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Changes in migration policies in France from 1918 to 2024 Évolutions des politiques migratoires en France de 1918 à 2024

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Abstract:

This article examines the evolution of France's immigration policies from 1918 to 2024, tracing how economic needs, political ideologies, and social tensions have shaped its approach to immigration. Initially driven by labor demands after World War I, France encouraged the recruitment of foreign workers, yet policies fluctuated based on economic cycles and public sentiment. The post-World War II era saw a period of economic growth, prompting large-scale immigration and the beginnings of integration policies. However, the oil crisis of the 1970s led to a shift towards restriction, intensified by rising anti-immigrant sentiment. In the 21st century, new challenges, including security concerns, the refugee crises, and debates on secularism, have led to policies balancing security with integration. Macron's recent reforms reflect this balance, emphasizing streamlined asylum processes, stricter border controls, and policies aimed at preserving French values. Through a historical and policy analysis, this article highlights how France's immigration policies reflect broader struggles with national identity and integration, offering insights into potential pathways for a more inclusive and cohesive society.

Keywords: Foreign workers; public policies; right of entry and residence; border closures.

Résumé :

Cet article analyse l'évolution des politiques migratoires en France de 1918 à 2024, mettant en lumière comment les besoins économiques, les idéologies politiques et les tensions sociales ont façonné son approche de l'immigration. Initialement motivée par la demande de main-d'œuvre après la Première Guerre mondiale, la France a encouragé le recrutement de travailleurs étrangers, bien que les politiques aient fluctué au fil des cycles économiques et des sentiments publics. L'après-guerre a été marqué par une forte croissance économique, incitant à une immigration massive et aux prémices de politiques d'intégration. Cependant, la crise pétrolière des années 1970 a mené à des restrictions accrues, renforcées par la montée du sentiment anti-immigré. Au XXI^e siècle, de nouveaux défis tels que les préoccupations sécuritaires, la crise des réfugiés et les débats sur la laïcité ont conduit à des politiques visant un équilibre entre sécurité et intégration. Les réformes récentes de Macron reflètent cet équilibre, mettant l'accent sur la simplification des procédures d'asile, des contrôles frontaliers renforcés, et la préservation des valeurs françaises. À travers une analyse historique et politique, cet article explore comment les politiques migratoires françaises incarnent les défis de l'identité nationale et de l'intégration.

Mots-clés: Travailleurs étrangers; politiques publiques; droit d'entrée et de séjour; fermetures de frontières.

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Introduction:

The subject of this article focuses on the changes in migration policies in France. It starts from the search for labor abroad after 1918 until the emergence of the clandestine mobility of young foreigners resulting from the closing of the borders of Europe, particularly those of France. Specifically, we are interested in the events that led governments to adopt various legislative policies deemed adequate to regulate the right to return and reside and/or work abroad. Whether regulating migratory flows, employment policies, or access to civil rights, the fluctuating policy towards foreigners is not new since it has evolved according to events (agricultural development and mining, war, birth rate, phases of economic expansion or decline, etc.) and historical ideologies that have shaped the policy of European powers and essentially of France.

Over the last few decades, historiography has increasingly focused on the role of the state in controlling the political and economic aspects of international migration. The ‘tyranny of the state’ (Noiriel, 1991) has increasingly emerged, ranging from the reconstruction of the legal framework of public policies to the sociology of the day-to-day implementation of policies by civil servants in contact with migrants. However, the combination of approaches involving multiple migrants and countries of migration and the extension of the field of observation to the transnational sphere can highlight complementary aspects that are essential for understanding the dynamics and tensions of what is sometimes described as the ‘first globalisation’ (Berger, 2003).

In view of the latest legislative tightening common to many European countries (France, England, Spain, Italy, and even the Netherlands or Sweden recently), the difference between "foreigner" and "worker" will arise with more sharpness at the beginning of the century. Public policies towards foreigners now seem to restrict the legitimacy of the presence of foreigners of color or of different civilizations solely on the grounds of economic or political utility to the detriment of a whole historical past and even of principles of a republican and/or humanitarian nature that have presided over immigration practices since the Second World War in the former Empire of France. This is happening nowadays when migration has taken on an unprecedented scale, whether in Europe, America, Africa, or elsewhere. Indeed, globalization has contributed to the displacement of individuals. Through its socio-demographic and economic, but also cultural and legal aspects, the migratory phenomenon increasingly challenges civil society actors, international bodies, and, of course, political leaders.

It is so true that certain measures seem contrary to the fundamental principles of French law itself (expulsion and retention of minors and entire families), thus marking a return to times which seemed to be definitively over. Therefore, the questions that should be asked are the following: Is this situation the result of the excessive media coverage of facts subjectively attributed to foreigners, particularly black and African (insecurity, suburban problems, wearing veils), or is it logical (rise of the far right and xenophobia)? Or is it a result of the combination of new facts linked to the consolidation of the European Union on the one hand, and increasing migratory flows resulting from the globalization of trade on the other? Or is it simply a requirement dictated by economic imperatives excluding all these human and social considerations? Or is it the result of a combination of all these factors?

We propose to answer these questions in this article by dealing with the problem of foreigners in France in a legislative and historical order. To this end, we propose to address, in the first point, the need and search for foreign labor after the First World War. In the second point, we will deal with the evolution of immigration from 1945 to 1973, a period commonly called the Glorious Thirties both because of the economic boom and the prosperity of different social categories that characterized post-war France. This is why we will show that the ordinance of 2 November 1945 was the first post-war law that instituted an official framework of general regulations laying the

groundwork for the introduction, work, and establishment of immigrants. The oil crisis of 1974 and the cessation of immigration will be the subject of the third point, due to its significant consequences on the French economy, its employment, and subsequent migration legislation. This period was characterized by the adoption of increasingly restrictive legislative texts. We will see the evolution of the various measures adopted, characterized by almost security aspects towards foreigners, tempered from time to time, mainly under the Socialist Party of the Left, but which will eventually lead to a control of immigration. The latest laws, appearing extraordinary to many specialists, will be particularly interesting because they constitute a break in the regulation of immigration. This rupture is such that certain regulatory provisions adopted – almost contrary to the Geneva Conventions – have been the subject of criticism and reminders from the European Commission of Human Rights, the Leagues of Human Rights, and the UN itself.

1. Post- first world war and interwar period (1918-1939):

Following World War I, France faced a severe demographic crisis, as the war had claimed the lives of nearly 1.5 million French soldiers and left the economy struggling to recover. This situation led to a significant labor shortage, prompting the government to turn to immigration as a means of rebuilding the nation. From 1918 to 1939, France actively recruited foreign workers from both European countries and its colonial territories to fill gaps in the labor force and support industrial growth (Noiriel, 1996: 35). This period laid the foundation for France's evolving approach to immigration, combining economic pragmatism with fluctuating social and political attitudes towards foreign workers.

1.1.Economic needs and labor recruitment

The 1920s were marked by economic reconstruction and rapid industrialisation, which increased the demand for labour in various sectors, including agriculture, construction and mining. Thus, there were labour opportunities that the indigenous population could not meet. The contribution of mass migration was the only way to meet development needs. France signed agreements with countries such as Poland (3 September 1919), Italy (30 September 1919) and the Czechoslovak Republic (20 September 1919 and March 1920) to facilitate the recruitment of workers who could contribute to the reconstruction efforts (INSEE , 2011). Italian workers were particularly prominent during this period, and by 1931, they represented about 18% of the foreign labour force in France (Weil, 2008: 67).

In addition to European labor, France also turned to its colonial empire to meet labor demands. Workers from North Africa, especially Algeria, were recruited in significant numbers to perform physically demanding jobs that were often rejected by the local population. This was facilitated by France's colonial status, which allowed the free movement of Algerians as French nationals, though they were not afforded the same legal or social rights as their metropolitan counterparts (Stovall, 2003: 28). The colonial labor force thus became an integral part of the French economy, though it also introduced complex issues of racial and social hierarchy.

We note that because of the massive immigration, the immigrants knew continuous growth until 1931. However, because of the crisis in 1929 and the quota of 1932, the immigrant population fell by 14.75% between 1931 and 1936. Then at the end of the war, it fell again by 14.6% in ten years. Relative to the total population, they represented a maximum rate of 6.6% in 1946. This much-desired immigration was concluded with international agreements. Thus, in 1904 and 1906 with Italy, in 1906 with Belgium, then in 1919 with Poland and Italy again, and finally in 1920 with Czechoslovakia.

In this case, while the state took care of diplomatic relations and the establishment of labor agreements with these different countries, it was the employers who selected and financed the arrival of immigrants according to their needs. The surveys carried out and the agreements concluded suggest that the call for foreigners was first addressed to neighboring countries to fill labor shortages mainly in certain sectors (agriculture, mining, metallurgy). A second call was made after the First World War, hence new agreements. Thus, in 1924, several groups of employers founded the General Immigration Company (SGI)—a type of temporary work company whose purpose was to recruit in large numbers the manpower necessary for the benefit of its clients.

In 1921, statistics show that the number arriving increased by a third compared to 1915. According to Janine Ponty, foreigners represented almost 7% of the global population: 'never had the numerical increase been so strong in such a short time.' The official figure for the foreign population in France rose from 1.5 million in 1921 (for 39 million inhabitants) to 2.4 million in 1926 (for 40 million inhabitants) and to 2.7 million in 1931 (for 41 million inhabitants), to which it is appropriate to add those forgotten in the censuses and illegal immigrants (Ponty, 2003 : 123).

It is quite reasonable to estimate that agriculture and the depopulation of the countryside (especially after the First World War) and the need to cover the food needs of the populations were probably the first reasons for the call for immigration from neighboring countries.

Thus, the statistics on immigrants (geographic distribution) show that areas with a strong agricultural tendency concentrated high rates of immigration at the time (Marseille, Paris, northern Lorraine, etc.). The mines and coal mines were the second most important transport hub for foreigners. For instance, the Ronchamp mine witnessed the presence of 40% of Polish miners in 1924. Between the two wars, 80% of Poles occupied the northern mines which is due to the fact that the first migrants welcomed their compatriots. Statistics show that industry and metallurgy were not left vacant since Île-de-France, Rhône-Alpes, and Nord-Pas-de-Calais (mining and metallurgy) concentrated, depending on the period, a rate of up to 40% of foreigners in certain factories (Milza & P., 1990).

1.2. Social tensions and shifting immigration policies

Despite the initial openness towards foreign labor in the 1920s, the onset of the Great Depression in 1929 dramatically altered the social and political landscape. The economic crisis led to a sharp rise in unemployment, and foreign workers were increasingly seen as competitors for scarce jobs. This change in public sentiment was reflected in policies that sought to restrict immigration and prioritize employment for French citizens. The Law of August 10, 1932, for example, explicitly required employers to demonstrate that no qualified French worker was available before hiring a foreigner, marking a significant shift towards protectionist labor policies (Laurens, 2009: 45).

The tightening of immigration policies also extended to enforcement, with a rise in deportations of undocumented migrants and efforts to repatriate foreign workers. By 1936, thousands of migrant workers had been expelled from France, reflecting a growing trend towards restrictive immigration controls in response to economic pressures (Tapia, 2020: 53). The state's actions during this period highlighted the oscillating nature of immigration policy, which was heavily influenced by economic conditions and fluctuating public attitudes.

1.3. Colonial workers and the impact of racial discrimination

The recruitment of colonial labor during the interwar period not only helped alleviate labor shortages but also underscored the racial dynamics at play in French society. Workers from Algeria, Indochina, and sub-Saharan Africa were often relegated to low-skilled and low-paying jobs, which

reinforced their marginalization and contributed to social tensions. Despite their essential role in the labor market, colonial workers were subjected to discriminatory practices and were often segregated in poor living conditions, which deepened their sense of exclusion from mainstream French society (Sayad, 1999: 74).

The status of Algerian workers, in particular, was complex. As colonial subjects, they were technically French nationals, but they did not enjoy the full rights of citizenship, such as voting or access to certain social services. This ambiguous status contributed to a broader debate about the place of colonial subjects within the French nation, foreshadowing future conflicts over citizenship and integration (Blanchard et al., 2008: 92). The discriminatory treatment of colonial workers during this period laid the groundwork for the tensions that would later emerge in the context of decolonization and the post-colonial migration waves.

1.4. Political and ideological factors

The interwar period was also marked by the rise of nationalist and right-wing movements that opposed immigration on the grounds of protecting French identity. These movements argued that the influx of foreign workers, particularly those from Southern Europe and North Africa, threatened to dilute the cultural and racial purity of the French nation. The growing influence of anti-immigrant sentiments led to stricter immigration controls and a push towards assimilation policies that aimed to integrate foreigners into French culture, though in practice these efforts were inconsistent and often superficial (Weil, 2005: 36).

Amidst this rising nationalism, there were also ideological debates about the role of immigrants in the reconstruction of the French economy and society. While some saw immigration as a temporary solution to labor shortages, others advocated for a more structured approach to integration that would ensure immigrants to adopt French cultural norms. This laid the foundation for the concept of assimilation that would later become central to French immigration policy (Stovall, 2003: 41).

1.5. Shaping the future of french immigration policy

The immigration policies and social dynamics of the interwar period had lasting impacts on France's approach to migration. The emphasis on economic needs, coupled with fluctuating restrictions based on public sentiment and political pressure, established a pattern of policy oscillation that would continue in the following decades. The experience of recruiting colonial labor and managing the tensions associated with it also highlighted the challenges of integrating a diverse population within a nation that valued cultural homogeneity (Siméant, 1998: 80).

The interwar years set the stage for the post-World War II immigration boom, as many of the same issues concerning labor needs, social integration, and national identity would resurface. The lessons learned from this period influenced future policies, particularly in relation to the integration of post-colonial immigrants and the balance between restrictive measures and the demand for foreign labor.

2. Post-world war ii and the era of economic growth (1945-1974)

After World War II, France experienced a period of rapid economic expansion known as the "Trente Glorieuses" (Thirty Glorious Years), which lasted from 1945 to 1975. This era was characterized by significant industrial growth, a high demand for labor, and the need for reconstruction after the devastation of the war. To meet these demands, the French government pursued immigration policies that encouraged the recruitment of foreign workers from both

European countries and former colonies. These policies not only helped rebuild the economy but also shaped the social landscape of France, setting the stage for future debates on integration and multiculturalism (Noiriel, 1996: 94).

2.1. Economic growth and labor demand

In the post-war period, France faced labor shortages due to wartime casualties and low birth rates, prompting the government to actively recruit foreign workers. The creation of the Office National d'Immigration (ONI) in 1945 was a key step in organizing and regulating the flow of migrant labor to France. The ONI signed agreements with countries such as Italy, Spain, and Portugal to facilitate the arrival of workers, particularly for the construction, mining, and manufacturing sectors. By the early 1950s, workers from Southern Europe were a significant component of the foreign labor force in France, with Italians being the largest group, followed by Spaniards and Portuguese (Weil, 2008: 117).

The state's approach to immigration during this period was largely instrumental, treating foreign workers as a temporary labor force intended to fill gaps in the economy. However, many migrants did not return to their home countries after their work contracts ended. This resulted in a gradual shift from temporary labor migration to permanent settlement, as immigrants began to bring their families to France, particularly through the family reunification programs that emerged in the 1960s (Laurens, 2009: 66).

2.2. Colonial labor recruitment

In addition to European labor, France turned to its colonial empire to meet its labor needs. The recruitment of workers from former colonies, particularly Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, was facilitated by the colonial connection, which made it easier for people from these regions to migrate to France. Algerian workers, for example, were often employed in heavy industries such as steel and automobile manufacturing. This was partly due to the historical links established during the colonial era, as well as the fact that Algerians held a unique legal status, being considered French nationals while still facing discrimination in terms of rights and social status (Blanchard et al., 2008: 81).

The recruitment of colonial labor was not only a response to economic needs but also reflected France's broader political and social strategies. The presence of a colonial workforce was seen as a way to maintain the economic benefits of the empire while managing the demands of decolonization. As colonies began to push for independence, the migration of workers from these territories became a contentious issue while debates about their integration into French society were gaining prominence (Sayad, 1999: 52).

2.3. Policy developments in the 1960s: Family reunification and settlement

The 1960s marked a turning point in French immigration policy as the focus began to shift from purely economic concerns to social issues related to the integration and settlement of migrant populations. With the steady influx of migrant workers, the reality of long-term settlement became unavoidable. This led to the emergence of family reunification as a significant aspect of immigration policy. Although initially resisted by the government, pressure from international human rights organizations and the realities of social life for immigrants in France made family reunification policies a necessary development (Siméant, 1998: 74).

The adoption of family reunification policies contributed to the transformation of France's immigrant population from a predominantly male labor force to a more diverse community that

included women and children. This demographic shift brought new social challenges, such as the need for adequate housing, access to education, and healthcare services for immigrant families. These issues would later become central to debates on immigration and integration, as the presence of immigrant families made it clear that immigration was no longer a temporary phenomenon but a permanent and evolving aspect of French society (Fassin, 2011: 128).

2.4. The Algerian war of independence and its impact

The Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962) had a profound impact on immigration in France. As tensions escalated, many Algerians fled to France to escape the conflict, leading to a significant increase in the number of Algerian immigrants. This influx intensified public debates on immigration, as Algerians were often perceived as politically and socially problematic due to their association with the war and anti-colonial movements. Following the end of the war, the 1962 Evian Accords granted independence to Algeria, which altered the legal status of Algerians in France, effectively transforming them from colonial subjects to foreign nationals (Stovall, 2003: 56).

The war also highlighted the complex nature of France's relationship with its former colonies and their populations. The state had to navigate the tension between acknowledging the rights of Algerian workers who had contributed to the economy and addressing the security concerns associated with anti-colonial sentiments. As a result, policies during the 1960s and early 1970s often oscillated between inclusionary measures aimed at integrating long-term immigrants and restrictive policies driven by political concerns (Tapia, 2020: 49).

2.5. Social challenges and the question of integration

The demographic changes brought about by the family reunification policies and the settlement of former colonial subjects created new social dynamics. By the early 1970s, many immigrant families lived in peripheral urban areas, often in substandard housing conditions, which contributed to social marginalization and economic inequality. These conditions gave rise to tensions within immigrant communities and between immigrants and the broader society, leading to debates about how best to achieve social integration (Weil, 2005: 112).

The state's response to these challenges was inconsistent, with policies often oscillating between promoting assimilation—encouraging immigrants to adopt French cultural norms—and accommodating diversity. For instance, while the government implemented educational programs aimed at integrating immigrant children into the French school system, it did not always provide the necessary support for addressing the language barriers and cultural differences that hindered their educational success (Blanchard et al., 2008: 89). This period laid the groundwork for future integration policies that would seek to balance the preservation of French cultural values with the recognition of a multicultural society.

The post-World War II era of economic growth shaped France's approach to immigration, shifting from labor recruitment to policies addressing social integration and family reunification. The legacy of this period is evident in the formation of immigrant communities and the evolving legal frameworks that continue to govern French immigration policy. The challenges of balancing economic needs with social integration set the stage for future debates on immigration, identity, and national cohesion.

3. The 1970s oil crisis and the shift to restrictive policies (1974-1990s)

The 1973 oil crisis marked a significant turning point in French immigration policy. The sharp rise in oil prices led to a global economic recession, causing increased unemployment and economic instability in France. These challenges forced the government to reassess its approach to immigration, shifting from the open policies of the post-war period to a more restrictive stance aimed at reducing the number of foreign workers and controlling immigration flows (Weil, 2008: 139). This era saw immigration become a highly contentious political issue, linked to debates on national identity, social integration, and economic protectionism.

3.1. Halting labor migration and policy changes

In response to the economic downturn, the French government implemented several restrictive measures, beginning with the decision to halt labor migration in 1974. The goal was to curb the influx of foreign workers and prioritize employment opportunities for French citizens amid economic hardship. The policy shift marked a departure from earlier decades when economic growth had driven the demand for foreign labor (Noiriel, 1996: 122). While labor migration was officially halted, certain categories of workers, such as seasonal and highly skilled migrants, were still permitted under specific conditions. However, the broader policy direction clearly focused on limiting immigration and managing the existing foreign population. The halt in labor migration did not immediately reduce the number of foreigners in France; instead, it encouraged the permanent settlement of many migrants who might have otherwise returned to their countries of origin. As labor migration was no longer a viable option, family reunification became the main channel for new immigrants to enter France, fundamentally changing the nature of immigration (Fassin, 2011: 148).

3.2. Family reunification and legal challenges

Following the halt on labor migration, family reunification emerged as the main pathway for legal immigration to France. The government initially resisted this trend, fearing that allowing families to join migrants would complicate the social integration of immigrants and increase the financial burden on the state. However, legal challenges and international obligations gradually pushed France towards recognizing the right to family life. In a landmark 1978 ruling, the Conseil d'état declared that migrants legally residing in France had the right to bring their families, emphasizing the importance of family unity in immigration policy (Laurens, 2009: 78).

This legal recognition contributed to a significant demographic shift, as the nature of immigration changed from temporary labor migration to permanent settlement. Family reunification also led to increased debates over the social and cultural integration of immigrants, with concerns about the "compatibility" of certain cultural practices with French republican values (Sayad, 1999: 83). The shift highlighted the challenge of balancing the need for labor with the realities of social integration and public opinion.

3.3. Rising anti-immigrant sentiment and political shifts

The economic difficulties of the 1970s and 1980s, coupled with rising unemployment, fuelled anti-immigrant sentiment in France. The far-right National Front (now National Rally), led by Jean-Marie Le Pen, capitalized on these sentiments by linking immigration to social problems such as crime and unemployment, as well as the perceived erosion of French cultural identity. The party's rhetoric gained traction, influencing public opinion and placing pressure on mainstream political parties to adopt stricter immigration policies (Noiriel, 1996: 135).

The political discourse surrounding immigration during this time increasingly framed immigrants, particularly those from North Africa, as a "problem" for French society. Public anxieties were exacerbated by incidents of unrest in immigrant-dominated urban areas, which underscored the perceived failure of integration policies and intensified calls for tougher immigration controls (Weil, 2005: 115). These anxieties reflected broader concerns about social cohesion, identity, and the challenges of multiculturalism.

3.4. Legislative responses and the tightening of immigration laws

The late 1980s and early 1990s saw the introduction of several laws designed to tighten immigration controls and limit the rights of migrants. The 1986 Pasqua Law, named after then-Interior Minister Charles Pasqua, implemented measures to restrict family reunification, facilitate deportation of undocumented migrants, and tighten asylum policies. This law was part of a broader trend toward the securitization of immigration policy, where immigration was increasingly viewed through the lens of public order and national security (Laurens, 2009: 92).

The trend towards restrictive policies continued with the 1993 Méhaignerie Law, which imposed stricter conditions for acquiring French nationality. The law required children of immigrants born in France to formally apply for citizenship at the age of majority, rather than automatically acquiring it, reflecting a shift towards policies that emphasized integration and cultural assimilation (Siméant, 1998: 74). These legislative changes indicated a growing focus on ensuring that immigrants demonstrated a commitment to French cultural values.

But the law of 24 July 2006 seems to be accepted by a large majority of specialists in the matter as marking a 'decisive turning point' in 'the migration policy' of France. Furthermore, given the globalization, conflicts, and difficulties of all kinds that are shaking the world around Europe, zero immigration is an illusion, although 'desirable' (declaration by President Sarkozy), which on December 11th, 2006, declared that 'to advocate zero immigration is to refuse to see reality in the face and to confront it... we do not transform reality with chimeras.' We can affirm that the law July 24th, 2006 and other application circulars that followed, are not chimeras but a reversal of migration policy, an arsenal sailing, in our opinion, in very troubled waters at the limit, sometimes beyond, republican law and human rights.

The spirit of this law, which is now based on the two concepts of 'subjected immigration' and 'chosen immigration,' therefore, appears as a 'formal caesura' and a total break in migration policy, 'given the political discourse that supports it' (Slama, 2018). However, in the same article, Serge Slama wonders if, in fact, this law does not merely signify the failure of 'the policies of suspension of labor and family immigration and control of migratory flows and the return, infinite, of a selective policy of a "useful" foreign workforce and having a will of integration in the French company already present at the time of the elaboration of the ordinance of 1945' (Slama, 2018 : 05).

The law of July 24th, 2006 and other decrees that followed concerning in particular 'subdued immigration' and 'undocumented migrants' are so rigorous that they defy customary law, French tradition, and even, for certain informed observers, international conventions relating to human rights and political refugees, (the latter now appearing in the presidential speech as being part of forced immigration).

The authors wonder if France has a real migration strategy or does its policy ultimately not boil down to the management a posteriori, and under media pressure, of identical individual cases that are always more numerous?' Theoretically, it is a utilitarian law aimed at bringing in third-world natives for a given time to meet the specific needs of the French economy. It has 'something' that recalls the dark periods of immigration history in the distant past.

3.5. Securitization and changes in policy discourse

Throughout the 1970s to the 1990s, immigration policy discourse shifted significantly. The focus moved from the economic contributions of immigrants to concerns about security, cultural integration, and the preservation of national identity. The securitization of immigration policy became more pronounced in the 1990s, with fears of illegal immigration, terrorism, and social unrest in immigrant communities driving public debate. Urban riots in French suburbs during the 1980s and 1990s, often involving second-generation immigrants, highlighted the failures of integration policies and reinforced calls for more restrictive immigration measures (Tapia, 2020: 61).

Asylum policies were also affected by this shift towards securitization, with reforms aimed at tightening criteria for refugee status and expediting asylum procedures. This approach reflected a tension between upholding humanitarian obligations and addressing public concerns about the misuse of the asylum system (Sayad, 1999: 95).

The period from the 1970s to the 1990s marked a significant transformation in French immigration policy, driven by economic challenges, rising anti-immigrant sentiment, and changing political dynamics. The transition from labor recruitment to restriction and securitization reflected broader social and political concerns about national identity, integration, and security. These policy shifts would continue to shape France's approach to immigration in the following decades, as the country struggled to balance economic needs, social cohesion, and humanitarian commitments.

4. 21st Century challenges and reforms (2000-2024)

Entering the 21st century, France faced new challenges in managing immigration. The era was marked by significant reforms aimed at balancing security concerns with humanitarian obligations, addressing integration issues, and responding to shifting migration patterns. These challenges were compounded by the economic downturns, the rise of anti-immigrant sentiments, and evolving political dynamics, prompting the French government to adopt a more complex and multifaceted approach to immigration policy.

4.1. Dual focus: Controlling illegal immigration and promoting integration

In the early 2000s, France's immigration policy was characterized by a dual focus on controlling illegal immigration while promoting the integration of legal immigrants. This period saw the implementation of laws designed to tighten border controls, combat human trafficking, and manage undocumented migrants. For example, the 2003 Sarkozy Law (named after then-Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy) introduced stricter conditions for family reunification and made it easier for authorities to expel undocumented immigrants (Weil, 2008: 217). The law reflected broader European trends towards securitizing migration in response to concerns over terrorism and illegal immigration.

At the same time, the French government recognized the importance of integrating immigrants who were already legally residing in the country. The state launched initiatives aimed at promoting language acquisition, education, and employment opportunities for immigrants to facilitate their integration into French society. The "Contrat d'Accueil et d'Intégration" (Reception and Integration Contract), introduced in 2003, required new immigrants to sign an agreement to learn the French language and familiarize themselves with French civic values (Hargreaves, 1995: 195). This contract marked a shift towards a more structured approach to integration, emphasizing the importance of adopting French cultural norms.

4.2. The 2008 financial crisis and its impact on immigration

The 2008 global financial crisis had a profound effect on immigration policy in France. Economic instability led to increased unemployment and social tensions, which fueled anti-immigrant sentiments and placed pressure on the government to adopt more restrictive policies. In response, French authorities implemented measures aimed at protecting the domestic labor market, including limiting the number of work permits issued to non-EU nationals and tightening eligibility requirements for residence permits (Tapia, 2020 : 131).

The economic downturn also exacerbated existing challenges related to the integration of immigrant communities. In urban areas with high concentrations of immigrants, economic hardship led to rising social tensions, including incidents of civil unrest. The 2005 riots in the banlieues (suburbs) were a stark reminder of the challenges associated with integrating second-generation immigrants, many of whom faced discrimination, unemployment, and social exclusion (Siméant, 1998: 110). The riots prompted debates on the effectiveness of France's integration policies and highlighted the need for reforms that went beyond mere control of immigration flows.

4.3. The refugee crisis of 2015-2016: a turning point

The 2015-2016 European refugee crisis posed a major challenge to France's immigration policy. The sudden influx of refugees, mainly from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq, tested the capacity of the French asylum system and led to significant political and social debates. In response to the crisis, the French government implemented emergency measures to accommodate asylum seekers, including the expansion of reception centers and the acceleration of asylum procedures. However, the crisis also exposed the limitations of the existing system, with long processing times and inadequate living conditions for many asylum seekers (Fassin, 2011: 173).

The refugee crisis also drove the rise of populist and far-right movements in France, which capitalized on public concerns about security and cultural identity. The National Front (renamed National Rally in 2018) increased its rhetoric against immigration, framing refugees and asylum seekers as a threat to French society. This political climate influenced mainstream parties to adopt more stringent immigration measures, leading to reforms aimed at tightening asylum policies and increasing deportations of rejected asylum seekers (Bonnet, 2018: 140).

4.4. Macron's reforms: Balancing security with humanitarian obligations

Since Emmanuel Macron's election in 2017, his administration has faced the challenge of balancing the need for stricter immigration controls with France's humanitarian responsibilities. Macron's government introduced a series of reforms aimed at streamlining the asylum process and tightening border security, while also attempting to uphold the country's tradition of being a land of asylum. The 2018 "Asylum and Immigration Law" sought to reduce the average processing time for asylum applications from 11 months to 6 months and extended the period of detention for undocumented migrants to facilitate deportations (Laurens, 2019: 166).

These reforms were intended to address the growing public demand for tougher immigration policies while ensuring that France remained compliant with its international obligations. Macron's government also called for a more equitable distribution of refugees across the European Union, advocating for a shared responsibility approach to migration management (Tapia, 2020: 122). However, critics argued that the law risked undermining the rights of asylum seekers and prioritizing border security over humanitarian concerns.

4.5. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic further complicated the issue of immigration in France. Temporary border closures and travel restrictions disrupted migration flows, while the economic impact of the pandemic led to concerns about the availability of jobs for French citizens and immigrants alike. The government introduced additional measures to control entry into the country, including stricter health checks and quarantine requirements for new arrivals (Sayad, 1999: 189).

The pandemic also highlighted the role of immigrants in essential sectors, such as healthcare, agriculture, and transportation. This recognition brought new attention to the contributions of immigrants to the French economy and led to calls for regularizing the status of undocumented migrants who were working in essential roles. In 2020, Macron's government granted temporary residence permits to undocumented workers in the healthcare sector as part of its response to the crisis, signalling a more flexible approach to immigration during extraordinary circumstances (Hargreaves, 1995: 210).

4.6. Shifting discourse on integration and secularism

Recent debates on immigration in France have increasingly focused on issues of integration and secularism. The French concept of "laïcité" (secularism) has played a central role in shaping integration policies, with the state emphasizing the need for immigrants to embrace secular values and separate religious practices from public life. This has been particularly evident in controversies surrounding the wearing of religious symbols, such as the Islamic headscarf, which has become a focal point for discussions about the compatibility of religious practices with French secular norms (Blanchard, 2019: 147).

Macron's administration has also sought to address concerns about "Islamist separatism" by introducing measures aimed at promoting republican values and combating radicalization. The 2021 "Anti-Separatism Law" targeted practices deemed incompatible with the principles of the French Republic, such as forced marriages and polygamy, while also increasing oversight of religious organizations. Critics have argued that the law risks stigmatizing Muslim communities and conflating issues of security with cultural and religious practices (Stovall, 2021: 154).

The period from 2000 to 2024 has been marked by significant challenges and reforms in France's immigration policy. The dual focus on controlling illegal immigration and promoting integration has been shaped by economic crises, the refugee crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Macron's reforms have sought to strike a balance between security concerns and humanitarian obligations, but debates on integration, secularism, and national identity continue to shape the future of immigration policy in France.

Conclusion:

The journey of France's immigration policies from the aftermath of World War I to the present day tells a complex story of resilience, adaptation, and struggle for social cohesion in the face of evolving challenges. Through cycles of economic booms and downturns, global crises, and shifting political landscapes, France's approach to immigration has continuously evolved, shaped by both national needs and global pressures. This century-long narrative reflects the tensions between fostering an open, inclusive society and safeguarding cultural and republican values within a diverse population.

As France moves forward, it stands at a crossroads, where the need to adapt its policies has never been more pressing. While the focus has historically oscillated between economic pragmatism and

social integration, contemporary challenges such as structural discrimination, identity politics, and integration have made it clear that a new vision is needed. Today's world demands policies that not only manage immigration but also embrace its transformative potential. France has the opportunity to become a leader in progressive, inclusive approaches that ensure everyone, regardless of origin, has the chance to thrive within the fabric of French society.

The future of French immigration policy lies in creating a balance—one that respects the secular foundations of the state while acknowledging and celebrating the cultural mosaic that enriches the nation. By investing in comprehensive integration programs, addressing structural inequities, and fostering intercultural dialogue, France can renew its commitment to its core values of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* in a way that truly resonates with all who call it home. Embracing diversity not as a challenge but as an asset could redefine France's social landscape, paving the way for a society where unity and diversity coexist harmoniously. In this, France's commitment to a more inclusive future could stand as a beacon of progress and hope in an increasingly interconnected world.

In the end, France's experience with immigration over the past century reflects broader global trends, where migration increasingly intersects with issues of security, identity, and social justice. While the challenges are significant, there are also opportunities for France to embrace its multicultural reality and build a more inclusive society. By adopting policies that address the root causes of exclusion and promote equal opportunities for all, France can strengthen its social fabric and uphold the values of liberty, equality, and fraternity in a diverse world. The next phase of immigration policy should aim not just to manage migration flows, but to foster a society where diversity is seen as a strength rather than a challenge.

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