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Immigration, collective memory and national identity in France

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During the 1980s the Far Right – which had virtually disappeared from the French political scene following the Second World War – witnessed a spectacular rise in its electoral following; the National Front and its leader Jean-Marie Le Pen regularly attracting over ten per cent of the vote. The majority of the French intellectuals, especially those who are concerned with the social consequences of their work, considered that this return of the Far Right on the political scene made necessary to rethink our relation to politics. The National Front owes its success to its advocacy of a xenophobic platform which blames immigrants for all of the problems facing French society.

Whereas in the 1970s organizations which defended immigrants' interests developed an aggressive discourse centred on issues of labor, housing and so forth, in the 1980s the National Front propaganda put them on the defensive. Arguing that new immigrants – and especially immigrants from Northern African countries, because of their African origins and their Muslim religion – represented a threat to French “national identity”, many of National Front spokesmen began drawing upon historical arguments to prove that the country was confronted with a radically new problem, and that French traditions and culture were on the line. In the same time the Far Right used history to celebrate the national memory, the negationist argumentation, trying to deny the reality of the Holocaust, came out. The fact that, from the beginning, the National Front has drawn from history a lot of its main ideological arguments meant important consequences for the current French historiography. Most of historians worried about the rise of National Front agreed to consider that one of the reasons of its success was due to the fact its leaders gave greater place to issues the Left has neglected until then, especially the issue of immigration and national identity.

This is the reason why, during the 1980s, this question became an important new field of French historical research. To explain in which directions I decided to pursue my own works on this topic, let me expose briefly what were, at my sense, the deficiencies of the two leading approaches to this question.

On the one hand, many scholars considering that historians have to enter directly into the political debate, did their best to give arguments for refuting the Far Right ideology, defending the French republican model of integration, promoting new solutions to solve the so called “probleme fo immigration”. On the other hand, historians from the famous *Annales* school, especially Fernand Braudel and Pierre Nora, addressed the issue of national identity by taking up Michelet's (the most famous historian in the 19th century and the founding father of the republican memory) definition of nation as a “person”. In this perspective, historians have essentially to go in search of the main elements which constitute the “nature” of the “personality” of France. This way of thinking national identity has always been very powerful in French republican historiography due to Michelet enormous influence. This argument rests on an organicist metaphor connected with the idea of roots and ancestors. For

example in his famous conference at the Sorbonne in 1882, Ernest Renan defined the nation from a dual idea: “one is in the past, the other in the present. One is the shared possession of a rich heritage of memories ; the other is the current consentment, the desire to live together, the will to continue to claim the heritage that we have commonly received (...). The cult of the ancestors is of all the most legitimate: our ancestors made us what we are”.

Paul Vidal de la Blache, the Founding Father of French geography, added to this definition a crucial metaphor: “ le tempérament national” (the “national character”). He assigned geographers a quasi-militant mission, to reassure the country by placing the accent on its continuities over time. André Siegfried, who was Vidal de la Blache’s student, strongly contributed to spread this view into the French intellectual community during the interwar period, especially among the *Annales* school, because he was in the first Board Committee of the journal.

In the beginning of the 1980s Braudel, who was the main leader of *Annales* school, published a very influential book : *L’Identité de la France*, which is profoundly marked by Vidal de la Blache “philosophy” about the “*longue durée*”, that is the physical environment as it has been organized by men from the most ancient times. Like Vidal, who leap abruptly from the most ancient history to the most recent period, Braudel supposed in *L’Identité de la France* that French history had ended at the moment when industrialization began. A simple breakdown of the number of pages devoted to the each issue reveals his extremely limited interest in contemporary and industrial history, not to mention legal, administrative and political history. Perhaps we should interpret this as a reflection of Braudel’s limited knowledge of subfields other than modern history.

Fundamentally, however, what we find is an approach similar to many other French historians whose main concern was to understand how the French nation was formed, how the “fusion” of ancient “races” led to unity and to the apotheosis of the Revolution. The “frames” were in place, the rest could only be a matter of “surface”, an epiphenomena. This is why Fernand Braudel grants too much importance to a Vidalian methodology of “traces” in physical space: toponymy, the form of villages, weather wanes on the roofs ; the full register of rural history is mobilized. But for Braudel, the most importance factor for the “*longue durée*” of the nation is the family, the lineage, and genealogical continuity. Following Pierre Chaunu (another great historian of the *Annales*’ school), who asserted (quote): “There exists at least one common cement, which binds the different parts of France: the duration and continuity of a population which goes far back in times” (unquote), Braudel added: “everything starts with the family, almost everything can be explained through it”.

To explain why I was shocked by this traditional French historical discourse about national identity, let me just add one point. In her book *l’immigration prise aux mots*, Simone Bonnafous shows clearly that the rising influence of the Far Right ideology in the French public opinion did not lie in its capacity to impose its answers, but the questions themselves. The National Front owes its success to the fact that many of its spokesmen were able to impress upon public opinion a new way of speaking about immigration. During the 1970s, the discussion was focused on ‘immigrant workers’. In the 1980s, the public debate moved towards a issue originally set afloat by the Far Right: the threat to “national identity” caused by new immigrants. While it is true that a vast majority of politicians and scholars firmly objected to the xenophobic or racist remarks expressed by the National Front, a kind of consensus eventually settled in, that immigration was now in France a new problem for “our national identity”. For example, in the introduction of the first part of the collective work he directed, *Les lieux de mémoire*, Pierre Nora wrote: “among the novelties of the country’s present day situation is the presence of a large immigrant population, which does not display the customary traits of “Frenchness” (francité). In *L’Identité de la France*, Braudel went in the

same direction: "I believe it is the first time that immigration presents the country, on a national scale, with a kind of "colonial" problem".

If I felt uncomfortable about these statements, it was because they forgot completely the central role played by immigrants in the transformation of the French society between the middle of the 19th century and the middle of the 20th century. Today, approximately 20% of persons born in France have at least one parent or grand-parent of immigrant origin. If we take great-grand-parents into account and include the foreign population living in France, but born outside French territory, we reach a total of nearly one third of the overall population; which makes France one of the foremost countries of immigration in the 20th century. Despite this importance, in Braudel and Nora works, everything seems to indicate that immigrants did not belong to the history of France. In Braudel's *Identité de la France*, the chapter on immigration is entirely built around the opposition between "us" ("Français de souche", French of old stock) and "them" (the foreigners). In Pierre Nora's *Lieux de mémoire* immigrants are completely absent of the sixty six essays devoted to the "places of memory" of the Republic and the Nation. In this book, immigration is a "non-lieu de mémoire", a denial of memory. It was only in the last volume entitled "Les France" published in the beginning of the 1990s, we found something about immigrants.

To sum up this part of my talk devoted to the French historiography, I would say that during the 1980s, the denunciation of the National Front became a way to maintain the intellectual "bonne conscience". Hence my insistence to show that the indifference displayed by French historians on this issue had made easier nationalist propaganda, by fostering a genuine phenomenon of collective amnesia with respect to the extraordinary role played by immigration in the renewal of the French population during the 20th century.

In the second part of my conference, I'd like to illustrate these remarks by coming back to the issue of national memory and immigration in France. A important part of my empirical research has been devoted to compare the opposing uses of immigration memory in France and in the US. Today in France, if we take 3 generations into account, we consider that nearly one third of the overall population has immigrants ancestors. So, if one places itself at the level of what the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs called "l'histoire vécue", le "souvenir" created from individual and family memories, the memory of immigration today affects the French at least as much as it does the Americans. And yet, if one puts one self at the level of national collective memory, the situation is the reverse. Until the 1980s, the role played by immigration in the constitution of the French collective memory was completely repressed in their national identity.

The first argument I'd like to mention to explain this contrast concerns the differences between the US and the French model of immigration. In America, immigration played a decisive role in the initial populating. This is the reason why the theme of "immigrants" occupies a important place in the constitution of the national identity. But in the French case, the precociousness and scale of immigration did not result from the development of sparsely populated regions. Until the end of the eighteenth century, France was the most populated country in Europe. The first statistical studies devoted to population deplored the fact that although French districts existed in most of the large European cities, foreigners were quite few on French soil.

Mass immigration in France was first and foremost an outcome of the needs of the labor market. In the middle of the 19th century, French large scale industry could no longer rely on a sufficient flow of labor from the countryside. Unlike in other European markets, French peasants were able to resist the process of uprooting and proletarianization which accompanied the industrial revolution. The means of resistance were twofold : economic (a majority of French peasants owned their own lands) and political (from 1848 onward, they

enjoyed the right to vote and represented the largest electoral constituency in the country). As a result, relying massively on immigration seemed an ideal strategy for supplying the labor market, since it allowed the recruitment of a labor force itself deprived of the economic and political means of escaping proletarianization. The French “pattern” of immigration illustrated a process which would become widespread in Europe following the Second War: the massive resort to immigrant labor as an overexploited work force used in the most devaluated sectors of the industrial labor market. In the French case, therefore, immigration developed as a direct consequence of citizenship, as the other side of the republican coin, so to speak. This is the first reason which explains why, unlike in other countries whose initial populating was significantly effected by immigration, immigrants in France have practically no place in national memory. During each period of inflow over the past century, in a repetitive and symptomatic fashion, French public opinion has viewed immigrants as transient workers destined to return to “their country” (an opinion shared at the outset by the majority of immigrants themselves).

A second reason of this amnesia, connected to the first one, concerns the myth of origin of the French nation. Contrarily to the US, where the construction of the nation-state and mass immigration appeared at the same time, in France, mass immigration only began in the second half of the 19th century, as a time when the structures of the nation-state had already been in place for quite some time. In France, the consolidation of the foundational myth was structured around the continued resurgence of debates surrounding the French Revolution. But to understand the role played by the historiographical discourses in the construction of French national identity (the problematic of the legitimate “ancestors” of the French people), we must return to the 18th century.

In the context of the struggle which pitted the nobility against the Third Estate, a quarrel led historians from the two camps to fight on this subject. Whereas the nobility affirmed its affiliation with the Frankish aristocracy which conquered Gaul at the beginnings of the Middle Ages, the Third Estate claimed the Gauls, the vanquished of the medieval contest, as their proper ancestors. From this polarity stemmed a presentation of the history of France in which “racial struggle” closely mirrored “class struggle”, a presentation which was defined, in the beginning of the 19th century, by the most famous historian of the Restoration, Augustin Thierry. In his eyes the French revolution marked the victory of the “people of Gaul” over Frankish aristocracy. The myth of “our ancestors, the Gauls” which would be conveyed for more than a century by historical manuals (including African and Asian colonies) became an eminently republican myth. However, it was only with Michelet that republican mythology acquired its definitive face. Challenging, in the name of universalist values held by the Republic, the ethnic vision of history developed by Thierry, Michelet imposed the theme of French people as a product of a “fusion”, of a “melting pot” in which were merged all the initial ethnic composites of the people of Gaul. And for Michelet, the “fuel” which permitted this “fusion” was the French nation itself, seen as an abstract democratic principle which triumphed over all enemies, both internal and external, with the Revolution of 1789. At the end of the 19th century, with the triumph of the Third Republic, Michelet’s message was reinterpreted as a vision of national reconciliation between aristocracy and the “middle class”. The historian Ernst Lavisse, author of historical manuals which constituted, up until the Second War, the veritable “bible” of republican ideology, drove the point home by educating even the members of the smallest village school on this theme of a “melting pot” of people (even if the “gaulist” composite remained the privilege one).

This rapid evocation sufficed to show that there was essentially a common thread between the French and American mythologies of a “melting pot”; the conception of a people forged as a result, or as a product of a “fusion” contrasting with, for example, the German

mythology which identified the public as a single ethnic group. However, a radical difference separated the two: in the American case, the Revolution inaugurated the “melting pot” and the process continued throughout the entire contemporary era. On the contrary, in the French mythology, the process of a fusion of peoples came to an end with the French Revolution, rendering totally invisible and unbelievable all “redefinitions” of the French public as having started with the contemporary waves of immigration.

It would be necessary to mention many other arguments for illustrating the role played by the myth of origins in the construction of national identities. For example, in French mythology, the question of a frontier plays a significant role, but in a sense radically different than the role it plays in the US. Since the battle of Valmy in 1792, the French have been seen as first and foremost a boundary to be defended, to be preserved against attacks from invaders. In the 19th and 20th centuries, the three wars against Germany have reinforced this collective feeling, which explains why French people frequently speak of “immigrés” (that is others coming temporarily to our land), and not “immigrants” (term which indicates the foreigners will stay in their new country).

This point led me to emphasize the major role of language for national identities. It is not by accident if a young North African man once bitterly observed, “to say immigré is to designate someone without honor, who is lost, who has nothing left”. Perhaps more than any other, the reality of immigration is indeed a question of words. An immigré is above all, to paraphrase Jean-Paul Sartre (1954), someone whom others regard as an immigré. Here again, the problem is not whether we “support” foreigners or are “against” them, but rather to determine why we feel authorized to employ terms which cause foreigners to suffer, and hence contribute to their existence as “immigrés”. History, conceived as an effort to “denaturalize” language, enable us to analyse why and how the term emerged in our vocabulary, before its establishment as a “self evident fact” of everyday controversy.

The difficulty of grasping immigration as a historical process is also situated in linguistic peculiarities. One must return to the 17th century to understand why in French we do not have an equivalent of the English term “making”, to describe both a social construction and a social movement. Likewise, as the German sociologist Norbert Elias showed, the French notion of “civilisation” which according to him was not easily understood by foreigners designates as the result of a cultural process more than a process itself. According to him: “It expresses the auto-satisfaction of a population whose national frontiers and specific characteristics are no longer questioned, and have not been for centuries, because they are permanently fixed”. Such words are but obstacles for thinking of immigration in terms of a contribution to French culture.

Of course, law is another powerful vector of national identity. In France, neither the “ethnic” question, nor that on immigration played a role in the circumstances which accompanied the birth of the French republican nation. Even though, as Eugen Weber showed, regional diversity remained significant until the end of the 19th century, the beginnings of political centralisation date from the 16th century; the origins of linguistic unification and codification date from the 17th century. That explains why, when the Republic of France endowed itself with its own instruments of political control (judicial system, administration and statistics), there were no racial problems in France like those which existed in the US upon its birth, and no large scale linguistic battle (like that which always pitted the Flemish against the Walloons in Belgium). Furthermore, and here I turn to Tocqueville, unlike the US, where republicans were able to elaborate their constitution without opposing an aristocratic “Ancien Regime”, in France the political system imposed by the French Revolution was profoundly marked by the desire to discredit the values and norms of the nobility and the clergy, both principal supporters of the monarchy.

This context of anti-aristocratic and anti-clerical mobilizations explains, far beyond the philosophy of the Enlightenment, the essential aspects of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizens. Behind the haunting theme of equality is found a violent rejection of all privileges (and all stigmatizations) based on origin. Whereas under the monarchy social position rested on birth and demanded the display of a genealogy and a degree of noble lineage, under the Republic, social position was based on personal merit, and technical qualification. The rejection of discriminations based on origin, does not exclude the ethnical religious or national questions. In effect, this question is combined with another decisive aspect of revolutionary ideology: the struggle against religious beliefs conveyed by the catholic clergy. The struggle at the beginning of the Revolution over the rights of jews, protestants and blacks from the colonial world shows that beyond the fight in favor of the rights of man, lay an effort to separate “public” life (the universe of “politics” in the true sense of the term) from “private” life. The rigid concept of frontier equally triumphs within the republican right of nationality. As of the Revolution, the fundamental line of demarcation between men has passed between the citizen (or at least the “national”) and the foreigner. Whereas under the monarchy of the Ancien Regime, a foreigner could exercise high public posts (and even lead armies), as of 1793, only the French had access to the “public sector”, only the French could be electors and elected. On the other hand, for those who wish to enter the French nation, there is no longer, at least officially, discrimination based on race, and religious or ethnic origin. I would say that in republican logic, everyone has the right to universalism, provided he or she is French.

The rejection of the criteria of origins to appreciate the social value of individuals and the confinement of religion to the sphere of private sphere had an enormous impact on the history of immigration. All societies invent their own forms of social classification. In France, the initial weakness of ethnic and racial criteria reaffirmed revolutionary action, in turn led to a hypertrophy of judicial criteria for nationality as the fundamental principle of social classification.

The example of the statistical device is another major illustration of the manner in which the founding principles of a national society are able to perpetuate themselves from generation to generation. As we know, the question of race has haunted American democracy from its beginnings. In the criteria of national origin, racial and ethnic membership played a fundamental role in the taxonomy of the American census, and as a result, in the American perception of the social world. Conversely, from the beginning in France, the classifications held by the Administration were based on socio- professional categories and on the right of nationality. As of the Third Republic, all questions concerning religion, language and ethnicity were forbidden, in taking a census. This restriction has made extremely difficult for historians to write, for example, the history of Jews in France and encouraged instead the tendency to limit research on immigration to categories of analysis given by the census: the accent is thus put on the history of “foreigners” who disappeared from the historical scene when their or their children became legally French.

Giving the rigidity of preexisting structures, the thought of immigration as an historical problem was practically inconceivable in France. Moreover, the millions of immigrants who transformed the composition of the French population had considerable difficulty leaving their own visible trace or forging their “places of memory”. Whereas in the US, Ellis Island – through which millions of European immigrants passed – has become a museum, comparable symbols of immigration in France (such as the selection center in the city of Toul, in the East of the country, which recruited the bulk of central European immigrants between the wars) were razed to the ground as if a history which fit in so poorly with the mythology of the soil could be magically erased.

I'd like to conclude these methodological remarks, with some reflexions concerning social identities. In discussing Braudel's or Nora's definition of nation, my purpose was not to deny the possibility for an historian to study the national identity as a collective entity as a "character". It is not illegitimate to designate nations as collective personalities, especially when we want to develop political studies on this issue. But if our purpose is to study the social dimension of the national question, to start from this viewpoint is leading up a blind alley. Braudel tried to explain the permanence of the France's identity with the argument of the genealogical continuity of the French population. However, in an industrialized nation state, it is not the continuity of the populating which explains the importance of the beginnings. These are due to the fact that political decisions taken in the context of these initial circumstances are often fixed in language, law, institutions, monuments and pass then on from generation to generation. We "inherit" (often without knowing it) these words, judicial norms, and classification statistics which are fixed, having long been stabilized. If we examine the problem of national identity in this perspective, we cannot deplore that immigration has practically no room in Nora's or Braudel's work. Because immigration has never been included in the national memory of France, it is a normal thing that works devoted to the study of this national identity of the French people, we are not allowed to equate the "I" and the "We" and to assume a fundamental equivalence between the individual and the collective, as Pierre Nora pointed out in the introduction to his first volume of *Les Lieux de mémoire*. The main question we have to answer is: how can we explain the passage from the multitude of diverse individual perspectives to the collective "we"?

The hypothesis I suggest is that in modern societies all collective identities (nation, ethnic community, social class) are subjected to identical formative processes. They cannot exist without the prior enterprise of naming or the invention of a unifying, universal concept through which a single representation of the diversity of individual experiences is achieved. Secondly, a small number of individuals must position themselves as representatives of the designated collective entity, contributing to its very existence by speaking in its name. If these spokesmen succeed in obtaining the recognition that their "community" really exists, the community in question may become consolidated by a process of institutionalization: the law recognizes its rights and makes certain material advantages available and members of the community are subjected to certain rules, elect their representatives, etc.

Applied to the study of memory, this perspective is central to understanding the agenda which underlies Maurice Halbwachs' writings on the subject. According to him, we all have personal memories which are not learned but acquired through live experience. Although such events as war, for example, are experienced by a multitude of individuals, each person remembers them differently according to the position he or she was in at the time, according to other events experienced in a lifetime. In order for these recollections to produce "collective memory", they must be fixed in words in writing and constantly recalled by speeches, monuments and commemorations. Individuals can then link their personal memories to a collective representation of the past. "Entrepreneurs of memory" play a key role in this process; it is they who choose, from an infinite diversity of individual memories, those which are best suited to support their cause and transform them into collective memory.

Let me quickly apply these reflections to the issue of immigration. Despite the fact several millions of French people have currently a familial memory of immigration, in this country, "entrepreneurs of memory" constantly failed to integrate it into the official national memory. To complete what I said to explain this fact, I'd like to mention a last point. Contrary to what is often said, the French Republic did not seek to eliminate ethnic cultures. The 1901 law on associations provided a legal framework through which communities may celebrate and enrich their culture of origin. The 1901 law on associations provided a legal framework through which communities may celebrate and enrich their culture of origin. What

the Republic prohibited was the *politicization* of communities. The defense of cultures of origin could therefore not be allowed to constitute a legitimate demand, an object of public controversy. Immigrants therefore did not, in France, have the possibility of collectively opposing efforts to discredit their culture of origin.

This is for me a matter of fact. I don't seek, here, neither to criticize the French republican, nor to promote "multiculturalism". It seems to me that the elements of personal memory consecutive to immigration constitute, for people affected by this question, only one part of their identity, combined with other elements due to gender, social position and all the specific events they experienced in their lifetime. Many French people of immigrant origin prefer maintaining in their private sphere the aspects of their memory due to their origin. Conversely they actualize the elements of their past which unite them with the history of the French community. For many of them, "shedding one's blood for France" was the best symbolic means of erasing the stigmat of origins, and publicity asserting the collective integration of the group into the contested French community. Because historians are not "entrepreneurs of memory" we are not allowed to say, in place of people who are directly affected, what aspects of their memory are really important. Individuals are free to represent their past in any way they wish, to display or to hide their "ethnic", "national", or "socio-economic" origins. However, to take seriously the diversity of the current French population involves a change in outlook on the recent past. Immigration can no longer be considered an issue which affects us "from without"; it must be understood as a problem which is internal to the history of contemporary French society. In this way, historians make possible for people who want it to promote publicly their specific memory.

Let me conclude this talk, with several reflexions concerning the present debate on immigration in France. First, one must emphasize the fact that our democratic systems have accomplished much progress since the 1950's. Before World War Two, foreigners had absolutely no rights, and they were only protected by their consulate. Refugees did not benefit from any special protection. Today, foreigners working in France benefit from social rights. Police can not deport them as easily as they did in the past. There is today a great number of associations that defend foreigners. Moreover, thanks to the Geneva Convention, there is such a thing as a refugee status since 1951. Finally, integration into the European Union is limiting arbitrary actions from the States. I recall that during the 1930's, hundreds of thousands of foreigners have been deported in a few years. Despite protests by human rights groups, there was no mass consciousness movement. In the late 1970's, when President Giscard d'Estaing tried to implement the same policy, he encountered such powerful protests that he was pushed to abandon these forced repatriations.

But paradoxically, the States possess today much more effective ways to identify people and lead a policy focused on the groups they intend to reject. The right of asylum, once regarded in France as one of the most important of human rights, is now scorned. In the book I wrote on that subject, I have shown that the constraints the French government had to accept when signing the Geneva Convention have finally been overcome by the fact that the granting of the refugee status has been placed under the control of the French administration. Henceforth, the major issue of asylum policies is the identification of individuals, who have to prove that they have been "persecuted". Lack of evidence becomes the main argument to deny them the status of refugee. Eventually, this logic of exclusion proves much more efficient than the 1930's. But today it is done in the name of "human rights". Asylum seekers are tagged by the government as "bogus refugees" because they fail to provide sufficient evidence of their persecution.

This inclination to justify exclusion in the name of humanistic principles has become routine since 2007, as shown by the policy of the Minister for immigration and national identity. In the name of “republican values” (liberty, equality, fraternity, secularism), we reject immigrants who do not speak French, women who do wear the veil, etc. That is why Nicolas Sarkozy has taken the term “national identity” over, despite the criticism it has drawn. In 2007, he decided to create the Ministry of National Identity to deceive voters from the National Front. However, it is important to underline the fact that the official definition of Frenchness has changed recently. Thanks to the work of historians and the action of the associations, immigration has begun to find its place in the national collective memory. After a 20 years struggle, we have obtained the creation of the Cité Nationale de l'Histoire de l'immigration (CNHI), which has become an important place of remembrance for the immigrants and their descendants. The Right was forced to acknowledge the importance of immigration in France’s contemporary history. The President of the Republic presents himself as a French with “mixed blood”, an “immigrant’s kid” who succeeded his assimilation into French society. But it did not put an end to the xenophobic rhetoric. The cleavage between “them” and “us” opposes now the “bad immigrants” of the present day (the Islamists who do not respect “republican values”) to the “good immigrants” of yesterday (who managed to become “assimilated” because of paying respect to our national identity).

The debate on national identity simply cannot be reduced to a narcissistic duel between France and itself. It is hoped that the 2010 celebration of the year of France in Africa, with the participation of African troops in the parade of the 14th of July, will be an opportunity to rehabilitate the image of the "Bougnoule" in the French imagination and recognition of the contribution of the rank and file cohorts to France's greatness. Indelibly engrave in the collective psyche of third world peoples the enduring idea of the inferiority of "coloured people" and, by extension, the superiority of the white race "as if white were not a colour, even if its proponents live it as immaculate, which, judging by the depravity of its history is far from the truth. National identity is not only a product of individual feelings of belonging and attachment; it is also affected by external perceptions of identity. How French national identity is both defined and expressed has been the subject of a long and controversial public debate in France since the mid-1980s. In May 2007 the government created the Ministry of Immigration, Integration, National Identity and Co-Development, which among other things was tasked with "promoting national identity." Two years later, in November 2009, a "Great Debate on National Identity" was launched by the government with the objective of codifying "what it means to be French." That collective memory of the war in France has been defined by the existence of competing and contested narratives[4]. As the Fourth Republic dissolved into the Fifth, a narrow Gaullist interpretation of the war came to dominate national remembering[5]. However, the proliferation of academic and cultural challenges to the "myth of resistance" since the spring of 1968, the most famous of. Mass immigration and debates over the changing nature of French identity have not only added to a sense of "national malaise" and social division, they have also diluted the authority of a monolithic interpretation of the past, whilst adding greater multiplicity to collective memory in general[44]. Recent papers in *Collective Memory and (Trans) National Identity Narratives. Papers. People.* This process is here explained by studying how memory and history relate to each other, how they are utilized in identity building and creation of national narratives as well as in relation to policy making. By following the Armenian question since its appearance on the international arena at the San Stefano in 1878 until the centennial commemoration in 2015, this study illustrates how the politics of memory has ever since kept the issue alive into our times. Immigration in the constitution of the French collective memory was completely repressed in their national identity. The first argument I'd like to mention to explain this contrast concerns the differences. Mass immigration in France was first and foremost an outcome of the needs of the labor market. In the middle of the 19. th.