(chapter 21)

The French Melting Pot

We arrived in Paris shortly after the beginning of Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting and celebration, and we couldn't have missed it if we had been walking around with bags over our heads. On our first walk through the city, we passed by the Great Mosque of Paris, near the Roman circus, and saw the faithful streaming in and out. *Le Monde* was running a daily special on the "Nights of Ramadan." On our second night in Paris we ended up at a concert listening to some of France's leading Muslim composers and performers.

Though tourists visiting France for the first time might not know it, France is the biggest Muslim nation of Europe, with an estimated five million followers. Islam has been the second religion of France for nearly thirty years. There are twice as many Muslims in France as Protestants (one million) and Jews (seven hundred thousand) combined, and Arabic culture is now definitely part of mainstream French culture.

Even a decade ago this was not the case. On our first visit to France in 1992, we heard the term *Beur*, a slang expression for the children of Arab immigrants, being used to describe a lively subculture known for speaking in a mix of Arabic, French, and *Verlan* (a form of French *Argot* that consists of reverting syllables). But a decade later, names like Djamel, Fharid, Sami, and Khaleb were part of mainstream culture in music, literature, television, and cinema.

Our friends and acquaintances all attributed this "coming out" of Arabic culture to the victory of the French soccer team in the 1998 World Cup. Of all the European teams, France's was exceptional for the mixed origins of its players, many of who were Beur or black (the French use the English word). The World Cup victory was followed by a fantastic explosion of joy on the Champs Elysées, where one million people paraded in celebration (the same celebrations happened all over again when France won the European Cup in 2000). In a popular pun, the patriotic expression *Bleu Blanc Rouge* (Blue White Red: the colors of the French flag) turned into *Black Blanc Beur* (Black White Beur). France's center field player Zinedine Zidane—a Beur of Algerian descent—became a common household name and a role model for hundreds of thousands of French youngsters—Beur, black, and *blanc* alike.

The French refer to this new cultural reality as *métissage* (crossbreeding). At first that expression struck us as strange and slightly offensive: France's population has almost always been ethnically mixed, and normally the French don't lean on people's ethnic origins, especially when they are referring to assimilated French citizens. Many of France's cultural stars, past and present, were immigrants, or children of immigrants. The famous French singer Yves Montand was Italian. The painter Picasso was Spanish, as was writer Albert Camus by his mother. While the Americans were still fighting the war of secession, one famous mulatto, Alexandre Dumas, wrote *The Three Musketeers* and *The Count of Monte Cristo*. In the 1920s, Americans were flocking to Paris to discover jazz music and listen to black artists like Josephine Baker. Actor Michel Coluche was Italian. In 1985, the former president of Senegal, Leopold Sedar Senghor, became a member of the French Academy. And this is not counting the number of artists of North African origin, which is even more impressive.

Beur culture is different, though, partly because of the sheer demographic weight of the North African immigrants. Beurs are provoking a grassroots cultural shift powerful enough to redefine mainstream French culture altogether. One of France's biggest international pop stars of the moment is the *raï* singer Cheb Mami, who recently recorded a duet with pop singer Sting. Like the American rap that originated in urban ghettos, French rap coming out of the suburban ghettos has quickly gone from marginal to mainstream. One of the most popular French comedies of the last decade, *Taxi*, was about a Beur taxi driver from Marseilles. In 2001, a big hit in movie theaters was *La Vérité Si Je Mens* (*The Truth if I Lie*), the story of five Tunisian Jews working in the Paris garment district who are swindled by a big French multinational. Judging by the number of jokes in the film in *Verlan* and Arabic (and the number of people who laughed at them), it is probably safe to say these languages are entering mainstream vocabulary.

The French have always considered artists and performers as quasi-intellectuals, and Beur artists are clearly adopting this role. The main contenders in the 2001 municipal election in Toulouse were a right-wing slate of Philippe Douste-Blazy and a group of Beur singers from a pop group called Zebda, whose song *Tombez la Chemise* (Drop the Shirt), had been a major hit in the 1990s. The pop group got 45 percent of the vote. They lost that time, but as the French would put it, *ce n'est que partie remise* (we'll see next time).

Despite all the signs that France is absorbing, rather than assimilating, Arabic culture, life is far from rosy for France's immigrant population. Many recent immigrants live in the country's suburban ghettos, known as *cités*, the products of France's disastrous urbanization schemes of the 1960s. *Cités* have made a lost generation out of the children of France's first wave of Muslim immigration.

Cités started out as giant public housing projects built throughout suburban France to answer urgent housing needs in the post-war period. The government meant well, but many of the projects quickly fell into decay thanks to poor design, poor building standards, and poor management. Much like apartment complexes in many North American city centers, France's *cités* ended up housing mostly the poor working class and immigrants. In the aftermath of the 1973 oil crisis, unemployment exploded and hit the least-qualified workers first—immigrants for the most part. This added misery to an already grim picture. Unemployment rates of 25 percent became the norm in the *cités*.

This misery was compounded by the fact that until the 1980s French immigrants had no political representation of any sort, not even advisory committees. As foreigners, they didn't even have the right to create their own associations, to the extent that they could not even organize soccer leagues without the approval of their *préfet*. A subculture naturally developed, reinforcing the ghetto mentality. Chronic unemployment and violence became rampant. Nights of rioting, burning cars, and *rodeos*—a ritual of driving stolen cars around and destroying them—have been the daily lot of residents for many years. Not a week goes by without a severe incident involving the disenchanted youth of the *cités*, whether it's the burning of city buses, gang fighting, assaults, rapes, theft, or other vandalism. In January 2001, two hundred kids from rival bands fought openly at *La Défense*, the hypermodern high-rise office complex west of Paris. When a policeman in Toulouse shot a car thief in a *cité* in 1998, three nights of riots followed.

Friends of ours in Paris, an anarchist musician and a left-leaning *lycée* teacher, moved into an apartment in one such housing complex in the suburban town of Épinay-sur-Seine, just north of our neighborhood in Paris. We visited them half a dozen times while they lived there. The area, like many on the periphery of Paris, had a bad reputation, but the first couple of times we saw it, the actual building seemed fine. A number of young couples like our friends had just moved in. However, while our friends took fewer prejudiced notions into their new life than most French would, in the end their open-minded optimism just wasn't enough. Six months after they moved in, the foyer was covered with *tags* (graffiti), and all the first-floor windows had been broken. Their nights were disrupted by noise, yelling, and explosions. They packed their belongings and moved to Saint-Cloud, a peaceful and prosperous town on the outskirts of Paris.

While researching municipal governments, Jean-Benoît had the opportunity to see *cité* life up close in the town of Meaux, just east of Paris. He was interviewing Jean-François Copé, the young mayor who decided to buck the system and create his own local police to deal with the chronic problems of the *cités*. Copé invited him to tag along on a night patrol with his newly created city police. The center of a region famous for producing

Brie cheese, Meaux is also a Jekyll-and-Hyde community. One-half is a quintessential small French town: old, quaint, small-scale, and densely populated. The other half, where 53 percent of the population lives, is a forest of decaying high-rises. But Meaux is not exceptional: most suburban areas of France have pockets that are modernist nightmares.

Before Copé got his city police up and running, the electors of Meaux tried to solve the problems in the *cités* themselves—so to speak. During the 1995 legislative elections, residents of Meaux cast 23 percent of their vote in favor of Jean-Marie Le Pen, the leader of France's extreme right party, the *Front National*. Le Pen's party had campaigned on the promise to bulldoze all the *cités* in France and send the immigrants back to the third world (ignoring the fact that half of France's immigrant population is European). Although Meaux never elected a *Front National député*, the party's 23 percent take was well above the national average of 15 percent.

Jean-Benoît set out with two policemen on a routine patrol of two of Meaux's *cités*: Beauval and la Pierre-Collinet. About twelve thousand people live in each set of complexes. Beauval, the more prosperous one, consisted of about fifty small apartment buildings. Trees had been planted between the buildings, one obvious effort at humanizing the environment. The police said there were only a few trouble spots left. Indeed, things were pretty quiet that night. The only incident that required police intervention was a case of two ten-year-olds who had thrown stones through the window of Beauval's police station.

La Pierre-Collinet, several kilometers away, was a different story altogether. It had four buildings that were two hundred meters long, twenty floors high, separated by two-hundred-meter stretches of open space. Each building had a ring of graffiti around its first floors. One was in such bad shape that the authorities had decided to demolish it. As the officers cruised by the buildings, something fell on the car roof. Residents whistled and yelled insults from the windows. As one of the officers explained, the police never go inside these kinds of buildings without special protection measures, and never in groups of less than three—progress from the time when no police ever entered them. In any event, he explained, locals tend to settle matters between themselves and rarely call the police, who are widely distrusted in the *cités*. To get a foothold in the neighborhood, the city police of Meaux opened a station in a nearby mall. But a week before Jean-Benoît's visit, a group of young men had rammed a car through the station's steel shutters, sacked the station, and set it on fire.

Relations between police and immigrants in France couldn't be worse. Police have the reputation of, on one hand, not caring about what happens in the ghettos, while constantly harassing the *basané* (literally, "tanned") youth who venture into good neighborhoods. Racial tension isn't the only problem. The kids in the *cités* are known for being extremely defiant of authority. The two policemen Jean-Benoît accompanied, Rachid and Tony, were a Beur and a Guadeloupian, respectively. Both grew up in the suburbs. But that didn't matter to the residents of the *cités*, who saw the officers first and foremost as cops. That evening there was a call from an apartment block in a good neighborhood. A resident was complaining that some *jeunes* (literally "youth," but actually a euphemism for black or Beur youth) were making a lot of noise. Rachid and Tony intercepted four teens coming out of one of the buildings, but whenever the police officers opened their mouths to ask a question, the kids laughed, interrupted them, or just walked away. It was only when one of the officers demanded their ID cards that the youngsters complied.

Police in France also have the reputation of being lenient on whites. Jean-Benoît followed Rachid and Tony to a neighborhood where they had made an arrest the previous evening. It was a peaceful neighborhood of cottages, not high-rises. The object of the visit was to check on a man who had been attacked by a neighborhood thug—a remarkably violent white teenager who was the leader of a gang. During the visit, all the neighbors showed up, chatting with the police over their garden's fence. They all seemed appreciative except one black man, who accused the police of reverse racism.

"You would have come earlier if the kid had been black!" he said.

Tony and Rachid told him, "Well, sir, you're talking to a black and a Rebeu (*Verlan* for Beur). So what you're saying doesn't really make sense."

Racial relations in France are extremely complicated. And racial discrimination is by no means confined to the *cités*. We saw plenty of it in our

own working-class neighborhood, which had a strong North African presence. We heard about racism firsthand from the mouths of friends, in particular our local grocer, Ridha, who had immigrated from Tunisia as a teenager and lived in the back room of his store for fifteen years before he could afford to get married and rent an apartment. When he was ready to get a nice apartment, it proved a difficult task, as it is for all North African immigrants in Paris. More than one landlord refused him, telling him they didn't want any "Arabs" in their building.

Strangely, though, it is very difficult to talk about racism, immigration, and integration in France, let alone write about them. There are absolutely no statistics available on these issues. Official documents in France simply have no boxes to check about religion, mother tongue, or ethnic origin. The government cannot legally ask for this information on the national census; they only ask respondents to indicate their citizenship. Once immigrants become French, they are considered French only. As a result, no one can make more than an educated guess about the size of any ethnic or religious group in France, or for that matter, about who lives in the *cités*.

There are reasons for the statistical void. Requiring citizens to declare their ethnic origin would be a transgression of the French doctrine of assimilation, one of the founding principles of the *République*. At the time of the French Revolution, France was an ethnic and linguistic patchwork. The Revolutionaries developed a policy of assimilation to further the goal of centralization and create a single French identity. Their motives were, of course, purely political, and not the slightest bit humanitarian. Still, France is the first country in Europe to define citizenship not by blood, language, or religion, but by residency in a territorial entity and adherence to its values. From the time of the Revolution, Protestants were given equal status, as were Jews and the children of immigrants. They were granted full citizenship at birth.

This principle shows a sharp contrast with Germany, where citizenship was still defined by blood for most of the twentieth century. According to the German law, the German-born son of a Turkish worker who worked all his life in Germany was not entitled to citizenship, but a twelfth generation descendent of a German settler on the shores of the Volga would almost automatically get German citizenship. The Germans only modified this law in 2000—two centuries after the French Revolution.

The French, of course, ignored these principles mightily during World War II, when the fascist regime of Vichy deprived France's three hundred thousand Jews of all their rights and sent seventy-five thousand of them to their death in concentration camps. At the end of the war, the French reverted to the strict principle of assimilation as it was articulated during the Revolution, and made it illegal to keep information on civilian's ethnic origin, religious affiliation, or sexual orientation. This official discretion can go very far, to the point that there is no way to gather statistics about any of these issues in France. In 1999, the government decided to legalize common-law marriages in order to give common-law spouses the same claims on Social Security and inheritance as married people. In the process, homosexual common-law unions were permitted. In 2001, twenty-eight thousand people entered a common-law union, but it is impossible to know how many of those were gay unions because the question is not asked on official documents.

Immigration and integration in France are statistical black holes. It's almost impossible, for instance, to compare France's immigrations patterns to other European countries. There are simply no reliable statistics available to make that possible. Germany claims to have 7.3 million immigrants; France claims to have around 3.5 million. The number is high in Germany because the children of immigrants do not automatically become citizens at birth and usually remain immigrants all their lives. It's almost the opposite situation in France, where children of immigrants become citizens at eighteen as long as they grew up on French territory. Then, when they become citizens, they automatically vanish from statistics.

French statistics only allow us to know this much. In 2000, there were 3.5 million immigrants, 40 percent of who were unqualified workers, and about 20 percent of who were unemployed. This accounts for about 6 percent of the population. Another 1.7 million former immigrants became citizens during their lives. This number is considered a low estimate, though; after they become citizens, many immigrants declare that they

were born in France on census forms. That makes another 3 percent of the population. How many of their children and grandchildren are now French? A conservative estimate puts the number of immigrants and second-generation immigrants at about 12 percent of the total population. Other estimates, probably more accurate, claim the proportion is more like 20 percent. Racists say it's 50 percent.

No one in France really knows anything about whether immigrants integrate, or what factors determine whether they do. An exact picture of integration in France simply does not exist. There are no statistics on how many former immigrants acquire citizenship, where they live, how many children they have, what jobs they have, who hires them, how much they are paid, what language they speak, who they marry, or what religion they practice. It's anybody's guess. All opinions are based on anecdotal evidence.

Some sociologists and associations do their best with the lack of official data and have even managed to produce studies on the topic. In the absence of true statistical evidence, they use factors like whether names sound French or not, then generalize their conclusions countrywide. According to some of these studies, one-half of male Beurs—second-generation Arabs—marry non-Muslim women, but only one-quarter of female Beurs marry non-Beurs. Another study claims that the rate of delinquency of African immigrants is higher than the national rate—not surprising because poverty is more common among immigrants than the general population. But the margin of error is enormous, and none of these studies are completely reliable.

This statistical black hole is a double-edged sword. On one hand, it prevents any form of labeling, a situation that immigrants appreciate. On the other hand, it allows racists and xenophobes to fabricate any kind of story they want, to magnify local problems into grand theories and argue that immigrants should be sent back to the third world. In other words, it removes the possibility of deflating the racist rhetoric of France's extreme right with plain facts and figures, and to act on real problems.

France's far-right party, the *Front National*, has made good use of this statistical void. The party is the creation of charismatic leader Jean-Marie Le Pen, a lawyer and *grande-école* graduate, who came in second during the

2002 presidential elections. In 1954–55, Le Pen fought in Indochina as a second lieutenant in the crack airborne troops. In 1956, at twenty-seven, he became the youngest *député* of the National Assembly as a member of the right-wing *Union et Fraternité Française*. The same year, he took a six-month leave to go back to the army. He fought in the 1956 Suez Expedition and worked as an intelligence officer in Algiers. He also became Secretary General of a paramilitary organization called the *Front National Combattant* (the National Fighting Front), which supported a French Algeria. Regarded as subversive, this association was outlawed in 1961. In 1972, Le Pen founded a political party, the *Front National*. Until 1983, the party was extremely marginal, winning only 0.5 percent of the vote in elections, at best. But at the 1983 municipal elections, the party won a surprising 11.3 percent of the vote. It has held onto about the same proportion of the vote since then, with highs of 17 percent and lows of 2 percent at some municipal elections.

It is hard to define a cause for the *Front National*'s sudden rise in popularity in the 1980s. Le Pen is an exceptional orator who appealed (and still does) to various conservative political orientations, including voters who are nostalgic for the Old Regime, fanatical anti-communists, die-hard colonialists, opponents of the parliamentary system, or even old fans of Pétain. What these voters all shared was a strong sense of anti-semitism and xenophobia. Le Pen built on this common denominator and used anti-immigration rhetoric to bind his different supporters. The *Front National* is an authoritarian, reactionary law-and-order party that is opposed to European integration and keenly attached to the idea of a powerful French State.

Circumstances were favorable to Le Pen's rise. When the 1973 oil crisis provoked a recession and unemployment rose in Europe, immigration became a hot issue in France, as in Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy, Belgium, and Sweden. Rising unemployment came just when immigration rates in France were peaking at about four million per year. In an odd leap of logic, conservative demagogues convinced many voters that immigrants were to blame for the job losses (when, in fact, immigrants were generally lowest on the seniority ladder and the first ones to be laid off). But there was already widespread resentment against North Africans in France as a result of decolonization and the independence movement in Algeria in the 1950s and early 1960s. Following in the steps of other European countries, President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing placed severe restrictions on immigration and offered immigrants money to return to their country of origin—like elsewhere, the measures were largely ineffective. It was around that time that Le Pen's popularity suddenly started to rise.

Given the *Front National*'s openly xenophobic platform, it is surprising that it has been allowed to exist at all. The French government actually could have stopped it, but it let the opportunity slip by. When it was first created, and for many years after that, *Front National* was considered marginal and inoffensive; nothing it was doing was illegal. Until the 1980s, the party failed to capture more than 1 percent of the vote, so other parties did not regard it as a threat. In 1983, the *Front National* suddenly gained 10 percent of the vote in the municipal elections, then 11 percent a year later in the European elections. This sudden jump in support comes from the failure of the center-right to win at the presidential and legislative elections of 1981, bringing in the socialist François Mitterrand as president. People of the right took this defeat badly, some of them claiming that the "Soviet tanks were waiting in the North of Paris." Some of the right-wing vote swung into the arms of Jean-Marie Le Pen, whose inflammatory rhetoric suited the most extreme conservatives. And suddenly, Le Pen had acquired too much legitimacy to be stopped.

Mitterrand himself is largely to blame for allowing the *Front National* to gain a luster of legitimacy. As the 1986 legislative elections were approaching, the socialists' position was not very good. Mitterrand did not attack the extreme right because he thought that if he left it alone, it might split the right-wing vote. The socialist-communist vote had been splitting the left-wing vote for thirty years, allowing the constant reelection of Gaullists. To make sure the same thing would happen on the right, Mitterrand changed the election system for the legislative elections from a two-round election by riding to a proportional system. But his strategy backfired: the socialists were ousted and he ended up in *cohabitation* with a right-wing prime minister. The *Front National* won 9.7 percent of the vote, which allowed it to take thirty-five of the 574 seats in the National Assembly. Mitterrand restored the two-round vote by riding in 1988, and the *Front National* won only one seat in the legislative assembly. But the damage was done. Although the *Front National* had never gained more than one National Assembly seat in any other legislative election, the 1986 elections gave them the status of a legitimate political party.

Fortunately, the political damage was contained. The French Right isolated the *Front National* and refused to deal openly with Le Pen. To its credit, the French Right has consistently refused to strike any kind of alliance with the FN, often at the price of the electoral victory. (This is exactly what happened in Austria and Italy in 2000 and 2001, where the right joined forces with the extreme right during legislative elections.) During the 1998 regional elections, some local right-wing politicians did strike local alliances with *Front National* candidates, but national parties of the Right and Left condemned the maneuver, and it hasn't happened since. The Right has been more confident about its position since Jacques Chirac won the presidency in 1995, in spite of Le Pen's 15 percent vote.

In the late 1990s, the *Front National* faired badly during elections, partly because French authorities decided to get tough with Le Pen. In May 1998, Le Pen manhandled a socialist protester at a political meeting in Mantes-la-Jolie, east of Paris—the protester turned out to be the city's mayor. Le Pen was prosecuted and found guilty. He was banned from office and stripped of his seat as regional councilor. In 1999, a number of assault rifles were found in the trunk of his car, and he was dragged before the law again. This constant legal harassment seriously undermined his credibility and provoked a rift in the *Front National*, which split into rival factions just before the European elections of June 1999. The two factions won less than 8.8 percent of the vote together. And at the municipal elections of 2001, the *Front National* won less than 10 percent of the vote.

But at the 2002 presidential elections, Le Pen bounced back with 16.8 percent of the popular vote, much to the shock and embarrassment of the French themselves. International commentators made much of his anti-immigrant discourse, but in fact, Le Pen had campaigned more on a law-and-order platform, selling himself as a hard-nosed right-wing candidate rather than the leader of France's extreme-right. Le Pen's traditional extreme-right oratory resurfaced only during the campaign for the second round, when France's other extreme-right parties rallied to him. In the second round, Le Pen's score only rose a tiny bit to 19 percent. The conclusion to be drawn? Most of his party's 2002 success was the result of Le Pen's persona, not support for the *Front National*. Even the legitimacy Le Pen gained by defeating France's socialist party in the first round was not sufficient to win extra votes among hard-nosed right-wingers. In the legislative elections a month later, support for Le Pen's party dwindled to 12 percent of the vote.

Whether the *Front National*'s success will survive its seventy-four-year-old leader remains to be seen, but one thing is certain: his ideas will always get support. That's partly because like any country, a good 15 percent of the French are reactionary and racist. But there is another fact at work, unique to France.

The *Front National* is the only party in France that has ever campaigned on issues of integration and immigration. Unfortunately, no other party brings these issues up in order to give them a positive spin. This allows the far right to monopolize the issue and lay down the terms in which it is discussed. Although the *Front National* never held a seat in any cabinet, Le Pen's party has been in a position to indirectly influence France's immigration policy and shape public opinion on the question.

A vast majority of the population is actually against Le Pen's ideas, but the political parties that represent them have failed in explaining why they oppose him. Even the politicians who do admit France has problems integrating immigrants tend to shy away from saying what those problems are. As a consequence, no one proposes constructive ways to deal with the integration of immigrants. The only coherent voice on the matter was Jean-Pierre Chevènement, a left-wing politician who expressed worries about integration problems while he was Minister of the Interior from 1997 to 2000. He worked hard to find solutions—his approach was to be tough on crime while working on a rapprochement with France's Muslim community. But the issue of integration is so taboo among the French Left that

Chevènement ended up getting very little political support from his natural allies, to the point that some even accused him of fostering extreme-right ideas. The reason for this taboo is the *République's* official policy of assimilation: everyone is expected to integrate. But any attempt to identify the problem of who does not integrate, where, and why, is perceived as a threat to the assimilation doctrine. That leaves the field open to Le Pen.

For fifteen years now, Le Pen has been the only politician willing to speak openly, though badly, about integration problems. France toughened up immigration laws in the '80s and '90s as a result of Le Pen's influence. In 1986, Jacques Chirac's government stiffened the rules for French citizens who married foreigners, forcing foreign spouses to wait two years for French citizenship instead of one. In 1993, the government removed the right to automatic citizenship at birth for children of immigrants and required children to apply for naturalization between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one. In 1998, the socialist government reverted to a more open policy, granting children of immigrants automatic citizenship at eighteen, or at age thirteen if the child requested it.

The *Front National* has probably not made the French more racist. It's safe to assume that a good 15 percent of the electorate is xenophobic to begin with. All European countries, for that matter, have a far-right party, and the proportion of extremists is probably about the same everywhere.

Racial discrimination is a fact of life in France, as it is in almost all societies. In the second week of our stay, the rental agent for our apartment casually remarked that we had chosen a good neighborhood because it was *le bon 18 ième* (the "good" part of the eighteenth *arrondissement*). The "bad" part of the eighteenth was the East Side, where there is a higher concentration of Africans and Arabs (as the French call North Africans). Of course, people in Toronto said something quite similar about the neighborhood we chose there, where there were a lot of Caribbean immigrants. The difference in France was how open, or even brazen, people were about their prejudices. We were struck by that the night an acquaintance drove us back home from a party and spontaneously launched into a rant about "Arabs" as soon as she saw our neighborhood (that would probably not happen in Toronto).

The people who were not that open about their prejudices simply refused to talk about the issue, probably because talking about race contradicts the values of the Republic by definition. The French have a lot of euphemisms for talking about the problems of race relations without calling them race relations. They speak of *insécurité* (insecurity, meaning violence) in *les cités* (ghettos) on the part of *les jeunes* (Beurs and blacks). Unfortunately, the refusal of well-meaning citizens to discuss immigration and integration just opens the terrain for France's far right.

Starting in the mid-1970s, French authorities realized France had an integration problem, but concretely, nothing was done about integration and racism before the 1990s. One of the reasons it took so long to act was that positive discrimination and affirmative action are taboo concepts in a country whose central doctrine of citizenship is assimilation. That seems to be slowly changing.

During the three years we were in France, we very rarely heard anyone say anything positive about multiculturalism. The Republic has been built on the principle that all citizens are equal before the State. The twentieth century showed the French that the existence of non-governmental associations would do no harm to the *République*. But the State always rejected the idea of political liberty at the local level and looked suspiciously on attempts to develop any form of community life, especially around local cultures (because of the risk that this would justify or legitimize such liberties). Bretons, Corsicans, and Basques were never allowed to create their own associations and neither were immigrant groups. This is a sharp contrast to the German custom of allowing immigrants to vote in municipal elections for parallel immigrants' councils with consultative powers. The French never allowed such councils on the basis that immigrants should have no special status—in other words, no more rights than any other citizen.

The government failed to see how this approach would actually work against the goal of integration. The government allowed the geographic concentration of low-skilled immigrants in the *cités*. The result was that entire towns were made hypersensitive to economic downturns. By refusing immigrants the right to vote even for an advisory city council, and by denying them the right to create their own associations, the government prevented them from having any say in their own affairs. The *préfets* were there to manage the *intérêt général*, but they tended to have less time and interest for non-citizens than for voting citizens. Not surprisingly, residents of suburban ghettos ended up feeling profoundly alienated.

That feeling remains, but the situation has been changing since the 1970s, when it dawned on the French government that protecting cultural minorities did not necessarily contradict the principles of the Republic. At that time the government started to encourage Basques, Corsicans, and Bretons to develop their own cultural associations. Slowly, the idea that immigrants could do the same started to gain ground. In 1974, the new president, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, created a ministry in charge of integration. Its main job was to apply programs for sending immigrants back to their countries of origin, but at least France had officially recognized the issues of immigration and integration.

In October 1981, François Mitterrand officially allowed immigrants to create their own associations. The number of mosques in France multiplied, from 274 in 1980 to between some twenty-five hundred in 1993. Mitterrand granted the same labor rights to illegal immigrants as legal immigrants already had. The government also recognized that the *cités* needed more resources and began to put more educational staff and schools in them. Throughout the 1990s, the government pushed integration more actively and attempted to improve its relations with France's huge and growing Muslim community.

Since the election of the socialists in 1997, the administration has adopted a number of measures to hire more children of immigrants. The very idea contradicts the principle of assimilation of the *République*, according to which nationals of foreign origin do not even exist, let alone get special treatment from the State. But the French are coming around to the idea of recognizing minorities. In 1998, the National Police started systematically hiring citizens of foreign origin as police auxiliaries. But, since no statistics can be held on the operation, there is no way of measuring its success. On a day-to-day basis, we did observe that about one in four police officers do not look old-stock French, though our method might be futile since half the French look Mediterranean, anyway. A number of police officers are also Guadeloupians and Martiniquans, who have been fully integrated since 1945.

In 2000, the socialists surmounted another taboo when they passed a law that said 50 percent of the candidates of any party, for any elected office, had to be women. Women are not a different race, but they have been curiously absent from public offices in France, more so than in any other European country (about 10 percent of members of the National Assembly are women, compared with an average of 20 percent for Europe and most developed nations). French women got voting power and equal civil rights in 1944, but invisible barriers have clearly stopped them from entering politics. The law on equality of electoral seats was first put to the test in the municipal elections of 2001. We interviewed Yvette Roudy, the *député* who had created the first laws on equality in 1981. We met her at a round table in 2001, and her point of view applied both to women and to immigrants: "I understand that every citizen must be theoretically equal, but I came to understand that if the principle of equality is there to justify the permanent exclusion of some groups, then there must be measures to put an end to this situation." The measure worked. After the municipal elections of 2001, the proportion of women holding elected offices in *communes* rose from 20 to 33 percent.

Like Roudy, many lawmakers in France have recognized that the National Assembly will need to do more for immigrants and their children. One of the reasons for the socialist victory in the 1995 legislative elections, and their other landslide in the 1997 legislative elections, is that they deliberately presented candidates from different ethnic communities and didn't hide it. The move was regarded as a novelty in French politics.

In 2002, Paris created its first Council of Immigrant Representation. This is the surest sign yet that old taboos about assimilation in France are finally breaking down.