applicable to the dilemma associated with assimilation. “In addition to socio-religious issues, Muslim immigrants in France are facing financial hardships, unemployment and economic disparities. The majority of these immigrants are unskilled workers who are engaged in the lowest paid menial jobs,” (Seljuq, 2). Muslims are facing enormous difficulties not only in finding jobs but also in establishing equal pay for the same job as a French worker and in maintaining some level of job security. “Most of the foreigners in France currently without work come from the Maghreb countries of North Africa. Reflecting the changes in France’s foreign population over the last two decades, sizeable numbers of Turks and South East Asians are also among the unemployed, though in comparison to the number of African job-seekers, they still remain a small minority. EU nationals, by contrast, comprise just a small part (19 percent) of the unemployed foreigner population: among them, Portuguese are the most likely to be jobless,” (Angenendt, 152). Such figures only strengthen the argument that ethnicity is directly associated with the ability to perform economically in France and, as this study shows, Arab Muslims continue to represent the ethnic group with the most challenges.

Most of the employment and economic studies conducted in the past decade have shown the same basic results: Maghrebians are worse off than any other immigrant group. There have been several attempts made to explain why they have made less progress than other groups. On the one hand, first generation Maghrebian workers had limited access to the higher education and job training skills that many European immigrants had. The governments of the vast majority of European governments,
including the authoritarian governments of the formerly communist Eastern bloc, have had the funds and the resources to sustain extensive educational programs. Many African countries have limited their educational and training expenses in an effort to deal with other pressing national issues. For the first generation African worker, “nothing in his economic and cultural tradition has given him the long-term preparation that might allow him to acquire the type of dispositions (economic, social and cultural dispositions, and especially temporal dispositions: looking to the future and calculation) required by the economic situation to which immigration introduces him. Nothing has enabled him to acquire a “native” familiarity with that system, because such familiarity is the result of a whole education, both explicit and implicit,” (Sayad, 171). In short, European workers arriving in France were more like to be better educated and better trained than their Maghrebian counterparts.

Another possible explanation for this economic discrepancy is that Maghrebians were simply discriminated against on the basis of ethnicity or religion. There have been several instances in which French companies have refused to hire immigrants from North African and sub-Saharan countries because of fears associated with crime and work ethics. On the one hand, crime is indeed a serious problem among this particular immigrant community, especially in the outskirts of major French cities. On the other hand, much of this crime is directly linked to poverty and the inability to find and keep a job. This creates a vicious circle in which Maghrebian immigrants commit crimes because they are unemployed and are unemployed because employers are convinced that they will commit crimes. This pattern is further aggravated by the fact that few firms and employers are willing to establish themselves in the banlieues because they feel that their businesses and, in many cases, their lives are threatened by such a poor work environment.

A couple of years ago, the government-run television station, TF1, aired a documentary about a pharmacist and his venture to open up a shop in a Parisian banlieue. After about a year, his store had been broken into so many times that he was forced to place bars on every door and window. Two years after he opened his shop, he decided to close it down because he felt that his life was in jeopardy too often to justify his profits. Ironically enough, he never had any problems with the people he had hired in the community. This kind of challenge is widespread throughout the immigrant neighborhoods in France and efforts like this one are often pursued in vain because the work conditions are simply not conducive to economic success. So, what options does this leave the immigrant workers living in the banlieues? Since businesses are not likely to move to their neighborhoods, they must seek work in the cities or in other communities. The commute, however, is often so cumbersome and costly that it may or may not outweigh the income, making it unattractive or difficult for immigrants to hold jobs outside of their place of residence. This means that they often opt out of getting a job because the benefits of having one over the government aid they receive are minimal. This also contributes to the cycle of unemployment and crime described earlier and fuels the debate over the extent to which immigrants should be allowed to depend on the national government for their economic survival.
At one point, particularly during the 1980s, the French government had adopted policies that would provide funding for those families that contributed to the French birth rate and population. Since birth rates were highest among immigrant groups, particularly Maghrebians, these were the groups that drew the most benefits from the government program to stop the ageing of the French population. At one point, a mother with a few children could live far more comfortably off the government child subsidy program than she could by getting a job that she was trained for. Faced with this reality, it is no surprise therefore that the French public came “to perceive foreigners as competition for the scarce jobs available or as a social-welfare dependent burden for taxpayers,” (Angenendt, 164). The fear of a native Frenchman losing his job to an immigrant is unwarranted to some extent, however, because oftentimes the positions occupied by immigrants are those that a native has chosen to pass up either because the work was unattractive or because they possess a level of training beyond the scope of the work. There is even a relatively common perception that foreign workers were invited into France to do the work that the French were not willing or did not desire to do themselves.

There are so many circular arguments involving immigration issues in France that it is difficult to determine what the reality actually is. “A French writer compared the dissatisfaction of the French to that of Californians with illegal immigration, noting that, in France, foreign workers, legal or not, are accused of looting French society by taking advantage of generous social services, disregarding French values and cultural habits, and raising the crime rate,” (Kamm, 1). The French complain that they are losing their jobs to immigrants, but then conveniently offer them invitations to work to fill positions that natives have often chosen not to occupy. French society fears that there is a cultural and social invasion by immigrant communities, yet the immigrant communities are encouraged to reproduce by the government in order to prevent the continued ageing of the French population. The attitudes of the French society are so contradictory in nature that the confusion involved with assimilation is almost predictable. The kind of economic challenges just mentioned, combined with the long list of political hardships, have been established as some of the major obstacles to assimilation and have inevitably contributed to the difficulties of cultural and social integration of immigrant communities in France.

The cultural and social assimilation of second, third and fourth generations of immigrant families often begins at the educational level and the extent to which children of immigrants are conditioned to be French citizens later on often determines the level to which they are assimilated into French society. Unfortunately, “young foreigners are less likely to follow a “normal” school career. French middle-class families also use various strategies to avoid sending their children to schools with a high percentage of foreign children (dispensations from school catchment areas, enrollment in private education, etc.). Schools may themselves be “elite” establishments or, on the contrary, de facto, “ethnic” ones catering to a homogeneous group of disadvantaged pupils,” (Peignard, 4). Although there are measures in place to prevent the complete separation of school children based on economic or ethnic background, such as attendance quotas, the reality is that poor schools with a lower level of academic performance are most often attended by immigrant children. These children are often less likely to complete their academic careers, either because of the lack of incentives to do so or because their families
encourage them instead to look for a job that will contribute to the household. The rift between immigrants and native French people is therefore often created in the very early stages of education and socialization.

Poor schools, just like poor neighborhoods, often make up the breeding ground for the kinds of attitudes that, later on, prevent the assimilation of immigrants into French society. While the children of European immigrants, as well as those of Asian families, have been able to integrate successfully into the educational system, children of North and sub-Saharan African descent have had a much more difficult time dealing with the hardships of French schooling. Perhaps the French approach to secular and all-encompassing education is so similar to that of other European and even Asian countries that it makes it far easier for immigrant children from these countries to perform well. Maghrebian immigrant groups have often had different educational experiences, such as the incorporation of religious elements, making it more difficult to adjust to the French approach.

This difficulty adjusting is exemplified by the previously mentioned controversy over whether or not Muslim girls should be allowed to wear the hijab to school. In an effort to promote national uniformity and cohesion, the French government has argued that religion must be kept outside of the classroom and that covering one’s face is precisely the kind of behavior that is contributing to the rift between French children and those of immigrant families. In fact, “by keeping girls who wear the scarf out of school, Ramadan says, the state pushes them toward Koranic schools—thus separating them and their families from public schools and the mainstream. The result could be insularity and ultimately, perhaps, radicalism,” (Ramadan, May 19, 2003, 3). The argument of the French government basically revolves around the idea that the only way to successfully assimilate immigrant children is to make sure that they think, behave and are treated in the same way as all others. The “laïcité”, or secular approach, of the French government, however, fails to address concerns like the one mentioned by the well-known European academic Tariq Ramadan. This strict interpretation of secular government and education could potentially have negative effects that might not surface until years later and the French government must be prepared to face the consequences of its decisions.

Aside from the academic and cultural challenges children of particular immigrant groups may face, the educational system is also one of the sources for racism and xenophobia that characterizes a large part of French attitudes towards immigration. The curriculum designed by the ministry of education is supposed to give an all-encompassing perspective on subjects like history and humanities, but it is at the personal, not the academic, level that students feel that there are real differences between themselves and other groups. There are of course many immigrant families who have pushed their children to follow the French model in order to ensure their rapid and total assimilation in the French society and work force later on in life. Azouz Begag, a famous and well-regarded French author and representative of the Maghrebian minority in France, published a book in the late 1980s on one young boy’s efforts to integrate into French society. Béni ou le paradis privé approaches the subject of assimilation in a
simple yet profound fashion by describing the internal struggle Béni, a young student of Algerian descent, faces in terms of respecting his parents’ culture while accepting those of the country he considers his own. At one point, Béni complains that there are certain aspects of French culture which he would like to adopt, but which his parents argue go against everything they would like their children to believe. So the struggle to assimilate exists not only among people of various ethnic groups, but within different generations of immigrants as well.

At one point, integration into a society was considered a means of losing touch with one’s native culture by many first and second-generation immigrants. Today, however, even the French government is making an effort to address the concerns of minority groups that will allow them to maintain their culture while making it compatible with the French way of life. In France, “given that Islam finds itself in a minority position in terms of both numbers and cultural values, it must be organized in such a way that it finds its own rightful place and no longer provokes reactions or rejection and fear. It must find the means to secure its own integration, as other religions have done before it,” (Le Breton, Part III). The French government has recently tried to bridge the gap between itself and Muslim communities by creating an Islamic representative body that would address a vast array of cultural, societal, religious and political issues. The French Council for the Muslim Religion was established by the Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy, the politician of Hungarian descent mentioned earlier on, and has facilitated the dialogue between the government and the most significant minority. One of the aims of the organization is to eventually integrate Islam into French society in much the same way Protestantism was integrated centuries ago. This by no mean implies that the process of integration will be as easy as that of a Christian religion into French society, but it demonstrates a fundamental desire to cooperate and compromise on issues that will allow both sides to tolerate and learn from each other.

On a cultural and social level, integration has occurred to varying degrees for different immigrant groups. European immigrants, particularly those from Italy, Belgium, Spain and Portugal, found it easy to learn the language, adopt the customs and values, and practice their religion. Asian immigrants also seem to have found a way to balance their own cultural norms with those of French society. For African immigrants, the assimilation process has been far more complex, particularly because many immigrants from this region believe that their own beliefs and values are fundamentally different from those of the country in which they have settled. Statements by right-wing party leader Le Pen that “massive immigration has only just begun. It is the biggest problem facing France, European and probably the world. We risk being submerged,” have certainly not helped to encourage immigrants to integrate and have made them disdainful of many of the nationalist attitudes espoused by large portions of the French society, (Le Pen, 2002). Nevertheless, as time passes, it seems that assimilation is becoming a primary goal of all immigrant groups and the degree to which they achieve it is dependent upon political, economic and social factors. That some groups have managed to assimilate better than others is a result of a combination of factors, from education to faith, which the French government hopes to someday address through its efforts to create a unified and equal French society.
Unlike other democracies in the world, notably the United States, the French state was not founded by immigrants escaping persecution. The modern French republic was founded instead by elites with mass support on the republican principles that would ensure that French citizens would always have their rights respected by their government. For a country that has experienced about one century of true waves of mass immigration, it can be argued that France has done a relatively good job of integrating its citizens. On the one hand, over one third of French immigrants have become citizens; about 10 percent of French marriages are mixed; and children of immigrants are purported to be as capable of economic success as children of French origin. On the other hand, immigrants of certain groups have assimilated far more successfully than others because of contributing factors such as race, ethnicity, religion, social convictions and educational opportunities. In an effort to effectively address the question of whether the assimilation of immigrants is a myth or a reality in France, the answer must be divided into two parts.

For European immigrants, the assimilation into French society is a reality—immigrants and their children have learned the language, adopted the customs and successfully transformed themselves into Frenchmen. For Asians, economic integration is highly advanced, but culturally and politically, it can be argued that they have learned to cohabitate with the French but not necessarily completed the process of integration. For African, and particularly Maghrebian, immigrants, the process of assimilation has a clear beginning, but so many different factors have prevented their integration—from religious and social norms to ethnic diversity. There is evidence that the gap is slowly being bridged between the Muslim minority and the French society, but much work remains to be done in strengthening this relationship. Immigration is a source of both prosperity and national disagreement in France and the degree to which immigrants are assimilated will contribute to the future of the French state and society. Although assimilation is a reality for some groups and a myth for others, what remains inevitable is that the French society and immigrant groups will have to learn to cohabitate in an effort to prevent the marginalization of certain groups and promote the inclusion of all immigrants. If this end can be achieved, there is no doubt that the benefits of such a profound assimilation will resound in all aspects of French life.
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