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HOW THE FRENCH UNDERSTAND IMMIGRANT INTEGRATION AND CITIZENSHIP

Christophe BERTOSI

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Executive Summary

It seems that the French model of immigrant integration and citizenship is difficult to understand outside France, even more so at a time when France is once again the target of jihadist terrorism and responds to this challenge with a dramatic emphasis on its national political tradition of universalism and secularism – what the French refer to in terms of *laïcité*.

In order to address this misunderstanding, this research proposes to analyze 10 terms that have been central to French debates on immigration and citizenship, namely: integration, communalism (*communautarisme*), secularism (*laïcité*), discrimination, Islam, citizenship, migrant, migration crisis, the nation-state, and Europe.

The lexicographic application Ngram Viewer is used for each of these terms in order to show evolutions over time. These evolutions are part of what needs to be understood.

Behind these evolutions, the analysis emphasizes ambiguities and a plurality of meanings surrounding the vocabulary of the French political tradition, and the subsequent misunderstandings these ambiguities and multiple meanings generate not only between French and international observers but also *within* French society.

A related claim is that evolutions that can be identified in French political and public debates about immigrant integration are not specific to France but are part of a broader transformation that concerns all Western countries in their relation to immigration, ethnicity and Islam.

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Introduction

It seems that the French model is difficult to understand outside France. It also seems that this misunderstanding has never been more acute than today, at a time when France is once again the target of jihadist terrorism and responds to this challenge with a dramatic emphasis on its national political tradition of universalism and secularism – what the French refer to in terms of *laïcité*.

International misunderstandings

Principles of the French model have crystallized the French authorities' response to the attack on a high school teacher, Samuel Paty, who was decapitated in Conflans-Saint-Honorine, in the Paris region, on 16 October 2020. A few weeks before, in a civic education class addressing freedom of speech, Paty had shown his teenage students cartoons ridiculing the prophet Mohammed published by the French weekly magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. The preliminary elements of the investigation proved that Paty was killed for that reason. The attack was subsequently framed in the media and political debate as an issue of freedom of speech (including the right to blasphemy) vs. Islamist terrorism, and secularism vs. Muslim communalism. When the horror stroke again in Nice only a few weeks later, French “republican values” were framed as the driving principle of France’s national cohesion and of the fight against jihadist terrorism.

Only a few voices within French society questioned the relevance and topicality of this response. However, outside France, the outcry against the French approach was massive. French flags were burned in Middle Eastern countries and a boycott of French products was called. Yet, it was in the English-speaking Western world that the misunderstanding came to be most surprising and, perhaps, most striking. It created a situation unseen before whereby a sitting French president replied to an online column published in the *Financial Times* (which was eventually withdrawn from the *FT* website), and phoned Ben Smith, a *NY Times* journalist, and complained about the US media coverage of the 2020 terrorist attacks in France. “There is a sort of

misunderstanding about what the European model is, and the French model in particular,” Emmanuel Macron told him.¹

Understanding how the French think and speak about their model

It is with reference to this “sort of misunderstanding” that I wrote this text, with the objective of explaining how the French think and speak about immigrant integration.

To do so, I thought it was useful to return to 10 terms that have been central to French debates on immigration and citizenship. These 10 words are integration, communalism, secularism, discrimination, Islam, citizenship, migrant, migration crisis, the nation-state, and Europe.

In studying these terms, my objective is not to lecture the international reader on how he or she should understand each and every notion that is used for discussing the French model of immigrant integration. For one, this French model can hardly be understood as a block, as we shall see, because it is filled with internal contradictions (for example between “*communautarisme*” and “anti-discrimination”). Another reason is that each notion has also been, in turn, subject to possibly contradictory definitions over time.

In other words, if we really want to clarify what the French model is, we must emphasize the ambiguities and plurality of meanings surrounding the vocabulary of the French political tradition, and the subsequent misunderstandings that these ambiguities and multiple meanings generate, not only between French and international observers but also *within* French society.

A related claim is that evolutions that can be identified in French political and public debates about immigrant integration are not specific to France. They are part of a broader transformation that concerns all Western countries in their relation to immigration, ethnicity and Islam. To put it bluntly, this evolution concerns the status of the narrative of liberal democracy in those countries. The study of the vocabulary that accounts for the French model of immigrant integration is enlightening on the type of democracy that seems desirable to French citizens, be it more or less liberal, more or less egalitarian and inclusive.

1. B. Smith, “The President vs. the American Media”, *The New York Times*, November 2020, available at: www.nytimes.com (consulted on 23 November 2020).

A late invention of the French tradition

What is particularly striking in the case of France is that core notions that are used today to describe the French political tradition of immigrant integration are in fact very recent products of the political and public debate. They appeared in a very particular context four decades ago, around the mid-1980s.

This moment is particularly important because it led to explicit mobilization of France's republican tradition, a tradition of immigrant integration that had not been a matter of public concern in the post-war period. Before the beginning of the 1980s, "citizenship" did not frame public discussions about immigration. It is even later, around 1986-87, that immigration was formalized as a matter of immigrant "integration" – a notion first defined in a 1989 report. It took another decade for "*laïcité*" (French secularism), the other important notion attached today to the French political tradition, to be related to immigrant integration and Islam.

This rather late appearance of what has been unquestionably conceived as the French political tradition must be addressed because it has had consequences until now on how the French understand their model.

Methodology

In order to do so, and to show how the French vocabulary of immigrant integration and citizenship has evolved over the past forty years, I will use a lexicographic application (Ngram Viewer) that precisely aims to identify trends in the use of words over time in different languages.

Ngram Viewer was developed at Harvard University by researchers in computer science and linguistics. The application makes it possible to make queries within a corpus made up of the digitalized documents of Google Books, that is, several million books and journals in eight languages. Here, I will use the corpus in French ("French 2019") and, in only a few instances, I will also compare with trends that Ngram Viewer shows in other languages (British English, American English, Italian, German). As its title indicates, the "French 2019" corpus covers a period up to the year 2019.

It must be emphasized that the application is not a tool that can support a "sociology of enunciation," that is, an analysis focusing on who is saying what in which context and with what objective in mind.² Ngram Viewer only

2. On the advantages and limits of this application, we shall refer to the text by the creators of Ngram Viewer: J.-B. Michel *et al.*, "Quantitative Analysis of Culture Using Millions of Digitized Books", *Science*, 331 (6014), 2011, pp. 176-182. We shall also refer to François Héran's work on the vocabulary of demography (part of which concern the vocabulary of immigration and integration) using Ngram Viewer:

shows trends in the use of a word or an expression. The graphs produced by Ngram Viewer show the proportion of occurrences of a word or of a group of words (e.g. “integration of immigrants,” here three words) in all phrases of the same number of words in the Google Books corpus.

These curves do not, by themselves, explain the reasons that may account for variations in a word or phrase over time. They do not indicate (or only in a very limited way) the contexts in which the searched words are used. On the other hand, however, they do make these variations visible and thus provide a solid basis for analysis. They confirm and objectify the hypothesis of the late invention of the French tradition and help circumscribe the exact period of time when “*intégration*”, “*communautarisme*” and “*laïcité*” appeared in debates about immigrant integration in France.

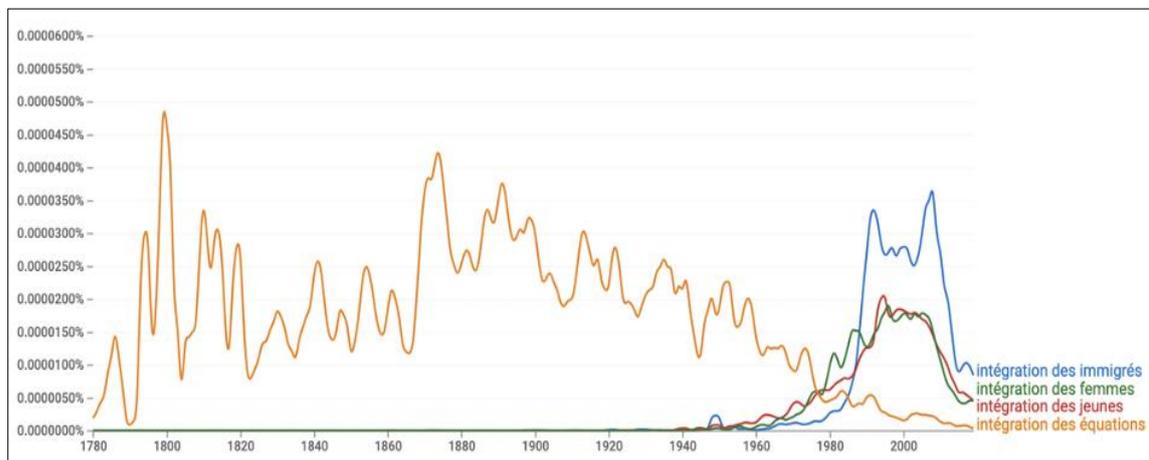
F. Héran, “The Vocabulary of Demography from Its Origins to the Present Day: A Digital Exploration”, *Population*, Vol. 70, No. 3, 2015, pp. 497-536.

Integration

Intégration is a central notion in the French immigration debate. It is synonymous with the Republic.³ It can be traced back to the political tradition of the Third Republic and its “*hussars noirs*” (public school teachers described as “soldiers” of the Republic in rural France in the 1880s). During the last quarter of the 19th century, French society was in the process of becoming a national society. At the time, national integration spelt the transformation of “peasants into Frenchmen”, to use the title of a seminal work by US historian Eugen Weber.⁴ As a result, it is common sense to attach the notion of “*intégration*” to this tradition.

To verify this connection between the word “*intégration*” and the republican legacy of 1789 and the 19th century, a search of the word on Ngram Viewer reveals a very interesting finding.

Graph 1.1: The invention of immigrant “*Intégration*” (1780-2019)



Source: “French 2019” by Ngram Viewer (smoothing of 1).

Read: in 1800, the frequency of the expression “integration of equations” was 0.46 per million of all expressions of three words in the French language corpus.

3. D. Schnapper, *La France de l'intégration*, Paris: Gallimard, 1991.

4. E. Weber, *From Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France 1870-1914*, Redwood: Stanford University Press, 1976.

Immigrant integration: a recent framing

Graph 1 illustrates the evolution of some of the most used expressions including the word “*intégration*” between 1780 (that is, the period of the French Revolution) and today. Those relate to different aspects, including the integration of youth, of women and immigrants. It clearly shows that it took a long time for the word “*intégration*” to be applied to the issue of immigration. Until rather recently (the late 1970s), the word was more a mathematical term than anything else: above all, it is equations that were integrated.

The word had certainly already been used in Algeria in relation to Muslim subjects during the colonial period. Nevertheless, in the postwar era (1945-1975), the problem of integration did not meet that of immigration, because the question of migration was only a question of work, not of citizenship. What has since been called the “myth of return” suggested that, once their work was done, immigrants would return home.

Indeed, even the immigrants themselves thought so. But the closure of the borders to labor immigration in 1974 marked the end of this “myth of return.” By blocking labor immigration while recognizing the right to family reunification (through a very important decision of the Council of State in 1978),⁵ the closure of the borders resulted in transforming the immigration of single men⁶ into the durable settlement of families. Their children, who had become French but were hardly recognized as fully-fledged citizens, then mobilized in the 1980s to claim their place in society. This “*beur*” movement (launched by the children of North African immigrants who mobilized for equality during the 1983 and 1984 Marches for Rights) was at the origin of a first generation of civic associations stemming from immigration.⁷

In this context, it was only in the mid-1980s that the word “*intégration*” began to designate what it means today: the integration of immigrants.⁸ Ngram Viewer shows that it was not until 1988 that this use of the word prevailed over all other uses. How can this be explained?

5. Le “grand arrêt” GISTI, CFDT, CGT of 8 December 1978.

6. T. Ben Jelloun, *La plus haute des solitudes. Misères affectives et sexuelles d'émigrés nord-africains*, Paris: Seuil, 1977. Voir également A. Sayad, *La Double Absence. Des illusions de l'émigré aux souffrances de l'immigré*, Paris: Seuil, 1999.

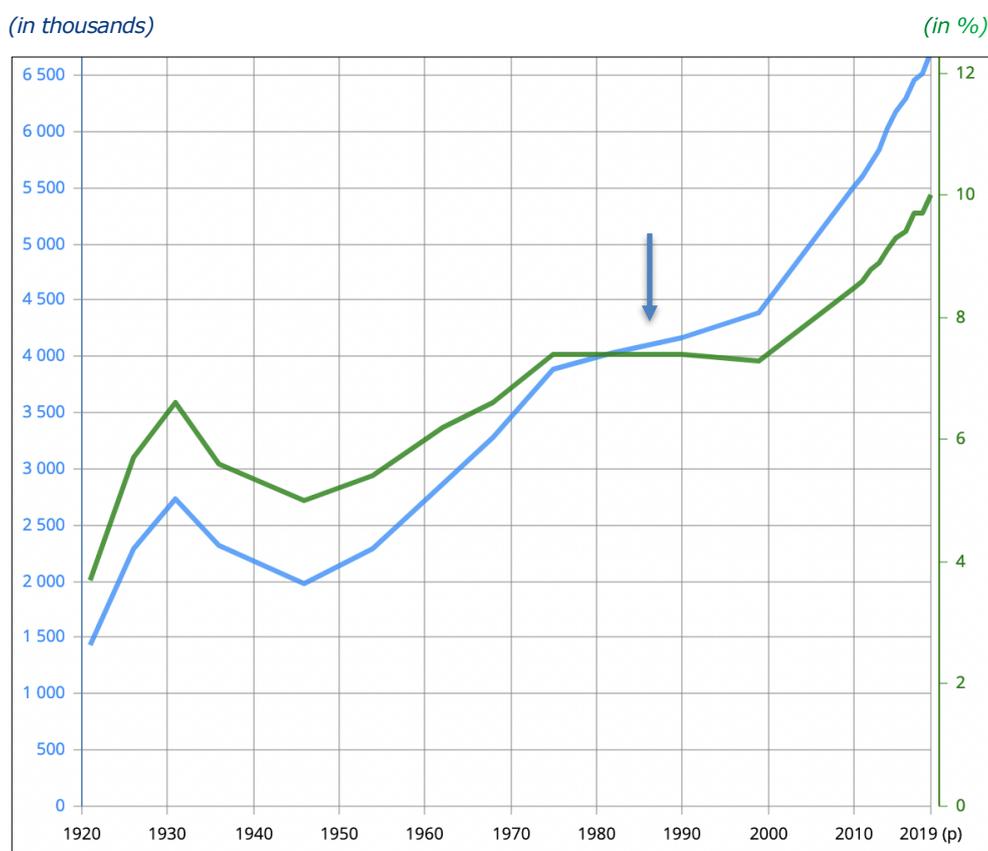
7. C. Wihtol de Wenden et R. Leveau, *La Bourgeoisie. Les trois âges de la vie associative issues de l'immigration*, Paris: Éditions du CNRS, 2001.

8. F. Héran, “The Vocabulary of Demography from Its Origins to the Present Day, *op. cit.*”, pp. 497-536.

More immigrants, more debates?

First of all, it is striking that the sudden increase in use of the word does not correspond to a moment of increased immigration in France, but rather to a fairly long period of stabilization of the proportion of immigrants in the national population, between the mid-1970s and the early 2000s (green curve in graph 1.2).

Graph 1.2: Immigrants in France (1920-2019)



Source: Insee, "Recensements de la population et estimations de population".

Number of immigrants (in thousands) and proportion of immigrants in the French population (in %) for metropolitan France (excluding Mayotte between 1999 and 2013, including Mayotte after 2014), between 1921 and 2019.

Another striking element is that between 1973 and 1988, the votes for the National Front (FN), the extreme-right wing party, changed considerably in scale. In 1988, the FN attracted 2.75 million votes in the general elections (45 times its score in 1973), and 4.3 million in the presidential election (30 times more than in 1974). This breakthrough of the FN on the electoral scene put pressure on the debate about immigration.

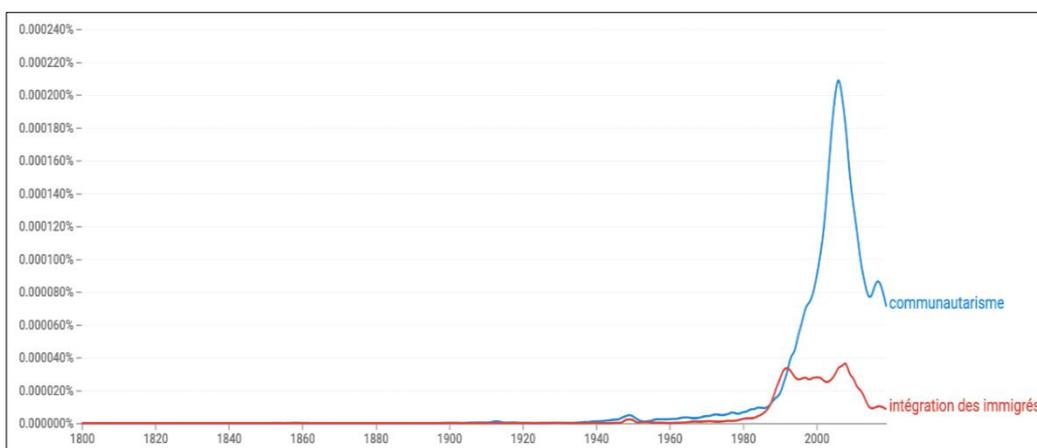
The debate changed as a result, with traditional political parties being jostled by the way the FN put immigration at the center of the debate. A competition took place on the topic between the traditional parliamentary right and the extreme right. The question of immigration in France shifted from an economic and social issue (regarding work and housing in particular) to an identity issue. Thus, a new lexicon of immigrant integration took shape in the mid-1980s.

Communautarisme (communalism)

“*Communautarisme*” is certainly the most important notion that must be understood by anyone who intends to make sense of French debates about immigrant integration. The *Larousse* dictionary defines “*communautarisme*” as follows: “Trend in American multiculturalism that emphasizes the social function of community organizations (ethnic, religious, sexual, etc.)” What does a term referring to an “American” reality have to do with French debates on immigration?

In order to understand this, it must first be stressed that it is in relation to the term “integration” that the term “*communautarisme*” must be understood in France. The two appear at exactly the same period, at the end of the 1980s, under the effect of the same politicization of the theme of immigration linked to the emergence of the FN and its impact on the political and media debate. Ngram Viewer illustrates both the centrality and late appearance of the term: uses of “*communautarisme*” in the French Google Books corpus are even more intense than uses of “*intégration des immigrés*” (graph 2).

Graph 2.1: The irruption of “*communautarisme*” in the debate (1800-2019)



Source: “French 2019” by Ngram Viewer (smoothing of 1).

Read: in 2006, the frequency of the word “*communautarisme*” was 2.14 per million of all the words in the French language corpus.

A negative identity

Seen from France, “*communautarisme*” is everything that French citizenship should not be.

Instead of emphasizing the abstract relationship between an individual and the French state, “*communautarisme*” is conceived of as a foreign tradition that emphasizes specific ethnocultural and racial characteristics of members of a society. This tradition is linked to the so-called “Anglo-Saxon” world. Hence a paradox: “*communautarisme*” is probably the most difficult word to translate in English because it is entirely a product of French republican public reasoning; at the same time, “*communautarisme*” describes what is supposed to be the tradition of English-speaking Western countries (such as the US, the UK, and Canada), against which the French tradition is defined by its promoters.

“*Anglo-Saxon communautarisme*” is the negative identity of French citizenship.⁹ It is the straw man argument of the French debate about immigrant integration. The reality is of course much more complex when we look closely at the situations in countries that are usually referred to under this label.¹⁰ But the word supports the idea of the existence of two blocs: an “Anglo-Saxon world” that is profoundly anti-republican; a republican world, rooted in French history, profoundly anti-communitarian. This narrative of a mutual exclusion between “Anglo-Saxon” and French citizenship cultures is essential to understand the controversy over the articles published by the *New York Times* and the *Financial Times* and the response by President Macron in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in France in October 2020.

Some but not all

The term “*communautarisme*” suddenly became a political issue in France at the end of the 1980s. By then some practices identified within French society were denounced as alien to France’s national political tradition.

The first “veil affair” at school took place in 1989, when three young students at a secondary school in Creil decided to keep their headscarf on during school hours. The affair caused a lot of controversy, a few months before the celebration of the bicentenary of the French Revolution. But Islam was singled out *before* then, notably in a report addressing French

9. The latter is ambiguous because it functions as a catch-all term. Indeed, it refers at the same time to a political reality (multiculturalism), a cultural logic (communalism), and a theoretical thought (communitarianism), without all of these necessarily overlapping. These different aspects find their coherence around the idea of a primacy given to communities over individuals.

10. J. W. Duyvendak *et al.* “Mysterious Multiculturalism: The Risks of Using Model-Based Indices for Making Meaningful Comparisons”, *Comparative European Politics*, Vol. 11, No. 5, 2013, pp. 599-620.

nationality published in 1988.¹¹ As sometimes happens, the debate preceded the manifestation of the issue it was denouncing.

However, not all immigrant groups were put on the same footing. In some cases, for example with regard to immigrants from China, belonging to a “community” has at one point been publicly described as something positive (as it would encourage the transmission of certain values such as success at school), while in other cases it has been equated to bad communalism. The discourse on “*communautarisme*” also targets immigrant women when they are Muslim, focusing on their clothes, their bodies and even their sexuality and fertility.¹²

Moral boundary

From the outset, the term “*communautarisme*” refers to the impossibility of integration for some immigrant populations and not for others, due to cultural elements that would be specific to these populations, in this case those originating from North African and sub-Saharan countries.

It is through this perspective and under the guise of “communalism” that debates about immigrant integration have successively focused on the issues of the naturalization of postcolonial immigrants and their children (1986-1993), the veil at school (2002-2005), the full-face veil (2009-2010) and, more recently, the idea of an Islamist “separatist” secession operating within French society (2020). From one issue to another, the term maintains very negative overarching representations of immigrant populations and their children, as well as of the reality of integration in France.¹³

However, this is contradicted by what social sciences have shown about the pathways of integration of these populations.¹⁴ “*Communautarisme*” is challenged by many empirical aspects: first, it fails to explain, for example, that immigrants in France quickly identify with French citizenship when they become French. Put another way, immigrants in France endorse the French understanding of universalism against “*communautarisme*”; the socio-cultural integration of Muslim populations is also more intense in

11. M. Long, *Être français aujourd'hui et demain*, Paris: Union générale d'éditions, 1988.

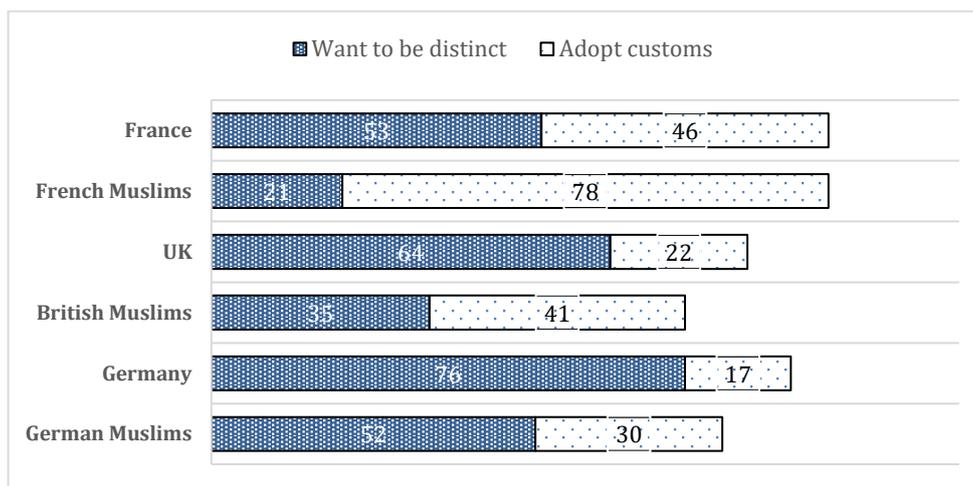
12. C. Sargent and S. Larchanché, “The Muslim Body and the Politics of Immigration in France: Popular and Biomedical Representations of Malian Migrant Women”, *Body & Society*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 2007, pp. 79-102.

13. M. Mohammed and J. Talpin, *Communautarisme ?*, Paris: PUF/La Vie des Idées, 2018.

14. M. Safi, “Le processus d'intégration des immigrés en France: inégalités et segmentation”, *Revue française de sociologie*, Vol. 47, No. 1, 2006, pp. 3-48; E. Santelli, *Grandir en banlieue. Parcours et devenir de jeunes français d'origine maghrébine*, Paris: CIEMI, 2007; J.-L. Pan Ké shon et G. Verdugo, “Ségrégation et incorporation des immigrés en France. Mise en perspective temporelle, 1968 à 2007”, *Revue française de sociologie*, Vol. 55, No. 2, 2014, pp. 245-284.

France than in other comparable European countries;¹⁵ the term also fails to explain the consistent failure of attempts to mobilize an “ethnic vote” in France.¹⁶

Graph 2.2: Perceptions of Muslims



Source: Pew Research Institute, www.pewresearch.org (August 2006).

Read: in France, 53% of the general population think that Muslims want to be distinct; in France, 21% of French Muslims want to be distinct.

As for the phenomenon of radicalization, evidence suggests that it is the lack of religious guidance of individuals – and thus the lack of a Muslim community with which to identify – that explains their resorting to violent acts, and not the other way around. The radicalization that is implicitly taken as evidence of the existence of “Muslim communalism” in France is in fact an illustration of its weakness.¹⁷

15. See: T. Rosentiel, “The French-Muslim Connection: Is France Doing a Better Job Than Its Critics?”, Pew Research Center, August 2006, available at: www.pewresearch.org (consulted on 23 November 2020).

16. S. Brouard and V. Tiberj, *Français comme les autres? Enquête sur les citoyens d'origine maghrébine, africaine et turque*, Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2005.

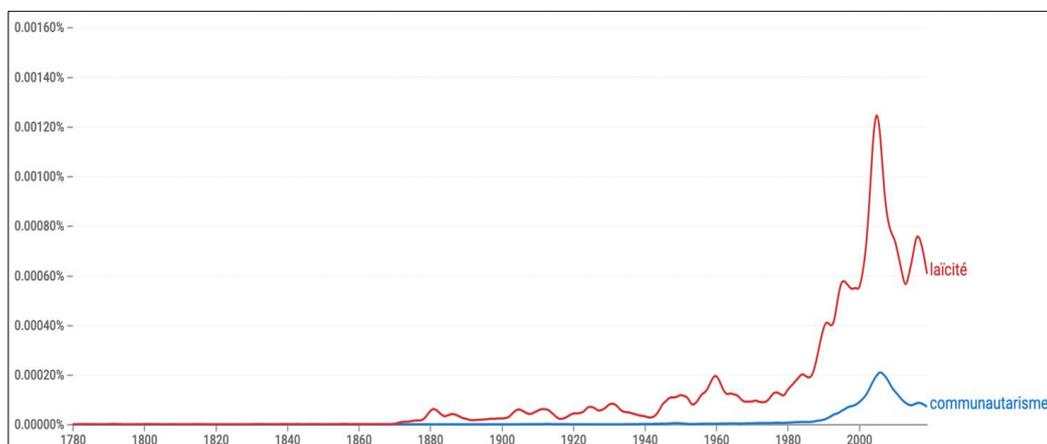
17. See the Boston Review symposium on “France after Charlie Hebdo”, available at: <http://bostonreview.net> (consulted 23 November 2020).

Laïcité (French secularism)

“*Laïcité*” is the most sensitive term of the debate today. The word means secularism, but in a way that is deeply rooted in France’s modern history. It refers to the long struggle in the 19th century to establish a separation between the (Catholic) Church and the State. This struggle resulted in the 1905 law which has provided the terms of reference for the legal definition of *laïcité*, namely the neutrality of the State in religious matters, associated with religious freedom and equality. The *Larousse* dictionary defines “*laïcité*” as a “conception and organization of society based on the separation of Church and State and which excludes the Churches from the exercise of any political or administrative power and, in particular, from the organization of education.”

A search on Ngram Viewer provides once again an interesting finding. If uses of the term “*laïcité*” can be traced back to the early 1880s and the Third Republic, the curve shows an exponential increase in the corpus after the mid-1980s, with a peak in 2005 (graph 3). There is something specific about “*laïcité*” in this recent period, that contrasts with earlier moments, including the time around the vote of the 1905 law. How can we understand this sudden change?

Graph 3.1: “*Laïcité*” in the French public discourse (1780-2019)



Source: “*French 2019*” by Ngram Viewer (smoothing of 1).

A late reframing as an Islam-related question

The first element of answer concerns a shift in the type of issues framed as being related to “*laïcité*.” It took a long time for secularism to be about something other than Catholic education. In 1984, it was against the Savary project that a million demonstrators took to the streets in defense of private (Catholic) education. Ten years later, in January 1994, the “one million for secularism” mobilized in defense of public education. “*Laïcité*” was not yet what it is today, i.e. an issue centered on the place of Islam. This shift did not come to fruition until the early 2000s. This late reframing of “*laïcité*” as an Islam-related issue accounts for the upward shift in the curve.

The politicization of “*laïcité*”

Particularly after 2002, there was an abundant production of reports on the topic. As the author of a report commissioned by the Prime Minister explains, secularism was used to remobilize the “Right of May” (“*la droite de mai*”), referring to the right-wing electorate that mobilized in May 2002, in the second round of the presidential election, to block the FN candidate.¹⁸

Against a backdrop of internal quarrels on the right side of the political spectrum, this “remobilization” led to the installation of the Stasi Commission charged with reflecting on the application of secularism in schools. Among the Commission’s many recommendations, only one was finally adopted: the banning of ostentatious religious signs, which was passed in 2004 thanks to a very broad consensus between the political parties, both on the right and on the left.

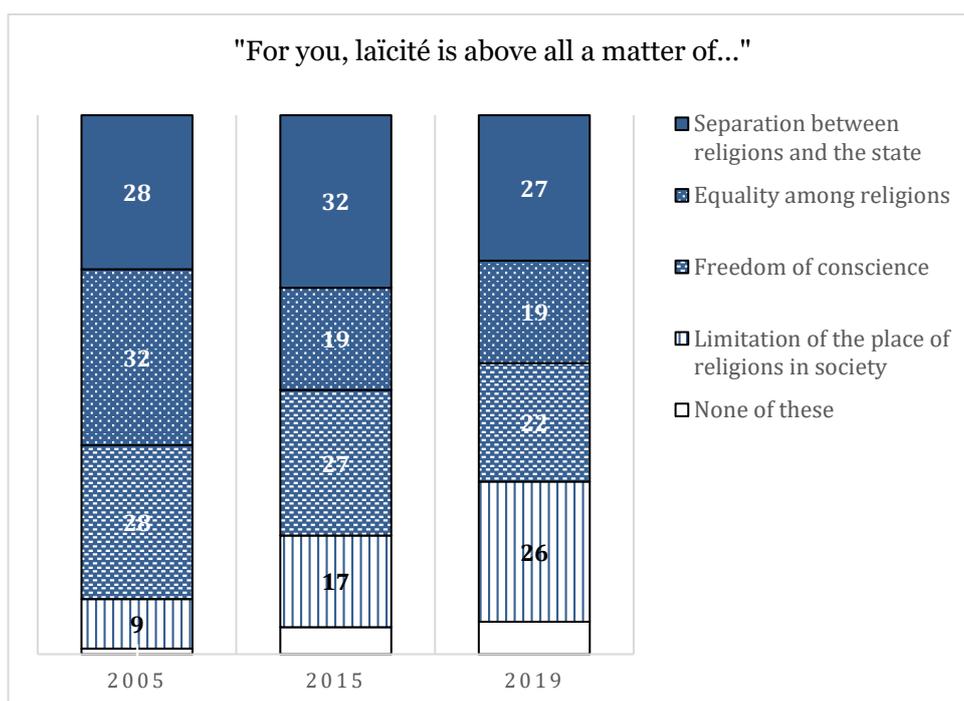
The politicization of the theme of secularism in 2002-2004 had an important consequence on the meaning of the term and its application. On two occasions, in 1989 and 1993, the Council of State was questioned on the wearing of the veil by Muslim schoolgirls. The response of the highest administrative court in the country was as follows: there is no contradiction in principle between secularism and the wearing of the veil at school as long as it does not amount to proselytizing. What takes precedence by default is the religious freedom granted to pupils. After the 2004 law was passed, the legislator overturned this trade-off between religious freedom and religious neutrality, and made prohibition the principle of secularism in schools.

18. F. Baroin, *Pour une nouvelle laïcité. Rapport au Premier ministre*, Paris: Club Dialogue et Initiative, 2003.

Expanding the scope of secularism

The debate quickly moved beyond schools, for example to hospitals or universities. Part of those discussions was the passing of the 2010 law banning the full-face veil.¹⁹ Eventually, the debate was extended to the disadvantaged neighborhoods (the “*banlieues*”), identified as “lost territories of the Republic”, according to the title of a 2002 book denouncing antisemitism and sexism in working-class immigrant schools.²⁰ The metaphor of “lost territories” was spun in many public statements and reports, particularly after the riots of 2005 or the 2015 terrorist attacks. Many people called for the 2004 law to be extended further, for example into the space of private companies. Secularism ended up becoming synonymous with the “fight against communalism.”

Graph 3.2: Perceptions of *laïcité* in France (2005-2019)



Source: Ifop survey (October 2019), www.ifop.com.

Read: in 2005, 9% of the respondents define *laïcité* primarily as an issue of limiting the place of religions in French society; in 2019, 26% think so.

19. After a long period of uncertainty at the time of the 2009 debates on whether or not the principle of secularism could justify banning the full veil in the public space, it was finally the notion of immaterial public order (a legal innovation) that founded the 2010 law banning the concealment of the face in the public space (and no longer just the niqab).

20. E. Brenner *et al.*, *Les territoires perdus de la République. Milieu scolaire, antisémitisme, sexisme*, Paris: Mille et Une Nuits, 2002.

The result is that the political debate today goes far beyond the framework of the 1905 law. The latter gives a clear definition of secularism, which commands the neutrality of the State in matters of religion while guaranteeing the religious freedom of individuals and an equal treatment of all denominations. *Laïcité* calls for the neutrality of agents of the State only, not of its users. It guarantees the exercise of fundamental freedoms including religious freedom and freedom of conscience. Under the 1905 law, secularism represents the basis of a balance, the objective of which is to organize the moral pluralism of French society within the shared space of a common citizenship.

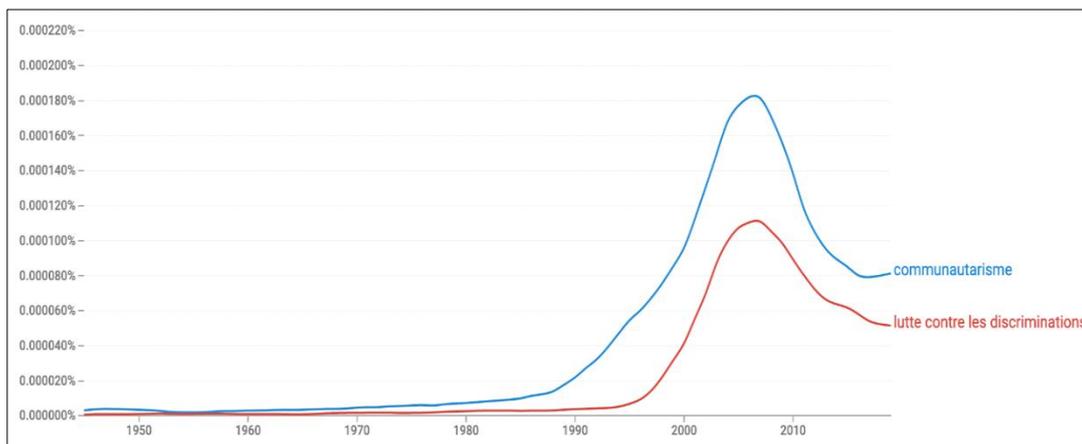
Yet, now that it has become the expression of a form of identity, “*laïcité*” has been transformed into a cultural block which is blurring the traditional separation between the public and private spheres.²¹ In the name of this culture, it is called upon to exclude practices – first and foremost the wearing of the “Islamic veil” – which are nevertheless normal in a democracy where individual freedoms are protected. By focusing on the veil in this way, this culture questions women’s membership of society on the grounds of their belonging to Islam. In so doing, the tendency to culturalize French secularism is linked to the production of gender-based exclusion, paradoxically advocated in the name of gender equality.

21. J. Scott, *Sex and Secularism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017.

Discrimination

It took a long time for the issue of discrimination to enter French debates on integration and immigration. This delay in addressing the issue of discrimination is made visible by Ngram Viewer. Compared to the word “*communautarisme*,” we can see that it has taken almost ten more years for discrimination to take hold in the debate (graph 4).

Graph 4.1: The fight against discrimination (1940-2019)



Source: "French 2019" by Ngram Viewer (smoothing of 1).

Does French universalism see discrimination?

There are several reasons for this delay with regard to other issues in France, but also in comparison with other European countries.

The first reason is that it seemed difficult to recognize that the universalism inherited from 1789 could coexist in French society with racial discrimination. By virtue of the principle of universalism attached to French citizenship (which consists of not differentiating between citizens considered as abstract individuals), any differentiating treatment based on

perceived race or ethnicity seemed alien to the republican order of things.²² This has long been an argument for refusing to put the topic on the agenda.

Another related reason concerns the difficulty of measuring discrimination in the absence of statistics pertaining to the categories on the basis of which people are stereotyped (racist, xenophobic, antisemitic, sexist, homophobic, etc.) and eventually discriminated against.²³

The late discovery of discrimination

Yet, anti-racist associations had already taken up the topic before that, as early as the 1990s. In particular, they had used the technique of “testing” in order to show that immigrant populations and their descendants had less chance than others at finding housing, work, internships or even being admitted to nightclubs. But the success of these campaigns remained very limited.

In 1997, there was eventually a major shift. It was the result of a dual evolution, at both European and national levels. The successful conclusion of negotiations at European level led to the drafting of an article on discrimination in the 1997 Treaty of Amsterdam, soon followed by two directives and an action program.²⁴ In France, a public debate was carried out in particular by the Council of State, which focused its 1996 annual report precisely on this issue.²⁵ A change in the majority at the National Assembly also took place in 1997, with a left-wing government (1997-2002) that put discrimination on the agenda in the most frontal manner.

The “Liberal Hour”

These few years resulted in what could be called the “liberal hour”, to use Adlai Stevenson’s notion, which refers to a context in which politics converge on a consensus about the need of a political change related to a specific social issue. During these few years, the topic of the fight against discrimination became a key issue in France. The new government made it the spearhead of its integration policy. Laws were passed. This gave new contents to the concept of “integration.” It was recognized that it is not the lack of

22. V. De Rudder *et al.*, *L'inégalité raciste. L'universalité républicaine à l'épreuve*, Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2000.

23. P. Simon, “La question des statistiques ethniques en France” in M. Poinot (ed.), *Migrations et mutations de la société française. L'état des savoirs*, Paris: La Découverte, 2014, pp. 297-306.

24. A. Geddes and V. Guiraudon, “Britain, France, and EU Anti-Discrimination Policy: The Emergence of an EU Policy Paradigm”, *West European Politics*, Vol. 27, No. 2, 2004, pp. 334-353.

25. Conseil d'État, *Sur le principe d'égalité, rapport 1996*, Paris: La Documentation française, 1997.

“integration” from immigrant populations but the discrimination against them that eroded the republican contract.

The place of these populations was no longer described in terms of cultural distance and “communalism”, but rather in terms of their positive contribution to national culture. However, this short-lived liberal hour was closed from 2002 onwards. The agenda of an anti-discrimination policy nevertheless gave rise to the creation of an independent administrative authority (the High Authority for the Fight Against Discrimination and for Equality, or HALDE) in 2004, which was finally merged in 2011 into the more generalist ombudsman institution of the “*Défenseur des droits*.”

However, increasingly linked to the debate on secularism, the anti-discrimination agenda rapidly found its limits. It certainly made it possible to highlight the limits of considering the wearing of the veil by users of public services as an infringement of French secularism. In 2006, for example, the HALDE confirmed that not allowing veiled women to participate in the ceremonies for the handing over of their naturalization decree constituted discrimination.²⁶ But the public debate has been more sensitive to “*communautarisme*” than to the fight against discrimination. At the time, while intelligence services pointed out that discrimination was a source of the 2005 “riots”,²⁷ this finding contradicted the analysis made by the Minister of the Interior and the media, and struggled to get heard.

Visible/invisible

Yet, the reality of discrimination is significant in France. The French concept of equal rights (as opposed to equal opportunities) does not protect the children of immigrants from unequal treatment based on their origin, skin color or religion. The “Trajectories and Origins” survey conducted in 2008 by INED and INSEE (and updated in 2019-2020) documents it very precisely.²⁸

26. A. Hajjat, *Les frontières de l'« identité nationale ». L'injonction à l'assimilation en France métropolitaine et coloniale*, Paris: La Découverte, 2012.

27. “Selon les RG, les émeutes n'étaient pas le fait de bandes organisées”, *Le Monde*, 7 December 2005.

28. C. Beauchemin, C. Hamel and P. Simon (eds.), *Trajectoires et origines. Enquête sur la diversité des populations en France*, Paris: Ined Éditions, 2016.

Table 4.2: Experience of racism of immigrants, natives of French overseas departments, and their descendants

	Has experienced a racist situation	Has not experienced a racist situation but feels exposed to it	Does not feel exposed to racism and hasn't experienced a racist situation	Total	Non-weighted numbers
Country or department of birth of immigrants or of natives of French Overseas Departments (DOM)					
FOD	47	36	17	100	522
Algeria	35	35	30	100	614
Morocco and Tunisia	38	34	28	100	832
Sahelian Africa	41	38	20	100	509
Guinean or Central Africa	55	33	12	100	606
South-East Asia	36	28	36	100	493
Turkey	25	31	43	100	662
Portugal	20	25	55	100	515
Spain and Italy	27	17	56	100	211
Other countries of the EU27	19	17	64	100	522
Other countries	28	26	45	100	921
All immigrants	32	29	39	100	5,885
Country or department of birth of the parents of descendants of immigrants or of natives of FOD					
FOD	52	28	20	100	616
Algeria	49	31	20	100	1,247
Morocco and Tunisia	50	28	22	100	1,079
Sahelian Africa	58	31	12	100	461
Guinean or Central Africa	60	25	15	100	322
South-East Asia	53	26	21	100	546
Turkey	44	32	25	100	427
Portugal	28	26	46	100	892
Spain and Italy	21	19	60	100	1,617
Other countries of the EU27	21	20	59	100	622
Other countries	38	24	38	100	553
All descendants of immigrants	36	25	39	100	8,110
Majority population	16	23	61	100	3,186
Total metropolitan population	19	23	58	100	18,864

Source: Trajectories and Origins survey, INED-INSEE, 2008.

Scope: 18-50 years old.

Note: The data presented excludes refusals of response and those who answered "don't know", i.e. 4% of the population surveyed.

Read: 47% of individuals born in a FOD declare having experienced a racist situation.

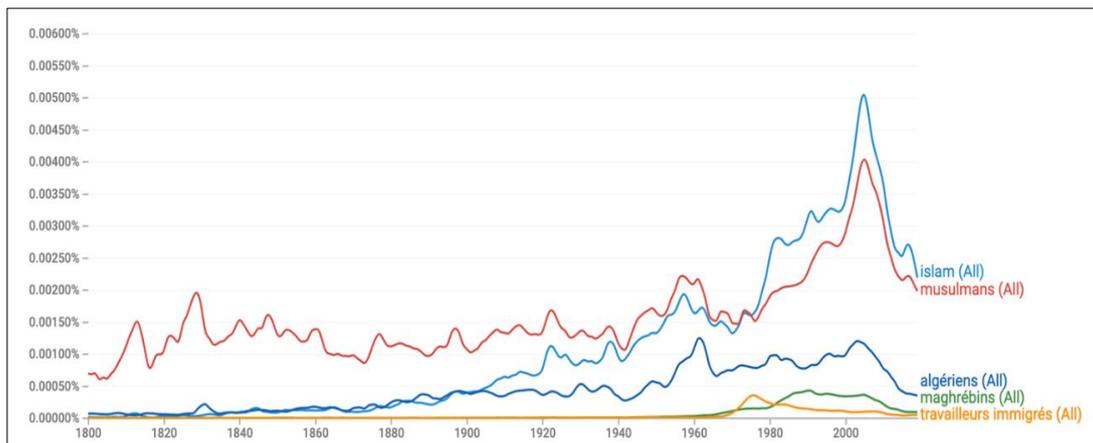
The difficult recognition of discrimination in France is undoubtedly less related to the universalist ideology of French citizenship than to the fact that this theme does not fit in well with a discourse based on the fight against “*communautarisme*.” In the French public language, “*communautarisme*” and discrimination are two readings of reality that cannot be reconciled because they refer to two mutually exclusive logics: the rejection of society by minority groups, in the case of *communautarisme*; the rejection of minority groups by society, in the case of discrimination.

The reality is, as we know, more complex, but no other perspective has so far been able to undermine the rhetorical force of the explanation based on “*communautarisme*” in political discourse and the media. The result is that “*communautarisme*” hides the reality of discrimination from the public eye.

Islam

There has been a very strong social and political demand for knowledge about Islam and Muslims over the past forty years. This is illustrated by Ngram Viewer (graph 5). Of course, the curve produced by a search on Islam and Muslims covers many different meanings of the word “Islam” and many different perspectives on Islamic realities – we should say Islams –, meanings and perspectives that are not at all limited to our topic nor to the French context. The fact remains, however, that Ngram Viewer shows a renewed interest in Islam and Muslims in a sequence that runs roughly from the late 1970s (the Revolution in Iran took place in 1979) to 2005 (the year of the “riots” in France), before the curve starts to drop.

Graph 5.1: Islam and Muslims (1800-2019)



Source: "French 2019" by Ngram Viewer (smoothing of 1).

Short term, long term

It is in the interplay between an external dimension (international geopolitical news, particularly since the end of the Cold War) and an internal dimension (the evolution of French society) that interest in the topic can be explained. But this is not enough to explain why Islam crystallizes to such an extent the issues at stake in the debate on immigration and citizenship, at the expense of other possible explanations (in terms of class and race for example).

First, it is not only national and international news that build the relationship of French society to Islam. There is also a long historical

dimension that must be taken into consideration in order to grasp this relationship, that is, the history of French colonization and decolonization. French colonial history, one essential stage of which was the conquest of Algeria in 1830, is first and foremost the history of the use of Islam as an internal boundary within the Republic, in order to establish a difference between French people according to whether they were citizens or colonial subjects. Muslims were confined to a subordinate status. In order to leave it and become citizens, they had to fulfil very strict conditions, comparable to naturalization but extremely difficult to access in practice.²⁹

From colonial subjects to postcolonial immigrants

The British sociologist John Rex showed in the 1970s how colonial ideology (and, with it, the racist hierarchies this ideology justified) was transferred to the mainland of former colonial powers by the phenomenon of migration: former colonial subjects became immigrants and settled in the working-class neighborhoods of large European cities, bringing with them the categories to which they were subjected during colonial times. Along with the issues pertaining to memory,³⁰ this link between colonial history and contemporary migration history had a very concrete impact on the process of politicizing the theme of immigration in the 1980s in France.

One of the driving forces behind the debate on immigrant integration at the time was the comparison between “yesterday’s immigrants” and “today’s immigrants”³¹: on the one hand, immigrants “of yesterday” who came from European countries (Italy, Poland, Spain, etc.) at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, for whom integration is said to have been successful (even though historians have stressed how conflictual this integration process was and how it was fueled by hostility and racism on the part of French society at the time their arrival);³² on the other, those “of today,” different from the migrants “of yesterday” because they came from further away, and for whom integration seemed problematic.

29. P. Weil, “Le statut des musulmans en Algérie coloniale. Une nationalité française dénaturée”, *Histoire de la justice*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 2005, pp. 93-109.

30. J. Michel, *Gouverner les mémoires. Les politiques mémorielles en France*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2010.

31. N. Foner, “The Uses and Abuses of History: Understanding Contemporary U.S. Immigration”, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, No. 45, 2019, pp. 4-20.

32. G. Noiriel, *The French Melting Pot. Immigration, Citizenship and National Identity*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

In those discourses, the contrast between “yesterday” and “today” has been embodied in the new immigrant populations’ belonging to Islam.³³ Islam has been conceived as what “makes the difference.” Once again, it has become the main marker of a symbolic boundary within French society. This took place very early in the debates. In this sense, the attacks of 9/11 did not bring about a shift, but are more exactly the continuation of a trend that had begun before, as Ngram Viewer shows in France (and also in other European countries).

Nativism

This preference to see immigrants and their descendants as Muslims (rather than through any other categories, including those based on class³⁴) has had consequences for the very shape of the debate on immigration and citizenship, and the arguments that have developed within it.

By focusing on Islam, the debate builds up an opposition between two value systems, that of the Republic and that of Islam. By turning it into an issue of values, the difficulty of justifying the exclusion of people in the name of racist or xenophobic categories (which today is punishable by law) is avoided. This transfer from a question of “racial” or “cultural” inferiority (which is the basis of racist discourses) to a question of defending national values (“secularism” versus “communalism”) allows statements that would have otherwise been unjustifiable if they had been expressed in the terms of traditional racist discourse.

However, as the sociologist Jan Willem Duyvendak has shown, far from eliminating racist hierarchies, this rhetoric based on the marker of Islam enables nativist discourses. Those discourses are based on the perceived privilege of those who are natives “from here” as against the “newcomers.” The latter also include those who have been “here” for a very long time but who are perceived as not being able to “be like us” precisely because of being assigned a different value system that, supposedly makes their otherness insurmountable and their morality incompatible with “ours.” This new type of discourse has profoundly changed the form of inclusion and exclusion pertaining to citizenship in Western countries over the last two decades, both in Europe and in the United States.³⁵

33. C. Bertossi *et al.* “Past in the Present: Migration and the Uses of History in the Contemporary Era”, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 2020 (DOI: 10.1080/1369183X.2020.1812275).

34. S. Beaud, *Violences urbaines, violence sociale : genèse des nouvelles classes dangereuses*, Paris: Fayard, 2003.

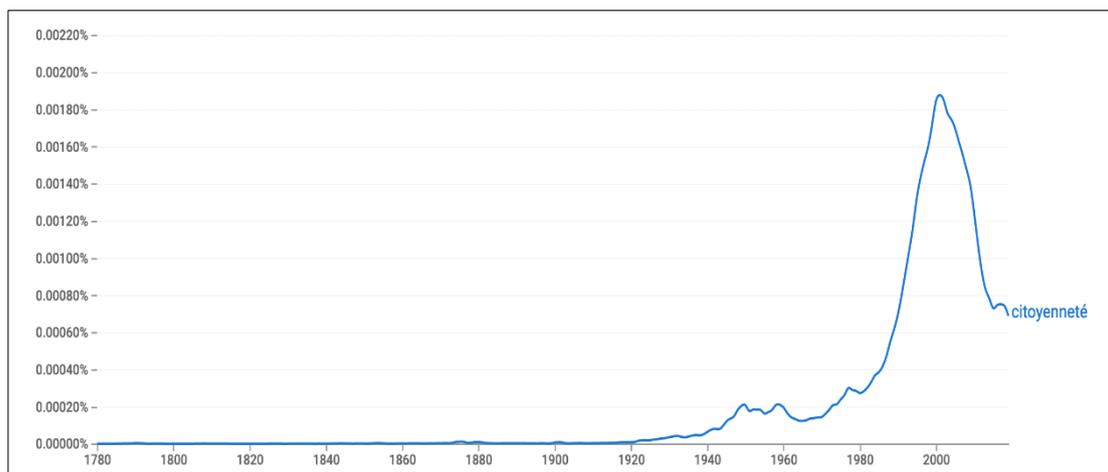
35. J. W. Duyvendak, *The Politics of Home. Belonging and Nostalgia in Western Europe and the United States*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Citoyenneté (citizenship)

This may seem surprising today, but it took a long time for postwar immigration to France to be considered from the perspective of citizenship.

Citizenship was a somewhat outdated notion before the debate on immigrant integration started. It was not until the 1980s that the term “*citoyenneté*” was dug up as a central dimension of France’s political tradition. Ngram Viewer helps visualize to what extent “*citoyenneté*” relates to the debates on immigration after the mid-1980s (graph 6).³⁶

Graph 6.1: “Citoyenneté” (1780-2019)

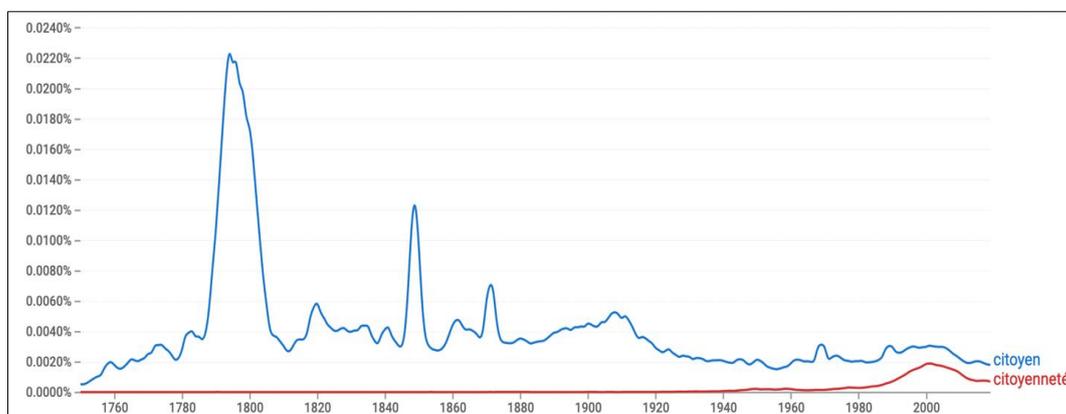


Source: "French 2019" by Ngram Viewer (smoothing of 1).

A comparison between the words “*citoyen*” (citizen) and “*citoyenneté*” (citizenship) shows that while the former actually belongs to the French tradition inherited from the French Revolution (with peaks in 1794, 1848 and 1871, and to a lesser extent in 1968), the latter is nothing but an outcome of the politicization of immigrant integration after 1986 (graph 6 bis).

36. C. Wihtol de Wenden, *Citoyenneté, nationalité et immigration*, Paris: Arcantère, 1987.

Graph 6.2: Comparing “citoyen” and “citoyenneté” (1750-2019)



Source: "French 2019" by Ngram Viewer (smoothing of 1).

Citizenship: to have it or not

Two rationales accompanied this “invention” of citizenship at the turn of the 1980s. Both operated at roughly the same time but as a counterpoint to each other.

The first concerns the access to French citizenship by foreigners. Due to the durable settlement of immigrants in France, this issue crystallized most of the debate: under what conditions was it possible to ensure the allegiance and loyalty of the new French populations? Born in France to parents who were themselves born French in France’s former colonies, the children of postcolonial immigrants were automatically French on coming of age. However, it was said that this automatic access to French citizenship (a legacy from the Third Republic) was no longer sufficient. It was assumed that their ethnic origin differentiated them from the migrations that had come to France some decades earlier, when immigrants came from European countries.

Hence, for example, the importance in those discussions of the topic of military service for dual nationals, especially young Franco-Algerians. Those young people could choose the country where they did their national service by virtue of an agreement signed by France and Algeria in 1983. The possibility of French nationals would do their service in the country of their second nationality was seen as contradicting their allegiance to France. In those years, the FN campaigned on the theme of “French of paper” and “French for the papers”, that is, citizens whose allegiance was supposedly only a façade. This was followed by the project to reform nationality law,

launched in 1986 and adopted in 1993 (a reform finally abrogated in 1998 by the Jospin government at the beginning of what I previously described as the “liberal hour”, see p. 25).

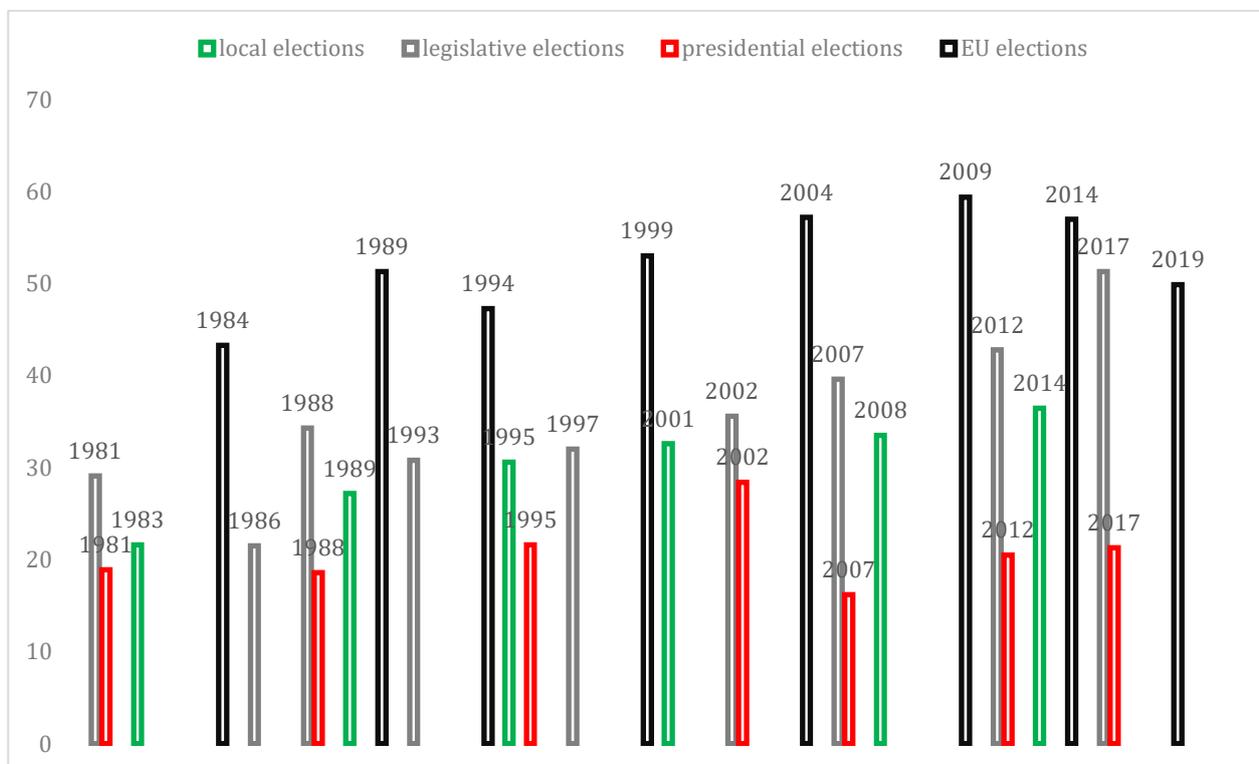
This way of looking at the issue of citizenship from the perspective of French nationality has reappeared several times since then, notably with regard to the deprivation of nationality for new French citizens. The Civil Code already allows the government to deprive of French nationality naturalized persons when they commit serious crimes. Projects to expand this possibility were proposed by President Sarkozy (for naturalized French nationals who allegedly committed violence against members of the police force) and by President Hollande (no longer regarding naturalized French nationals but dual nationals who were born French). These projects were never adopted.

Citizenship without nationality

There is a second line of reasoning on citizenship that is very different from the first one. It started with the first generation of associations that emerged from the “*beur*” movement (the offspring of North African immigrants) in the mid-1980s. The issue was not about the conditions that could guarantee the making of loyal new French citizens, but whether non-nationals needed French nationality to be recognized as “good citizens” in France.

As a matter of fact, French nationality only imperfectly covers the types of commitment which are at the roots of citizenship. Many French people abstain from voting (even though they are citizens); many foreigners are also very much involved in “civic” activities, for example as volunteers, parents, heads of associations, etc. (although they are not citizens). How then is it possible to think of citizenship without nationality?³⁷

37. T. Hammar, *Democracy and the Nation State: Aliens, Denizens and Citizens in a World of International Migration*, Avebury: Ashgate, 1998; R. Bauböck, *Transnational Citizenship: Membership and Rights in International Migration*, Aldershot: Elgar, 1994; J. Habermas, *L'intégration républicaine. Essais de théorie politique*, Paris: Fayard, 1998.

Graph 6.3: Abstention rates at elections in France (in %)

Source: Ministry of Interior.

Read: The abstention rate was 51.3% at the 2017 legislative election.

In the 1990s, this theme of citizenship without nationality intersected with the birth, enshrined in the Maastricht Treaty, of an EU citizenship. Although EU citizenship has never been disconnected from nationality (you have to be a national of a Member State to benefit from it), it has nevertheless opened the right to vote to non-nationals in local and European elections to non-nationals (with the exclusion of national elections).

There is a great deal of convergence between EU citizenship and the idea of a local right to vote for foreigners, demanded by immigrant associations. Subjected to local experiments on several occasions in French cities since the 1990s, this right to vote for foreigners has long been promised (it was already included in the program of candidate Mitterrand in the 1981 presidential election), but never put in place.

Two opposing logics

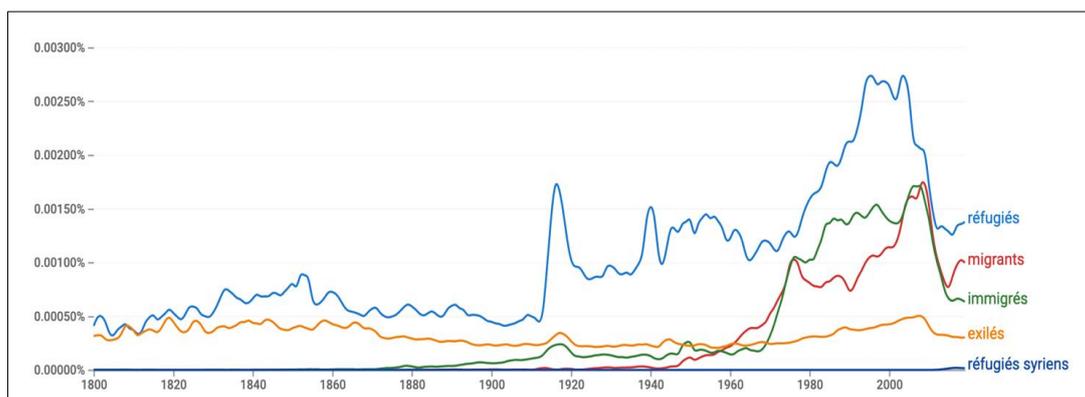
These two conceptualizations of citizenship are very different. It is even impossible to bring them together because they are based on two irreconcilable visions. The first perspective (citizenship through nationality) questions the quality of “good citizenship” regarding populations that are described in terms of the problems they may pose to French society: polygamy, delinquency, conflictual relations with the forces of law and order, offences linked to terrorist activities, etc.

On the other hand, the second perspective (citizenship without nationality) suggests an understanding of equality beyond formal equality and is closely linked to the anti-discrimination agenda. Over time, the former has largely prevailed over the latter in French debates. It can be explained by its link with the issue of “*communautarisme*”, as illustrated by the discourses that question the possibility that Muslims would “really” belong to French society.

Migrant

The categories used to describe the populations concerned by debates about immigration are not easy to delineate with precision. In forty years, these categories have changed a great deal: immigrant workers, family immigration, North Africans, “beurs” (French youth with a Northern African background), “second generation”, Muslims, refugees, migrants, exiles, etc. Each category refers to specific situations, social logics and very different issues regarding citizenship and belonging.

Graph 7.1: “Migrants” and other categories (1800-2019)

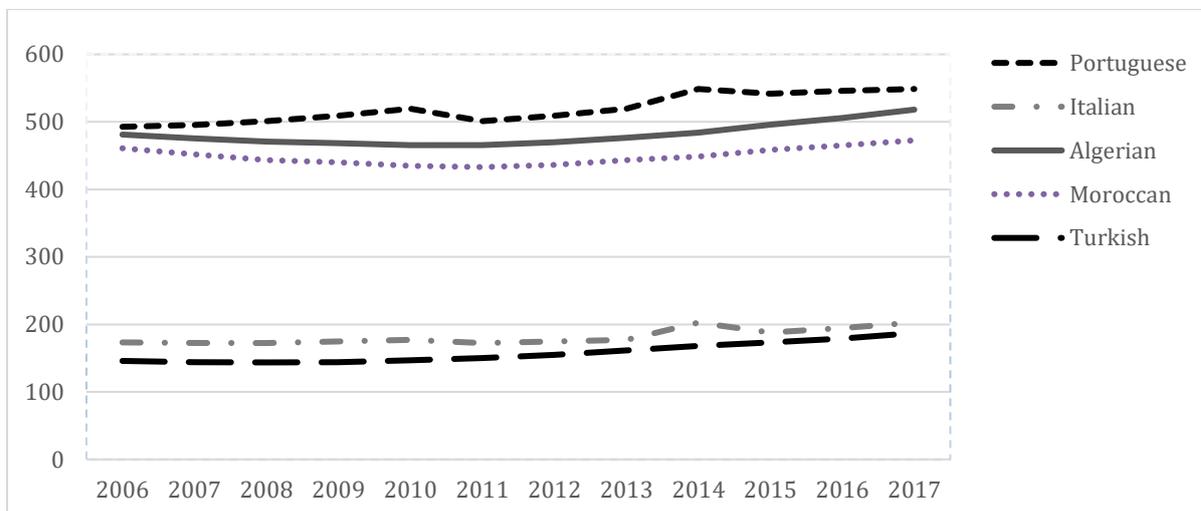


Source: "French 2019" by Ngram Viewer (smoothing of 1).

Untold ethnicity

A first observation can be made: these ways of describing the “who” in the immigration debate have always had a strong ethnic connotation. Socially, through media coverage as well as politically, the immigrant is always a non-European person. Europeans and, more generally speaking, Westerners are barely framed as “immigrants.” If in France, unlike in other countries, ethnicity has not in itself been used as a formal category to describe immigration, it is none other than ethnicity that we find behind the many terms used to talk about migrants. So much so that populations who have no migration experience but are of non-European origin are still described as “immigrants,” even in the second or third generation. This leads to a second observation: what links most of these categories in the public eye is the (actual or supposed) belonging to Islam of the people concerned.

Graph 7.2: Evolution of the 5 largest foreign national groups in France (in thousands)



Source: INSEE, www.insee.fr.

These two major aspects that make ethnic categories function despite their social and political illegitimacy and that find in Islam the basis for this difference (like “race” or language in the US), explain why other immigrant groups in France have sometime remained barely visible. Among those groups should be mentioned the case of the Portuguese, who have been the first foreign national group present in France, ahead of the Algerians.³⁸ We should also highlight the way in which other numerically important groups have been spared, *a priori*, by the discourse on “*communautarisme*” because they are not Muslims.³⁹

Three ages of the immigration debate

This quick summary allows us to identify three distinct phases in the French debate on immigration in the contemporary period: first, a debate in the 1980s focused on the access to French nationality of recently settled post-colonial immigrants and their children born in France; second, a debate in the 1990s and 2000s on people born in France with an immigrant origin, in relation with the issues of the “*banlieues*” (immigrant neighborhoods) and Islam, including the fight against discrimination moment and the rise of the theme of “*laïcité*”; since 2015, the debate has entered a new phase, focusing

38. A. Cordeiro, “Les Portugais et les marches de 1983 et 1984. Les dessous de la manipulation raciste de l’opinion publique distinguant des communautés ‘visibles’ et ‘invisibles’”, *Migrations Société*, Vol. 159-160, No. 3, 2015, pp. 171-190.

39. This is what is called “ethnic leveraging”: E. Bleich and K. Morgan, “Leveraging Identities”, *Theory and Society*, Vol. 48, No. 4, 2019, pp. 511-534.

on asylum seekers and refugees in connection with the issue of European borders in the Mediterranean.

Another way of highlighting this evolution is to observe the changes in the paradigms of French migration policies over the same period. The “zero immigration” paradigm, which emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s, suggested that the only way to successfully “integrate” immigrant populations who were already in France was to limit entry as much as possible. The counterpart of “zero immigration” was the emphasis on the category of the “clandestine” immigrant who is in an irregular situation in France.

In the mid-2000s, a new paradigm emerged, that of “chosen immigration.” This referred to labor immigration (in fact, however, immigration is always ultimately an issue of labor because migrants’ families and refugees also work, whatever the reasons for entry). This “chosen immigration” was opposed to the so-called “suffered immigration,” i.e. immigration over which the government has no real power of control – family immigration and asylum – because those are entries that are protected by constitutional and international law, in the name of the respect for fundamental human rights.

Since 2015, the priority has been the reception and integration of refugees. The distinction has then been made between those who are described as “genuine refugees” and those who apply for asylum but who are alleged to have no actual need of protection.

The wheat and the chaff?

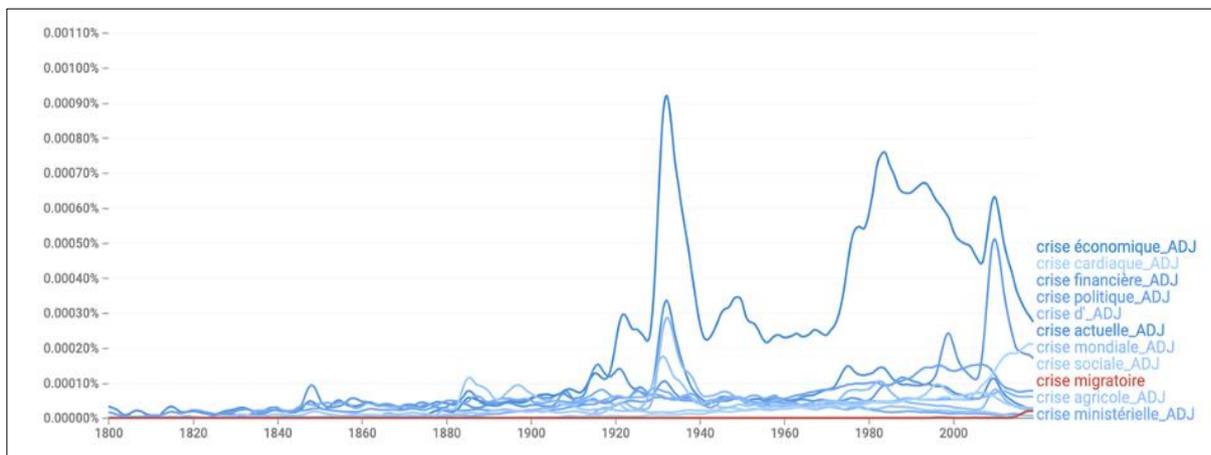
To summarize, there is always a category that is dictated by the migration policy objective of the moment that refers to persons accused of abusing the procedure and the system (illegal immigrants, family immigration, “fake refugees”). This organizes a distinction between “good” and “bad” migrants, an artificial one because the same person can easily fall into one category or the other at different times in his or her life: “illegal” immigrants regularized through work become labor migrants; asylum seekers may prefer a host country because they already have settled relatives there; those who flee their countries do so for intertwined economic and political reasons, etc.

Today, the generic term “migrant” seems to have replaced the old figure of the immigrant in journalistic and political vocabulary. But the term does not refer to a specific status. It only refers to people’s migratory experience. Ngram Viewer also shows the importance of the term “refugee” in the corpus and how much the contemporary period illustrates the importance of the issue of asylum, which is comparable in its intensity only to the period following the First and Second World Wars.

Crise migratoire (migration crisis)

2015 will long remain an exceptional year in terms of migration on the European continent. In just a few months, over a million people landed on the shores of the Aegean Sea, passing through Greece to enter Europe. The images of this exodus were reminiscent of older ones in black and white showing civilian populations on European roads during and immediately after World War II. A dramatic symbol of the 2015 episode, the image of the lifeless body of Aylan Kurdi, a three-year-old Syrian boy stranded on a Turkish beach, travelled around the world and aroused a profound international stir: a human drama against the backdrop of a “migration crisis.” The term “migration crisis” has been used in a loop on news channels to reflect this reality. Was it really relevant then and is it today?

Graph 8.1: The place of “migration crisis” in the use of the word “crisis”



Source: "French language corpus 2019" by Ngram Viewer (smoothing of 1).

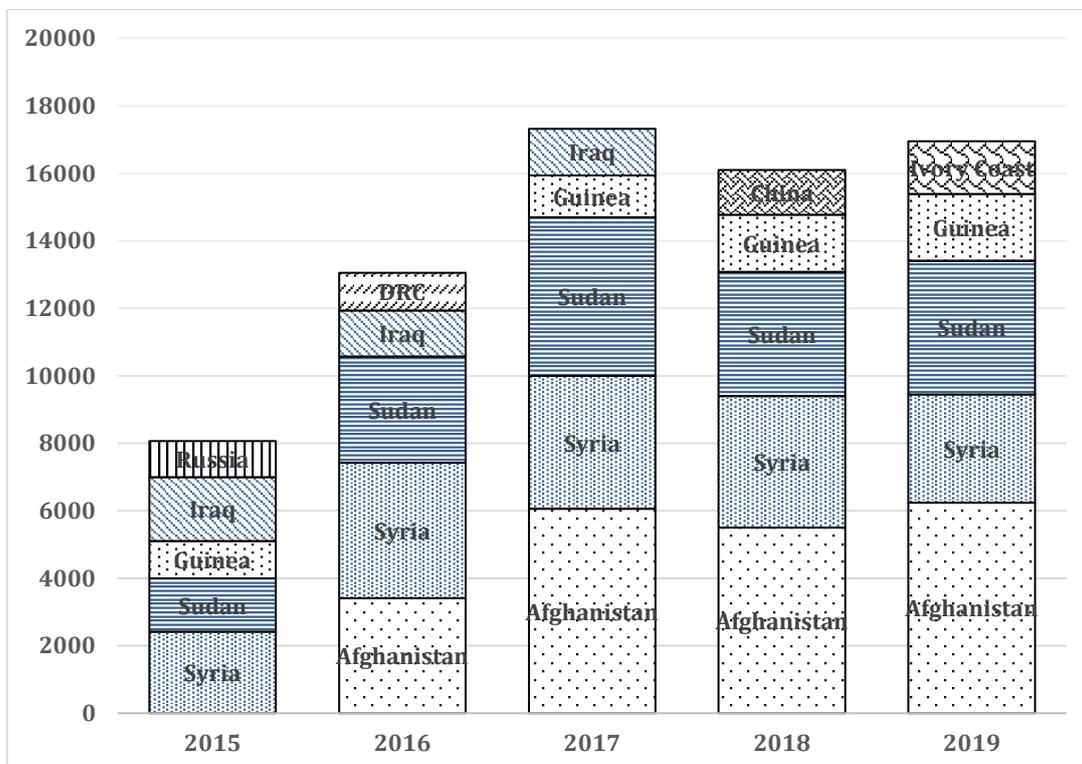
A “crisis” that is almost invisible in the corpus

Besides the success of the phrase “migration crisis” in the media, it is only barely visible in the corpus analyzed by Ngram Viewer. An initial search for adjectives linked to the word “crisis” in the corpus does not make the “migratory crisis” visible: the crisis is first of all “economic,” “financial”; it is often “cardiac.” “*Crise migratoire*” appears only slightly more frequently than “ministerial crisis” or “agricultural crisis.” One could have imagined a sudden surge in the occurrence of the term after 2015. This is not the case. At best, we can see an inflection, linked to the year 2015. The term had no existence before the months preceding the events in Greece. It made a slight breakthrough afterwards.

If we zoom in on this slight breakthrough, we see a close link with the war in Syria. A similar search on adjectives related to the word “refugees” gives a sharper result: “Syrian refugees” is in second place, just behind “political refugees,” which is in first place. By testing the dependency between the word “refugee” and the word “Syrian,” we obtain a curve of the same shape: the refugee question is indeed a Syrian question in the corpus. Another research shows the sudden increase, in very comparable proportions, of the terms “Syrian refugees,” “migration crisis” and “migrant crisis.” Despite the strong emotions caused by the drowning of Aylan Kurdi, Ngram Viewer shows only a very limited occurrence of his name in the corpus.

One can also isolate a first period, during the year 2015 and at the beginning of 2016, when “migration crisis” and “refugee crisis” were two phrases used as synonyms to describe the same reality. But after the agreement concluded in March 2016 with Turkey to prevent migrants from reaching the Greek coasts, the term “migration crisis” prevailed. As a result, the arrival of populations in need of international protection was eventually framed as an issue of irregular migration.

Graph 8.2: The 5 largest national groups granted asylum in France since 2015



Source: OFPRA.

A crisis of the EU, not of migration

There are good reasons to dispute the usefulness and relevance of the term “migration crisis,” then and now. The first reason requires to go back to what happened in the EU in 2015. Has the sudden arrival of more than a million people on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea jeopardized the solidity of the European construction? It seems reasonable to think that, faced with a humanitarian crisis of this scale, institutions that function normally in a democratic area of half a billion European citizens would be able to organize the reception of what corresponds to 0.02% of its population.

However, we know the deep institutional crisis that was concomitant with those arrivals of migrants. The crisis that the EU has had to face is not directly linked to arrivals per se, but to the refusal of some EU Member States to respect the principle of solidarity within the EU. Exactly 25 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, new walls were erected to respond to the influx of migrants. A country like Hungary framed the transit of migrants through its territory with a very strong xenophobic and anti-European

discourse. And it was without blinking that the leader of the party that won the 2015 Polish general elections said that migrants had brought cholera to Vienna and to the Greek islands.

In the end, Germany, together with Sweden, received the vast majority of these migrants. The European framework exploded, however, victim of a political ambiguity dating back more than twenty years as to the respective roles of the States and the European institutions in the development of European immigration and asylum policies. Solutions and policy instruments exist but, jealously protective of their national sovereignty regarding such a politically sensitive issue, the Member States refuse to make them work normally.

The “uprooted”: a global crisis

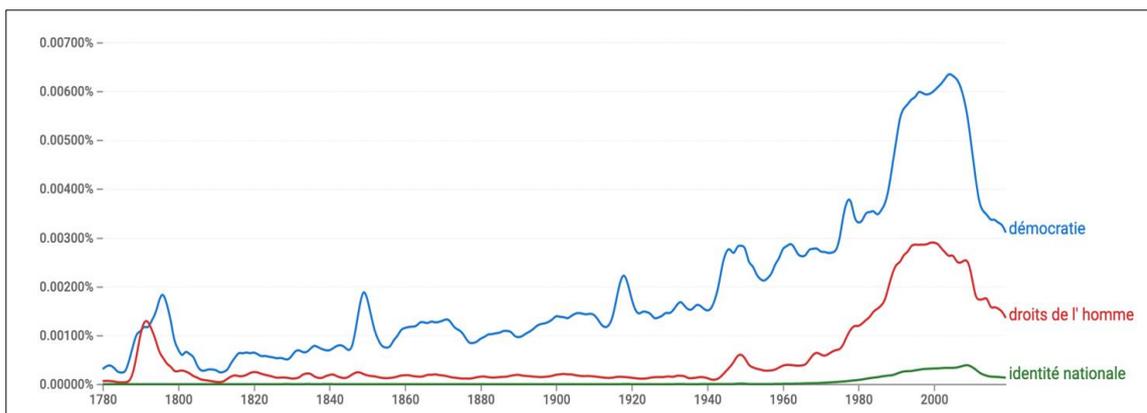
Today’s situation is both unambiguous and alarming: there have never been so many people fleeing persecution and conflict. There are 79.5 million “uprooted people”, to use the term of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). This is 20 million more than between 1939 and 1945. Out of nearly 80 million, 45.7 million are internally displaced persons, who have not left their country; 73% are in a country neighboring their country of origin; 85% live in a developing country; 40% are children. Turkey is, today, in absolute numbers, the most important host country for these populations in need of protection. But in a country like Lebanon, Syrian refugees represent 20% of the local population. The participation of EU countries in the reception of the “uprooted” is therefore very relative.

For these reasons, the term “migration crisis” applied to Europe is highly ambiguous. The shortcut reasoning of “crisis = migration” maintains the idea of a crisis resulting from a migration policy. However, all these elements suggest that if there is indeed a “crisis,” it does not fall within the scope of a migration policy focused on the economic and demographic needs of a country and on the control of its borders in the name of its sovereignty. It is a global crisis that calls for a global response.

Nation-state

The nation-state is the ultimate framework for modern citizenship. The anthropologist Ernest Gellner emphasized the specificity of the nation-state by showing that it is based on the superimposition of a country's political identity and its national identity.⁴⁰ However, between the late 1980s and early 2000s, this relationship began to change. The question of the future of the nation-state then arose in public debates as much as in the work of migration historians, sociologists and international relations specialists.

Graph 9.1: "Democracy", "human rights" and "national identity" in France (1780-2019)



Source: "French 2019" by Ngram Viewer (smoothing of 1).

From the nation-state to "transnational" citizenship

One first factor questioned the nation-state at that time. It was migration. As such, in 1989, the fall of the "Iron Curtain" marked the birth of a world that was once again on the move after being frozen by the Cold War. Whereas there were 77 million international migrants in 1975, the figure rose to 120 million in the 1990s and 190 million in 2000 (compared with 270 million today).

40. E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1983.

This had an important consequence on the way national belonging was viewed. Against the classical paradigm that defined citizenship as belonging to a single state, migration rendered this model more complicated and showed that one can belong to a first state (that of one's country of origin), as well as to a second (that of the host country), or even a third (that of one's on-going migration). The sociologist John Rex explained that the question was no longer that to which country do migrants belong, because they belong to all of them at the same time, through family networks that weave links between the different political spaces where their migration has brought them.

Research on what has been called "transnationalism" (a citizenship made up of belonging both "here" and "there") was particularly developed in the 1990s and 2000s in the United States, studying Mexican immigrants from California. These people from Mexico were able to build up economic and social capital through their emigration to the US, which in turn enabled them to invest in their Mexican citizenship by becoming influential figures in Mexican politics and in the Mexican diaspora in California.⁴¹

This way of explaining the impact of migration on the evolution of citizenship made it possible to better understand plural allegiances, for example the dual nationality of French people of North African or Turkish origin, by taking this issue out of the terms used in the public debate, which saw it as a contradiction between two competing allegiances.

Migration and the "liberal paradox"

This return, at the end of the Cold War, to a level of human mobility that the world hadn't experienced since the beginning of the 20th century, went hand in hand with the hope that this openness to migration would be a positive element for liberal democracy.

At issue here was what the political scientist James Hollifield called the "liberal paradox":⁴² on the one hand, the economic side of liberalism has become increasingly dependent on foreign labor for the production and growth of national economies; on the other, and despite this, the political side of liberalism has accommodated itself with limiting, sometimes severely, the right of entry of immigrants to host countries through restrictive visa policies. The aim of these policies was to respond to very sensitive public opinion about immigration.

41. D. Fitzgerald, "Beyond "Transnationalism": Mexican Hometown Politics at an American Labour Union", *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 2, 2004, pp. 228-247.

42. J. F. Hollifield, "The Emerging Migration State", *International Migration Review*, No. 38, 2004, pp. 885-912.

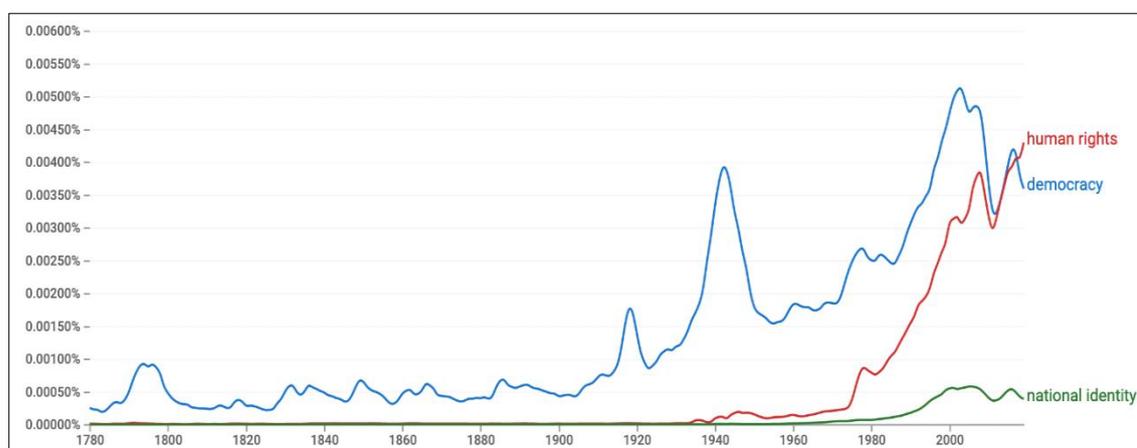
This paradox has never been overcome despite analyses that have shown the economic contribution of migration and the fact that it does not weigh on public finances (immigrants also pay taxes), and which, promoted by international organizations, have led to calls for greater liberalization of the conditions of movement of international migrants for the benefit of the countries of departure, the host countries and the migrants themselves.

Blockage

Far from leading to more liberal attitudes and the creation of more rights, including the right to migrate,⁴³ the transformation through migration of the post-Cold War world never led to a new political paradigm. However, despite this blockage, the nation-state is already overwhelmed by citizenship practices that no longer correspond to the political principle defined by E. Gellner.

Caught in this in-between, the liberal paradox has entered a new, more severe phase, as illustrated by the European refugee crisis of 2015-2016 as well as the 2016 vote on Brexit (also motivated by the desire to regain control of national borders on immigration, particularly from Eastern Europe), or by the rise of identity populist forces in Western and Eastern Europe (focused on anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim discourses). Not only has the world of migration not produced the victory of political liberalism, but the issue of migration has become the main crystallization point of its crisis.

Graph 9.2: "Democracy", "human rights" and "national identity" in the UK (1780-2019)



Source: "British English 2019" by Ngram Viewer (smoothing of 1).

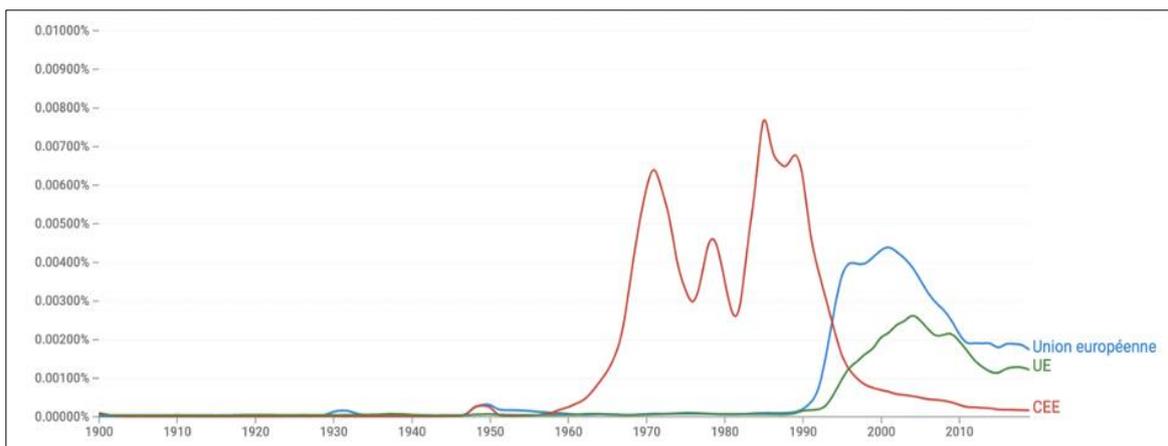
43. R. Bauböck, *Transnational Citizenship*, op. cit.; S. Castles and A. Davidson, *Citizenship and Migration: Globalization and the Politics of Belonging*, London: Macmillan, 2000.

Ngram Viewer allows us to visualize one part of this crisis, particularly in France. When analyzing, for example, the occurrences of “*droits de l’homme*” and “*démocratie*,” the application draws a relative downward trend in the interest for these terms in the French corpus. Compared to the Italian corpus the decrease is less pronounced, but it contrasts sharply with the increase in “human rights” and “democracy” in the English corpus over the same period (graph 9.2).

Europe

Along with migration, the process of European integration is certainly the other major transformation that has most led to questioning the nation-state. It is in Europe that the process of regional integration has been most successful and, at the same time, most ambitious, to the point of proposing the emergence of a new political project beyond the traditional national form of the state. Here again, however, we can see a shift that has taken place between the 2000s and the present day.

Graph 10.1: A loss of interest in European integration?



Source: "French language corpus 2019" by Ngram Viewer (smoothing of 1).

Towards a "post-national" democracy?

Today, probably only few people remember the place that the European project occupied twenty-five years ago in discussions on immigration and citizenship. The European horizon heralded a paradigm shift. An important literature examined the historical and political specificity of the European integration process. While the national paradigm seemed to lock the migration issue into a restrictive logic (then described as "nationalist"), a different view of migration and diversity seemed to be promised by European integration.

Everything was changing because the political principle (citizenship and democratic institutions) and the national principle (a common identity) were no longer linked to each other. More than the legal separation between citizenship and nationality in accessing the exercise of citizens' rights, what was at stake with European citizenship was the shift from the national principle to a new "post-national" principle, to use the term proposed by Yasemin Soysal:⁴⁴ a citizenship based on the primacy of human rights rather than on nationality. This type of analysis was directly inspired by Jürgen Habermas' thinking in Germany on the concept of "constitutional patriotism."⁴⁵

2005, the French "No" and Turkey

A major changeover took place at the time of the 2004 enlargement and the 2005 referendum on the treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe. The negative result of the referendum and the rejection of the treaty by the French and Dutch are well remembered. The aim of the new treaty was to adapt the institutions of the enlarged EU to its new scale (from 15 to 25 members). But the French referendum focused on another issue: Turkey's accession. This overshadowed a fundamental debate that had just taken place on the consequences of the enlargement to the new countries of Central Europe and the Mediterranean region. At the time of the referendum, the question was no longer "what do we want to do together?" but rather "who are we together?"

The position of national governments with regard to Turkey's accession varied from one country to another: for example, the British perception of the EU as a common market rather than as an integrated political area went hand in hand with support for Turkey's accession; for Poland, Turkey's accession was to pave the way for those of Ukraine and Belarus; in Austria, the memory of the struggle against the Ottoman conquest was reactivated. Ultimately, however, there were just as many arguments on the side of the supporters as on that of the opponents to Turkish accession, whether it concerned Cyprus, for example, or the economic impact of Turkish accession. In the end, the most discriminating element in the debate was the issue of European identity and the place of (Muslim) Turks in it. Islam functioned as a magnifying mirror of the identity ambiguities of the enlarged European citizenship.

44. Y. Soysal, *Limits of Citizenship: Migrants and Postnational Membership in Europe*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

45. J.-M. Ferry, "Chapitre 8 – L'Etat européen", in R. Kastoryano (ed.), *Quelle identité pour l'Europe? Le multiculturalisme à l'épreuve*, Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2005, pp. 231-290.

After 2015: Europe in the identity trap

Member States' refusal to show solidarity with Greece and Italy in receiving migrants in 2015 and the rejection of the European program for the distribution of asylum seekers throughout the EU was a huge shock. This rupture of the principle of solidarity between Europeans – a founding principle of the Union – has left (and will durably leave) traces in the pursuit of EU integration.

When the composition of the new European Commission in 2019 was announced, the title of Margaritis Schinas' portfolio did not go unnoticed. The new Commissioner for Home Affairs and Migration had become the Commissioner for “Protecting the European way of life.” This rapprochement between immigration and the idea of a “European way of life” to be protected has taken on an air of nativism, pitting European values against the supposed values of migrants.

Many voices saw this as a defeat of the EU against the extreme right. In the name of “realism,” others accused the “multicultural” and “moral left” of endangering the identity of Europe and Europeans through its supposed blindness. The whole debate on Europe is today trapped in this tension: on the one hand, the values of liberal democracy (historically the basis of European integration); and on the other hand, what is presented as an identity-based “realism” for which liberal democracy is only one moral preference among others which is, furthermore, today less preferable because of the “blindness” (or even “betrayal”) of the liberal elites regarding immigration, Islam and multiculturalism.

Conclusion

In the course of this 10-word journey, we have observed a global transformation of the terms of the debate on immigration and citizenship in France.

If this text had been written twenty years ago, it would have focused on practices and theories of citizenship that consider the migrant as a new prototype of citizen (e.g. European, transnational or cosmopolitan citizens). The text would have discussed how human rights have emerged as the foundation of belonging in a European context full of promise for equal opportunities and the fight against racism and discrimination. It would also probably have suggested the hypothesis of a positive trajectory of liberal democracy, embodied in the process of European integration.

Twenty years later, we can measure just how much of a turn has been taken and how decisively we have moved away from this narrative. Not only have we not at all arrived where we thought we would, but this simple reminder of the terms of a twenty-year-old debate brings us back to notions (transnational, post-national, cosmopolitan, etc.) that seem totally inaudible today. European integration is at a standstill. It has come up against the issue of migration and Europeans' inability to be faithful to the principle of solidarity that is supposed to unite them.

A crisis in the narrative of liberal democracy

But the European crisis is not only institutional and limited to the proper functioning of its mechanisms and instruments. It is at the same time a crisis of representative democracy, confronted with the rise of homogenous, essentialist and even authoritarian (some say "illiberal") conceptions of national identities.

In the name of the political sensitivity of migration issues, our liberal democratic order is vacillating in some of its aspects: the right of asylum must be re-justified; religious freedom must be conditioned; public freedoms must be restricted. Faced with the questioning of the place of migrants and minority groups in European societies, there is a new need to justify the fundamentals of our social contract. This is illustrated by the evolution of the debate on immigration. The founding narrative of liberal democracy was believed to be a seamless fabric. Eventually it revealed its fragility and ripped in many places.

A new configuration

How can this be explained? There are many factors that come into play: the impact of the terrorist attacks in France and Europe and the immense shock they caused; the continuation of previously exceptional security measures (from the renewed state of emergency to the entry of some of its aspects into ordinary law); the economic and financial crisis and durable massive unemployment; Brexit and the positions of countries such as Hungary and Poland on the issue of refugees, etc. All these elements help to describe the current context.

However, this list of heterogeneous elements is only intelligible if the importance of two elements of analysis is emphasized to comprehend the transformation seen in the pages above.

The first element is the way in which the debate on citizenship has gradually been transformed into a debate on identity. Some European countries have ended up delineating their national identity through principles (French secularism, Dutch values of tolerance, Britishness) that have transformed what had previously been the values of liberal citizenship into national cultural values. The second element concerns the evolution of the place of a term that was central in the 1990s and 2000s, but which now acts as a foil in an increasingly wider part of our debates on migration and citizenship. This term is that of “tolerance.”

Taken together, these two elements have produced a new configuration of what underpins inclusion and exclusion in European societies. Sometimes referred to as “populism,” this new configuration outlines the privilege of belonging to the majority against certain minority groups, against a backdrop of nostalgia for a society imagined to have once been culturally homogenous and that should be restored as such – a society *before* immigration.⁴⁶

Gender and sexualities

In a country such as the Netherlands, for example, the issue of homosexuality has helped develop a political rhetoric that opposes the national values of “tolerance” and “progress” to the supposedly “conservative” and “retrograde” values of Muslim communities. While the reality of the tradition of moral progressivism in Dutch society prior to the 1960s is particularly questionable, this does not detract from the political profitability of this type of argument. In France, it is not so much the issue

46. C. Bertossi *et al.*, “Past in the Present: Migration and the Uses of History in the Contemporary Era”, *op. cit.*

of sexuality as that of gender equality that plays this leading role in debates on Islam. In the name of equality between men and women, the veil is held to be an object of male domination and the burden of proof to the contrary is (rather paradoxically) placed on women. In the name of the emancipation of women in French society, women are ultimately excluded because they wear the veil.

Such discussions on sexual freedom and gender equality are fundamental and central to the future of democracy. This is non-negotiable, it must be seriously discussed. However, if we really want to give full importance to the notion of equality in general and to gender equality in particular, then we should not underestimate the complexity of the link, built up in the course of these discussions, between national identity, sexualities, immigration and Islam, as fundamental values (gender equality, sexual freedom) become instruments for stiffening moral boundaries between “them” and “us.”⁴⁷

Is tolerance still a value of progress?

Today, over the course of these discussions, the traditional link between tolerance and the values of progress, established in the framework of the post-war welfare state, has been deeply transformed and crystallizes new debates on integration, immigration and citizenship.⁴⁸ In short, twenty-five years ago, the value of “tolerance” (towards the foreigner, the immigrant, the “other”) was among progressive values. By reducing the question of Muslims’ belonging to the issue of gender and sexuality, it is today in the name of progressive values that forms of intolerance towards Muslims are sometimes justified.

Beyond the societal debate, which is normal and legitimate, these two elements (i.e. the culturalization of citizenship and the suggestion that to be progressive, there is no choice but to be intolerant) profoundly transform our social contract and create a tension within the democratic project that we inherited after World War II. If we think that we do need to get out of this project, this at least calls for a reasoned and critical debate. If, on the other hand, one thinks that we need to preserve this heritage and use it to face the major challenges of the moment, then this evolution can be worrying.

47. J. Uitermark, P. Mepschen and J. W. Duyvendak, “Populism, Sexual Politics and Exclusion of Muslims”, in J. Bowen, C. Bertossi, J. W. Duyvendak and M. Krook (eds.), *European States and their Muslim Citizens: The Impact of Institutions on Perceptions and Boundaries*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 235-255.

48. J. W. Duyvendak, P. Geschiere and E. Tonkens (eds.), *The Culturalization of Citizenship: Belonging and Polarization in a Globalizing World*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.



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