Immigration: Amnesia and Memory

Gérard Noiriel

The immigration issue is an ideal starting point for considering the problem of intellectual relations between France and the United States. Indeed, what the two countries share in common is that they both welcomed a sizeable number of immigrants of the most diverse origins. Yet the social sciences in France have fallen well behind scholarship in the United States in analyzing this phenomenon. French sociologists and historians have always borrowed extensively from American studies of immigration, widely perceived as their most relevant field of reference. In so doing, however, they failed to examine critically the paradigms of ethnicity and multiculturalism which guided those studies, largely ignoring the specificities of cultural, social, and political traditions in the United States. Recurrent French polemics concerning immigration have tended to use the reference to North America for partisan purposes, picturing it either as a model to be emulated or as a counterexample to be avoided, a pattern which, I believe, has served only to aggravate misunderstandings between the two sides. I argue that to overcome these schematic analyses, we must first restore the coherence of each specific tradition by placing it in its proper historical context. In this essay, which builds on an earlier comparative study of immigration in France and the United States coauthored with Donald Horowitz,[1] I will underscore some of the historical specificities of the French model of immigration, by showing how it resembles and differs from a contextualized understanding of the American case.

Gérard Noiriel is directeur d'études at the Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales in Paris. His recently published books include *Le Creuset français: Histoire de l'immigration (19ème–20ème siècles)* (Paris, 1988. The English translation is to appear in 1995 at the University of Minnesota Press), and *La Tyrannie du national: Le Droit d'asile en Europe (1793–1993)* (Paris, 1991).

1 Gérard Noiriel, "Difficulties in French Historical Research on Immigration," in *Immigrants in Two Democracies: French and American Experience*, ed. Donald L. Horowitz and Gérard Noiriel (New York, 1992), 66–79.

The French Case of Immigration and the Refusal of History

Several criteria allow us to say that France has been one of the fore-most countries of immigration in the twentieth century. Had it not been for the influx of immigrants over the past century, the overall population of France would stand at forty-five million rather than at fifty-eight. Approximately 20 percent of people born in France have at least one parent or grandparent of immigrant origin. If we take great-grandparents into account and include the foreign population born outside French territory, we reach a total of nearly one third of the overall population. So, if one places oneself at the level of what the Durkheimian sociologist Maurice Halbwachs called "l'histoire vécue," "le souvenir," created from individual and family memories, the memory of immigration today affects the French more than it does the Americans.[2] And yet, if one puts oneself at the level of "collective memory"—that which is conveyed, maintained, and celebrated by all instruments of public opinion (scholarly works, manuals, monuments, and official ceremonies)—the situation is the reverse. The role played by immigration in the constitution of the collective memory of the French remains completely repressed in their national identity. Conversely, the myth of the United States as a "melting pot," as a place of "refuge" for all peoples, still prevails in the American collective memory. Nathan Glazer recently remarked that one of the major obstacles to curbing clandestine immigration into the United States remains the sentiment that America is still an "unachieved country," which need not have rigid barriers.[3]

These opposing uses of "memory" reflect the radical difference between French and American immigration. In all countries, the nation-state's constitution is accompanied by a certain number of "myths of origin" destined to reinforce the cohesion of a population which has divided itself into antagonistic groups. In countries where immigration played a decisive role in the initial populating, the theme of "immigrants" often occupies an important place in the constitution of the "myth of origins" (for example in Australia, where

---

2 I will not deal here with the statistical problems posed by attempts to classify the French population according to criteria of national origin; nor with the evidence that allows us to say that after three generations there are more French with immigrant ancestors today than Americans with immigrant ancestors; see Gérard Noiriel, Le Creuset français: Histoire de l'immigration (19ème–20ème siècles) (Paris, 1988).

3 Nathan Glazer, ed., Clamor at the Gates: The New American Immigration (San Francisco, 1985).

collective memory sanctifies English convicts as those who forged the origins of the current population). On the other hand, immigration in France cannot be explained by problems of population. Until the end of the eighteenth century, France was the most populated country in Europe. The first statistical studies devoted to population bemoaned the fact that although French districts existed in most of the large European cities, foreigners were quite few on French soil.[4] As was noted in a recent study, the French "pattern" of immigration "foreshadowed" by a half-century, perhaps even by a century, a process which would become widespread in Europe following the Second World War: the massive resort to immigrant labor as an overexploited work force used in the most devaluated sectors of the industrial labor market.[5] It is interesting to note that, in France, from the Second Empire on, the immigration curve closely traced that of industrial development. The "boom" of the 1850s–1870s was accompanied by a doubling of the foreign population (which bordered on a million individuals around 1880). Marked by a severe depression, the following decade saw the number of foreigners stagnate. In a quasi-mechanical fashion during the twentieth century, each cycle of expansion followed by economic crisis provoked a corresponding cycle of immigration—flux and reflux. It is also noteworthy that, as of the Second Empire, foreign workers were particularly numerous in the most mechanized industrial sectors (the textile industry), as well as in the most arduous sectors (mine and agriculture). Finally, the sectors in which immigrant labor was massively employed were frequently also those which had the most stunning rates of development (for example, heavy industry between 1900 and 1930), thanks to the profits gained by firms due to the management of a double labor force: French workers (stable and skilled) and foreign workers (not stable and unskilled).

Historically, it is thus indisputable that the French "pattern" is identified as an "immigration of work." But the question remains why a country which enjoyed an overabundant supply of labor at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution would resort for the next 150 years so continually to foreign labor to complete its economic development. In my mind, the answer to this question highlights two other decisive aspects of the French "pattern" of immigration

4 See, for example, M. Moheau, *Recherches et considérations sur la population de la France* (Paris, 1778).

5 See D. Dignan, "Europe's Melting Pot: A Century of Large-Scale Immigration into France," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (April 1981); and Gary Cross, *Immigrant Workers in Industrial France: The Making of a New Laboring Class* (Philadelphia, 1983).

found, and not by accident, in most European countries following
the Second World War: the democratization of the political system
and demographic Malthusianism. One of the major effects of the
Revolution was a reinforcement of the settlement of a small frag-
mented peasantry on its land, making this social group numerically
the largest. The precocious adoption of universal suffrage in 1848
furnished this peasant mass with the peaceful means of blocking
any massive rural exodus and the kind of proletarianization that
occurred in Great Britain. The restriction of births, which spread
little by little, across the French countryside during the nineteenth
century, limited the dispersion of property. By the end of the nine-
teenth century, Malthusianism had taken such proportions that all
great European countries were able to surpass France in population.
Henceforth, a demographic deficit (aggravated by the slaughter of
the First World War) added to the political obstacles, rendering in-
evitable the resort to immigration in large industry. The very fact
that immigration was conceived as a solution to overcome any ob-
stacles created by the rigidity of the labor market explains in part
another characteristic of the "French pattern": the premature and
quasi-obsessive resort to police and administrative means to channel
the flux of immigrants toward the sectors of the labor market depen-
dent on their presence (for example, the complicated bureaucracy of
"identification papers," work contracts, and police surveillance).

   This cursory presentation of the French historical "pattern" of
immigration suffices to explain why, unlike in other countries whose
initial populating was significantly effected by immigration, immi-
grants in France have practically no place in national memory. Dur-
ing 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 opin-
ion shared at the outset by the majority of immigrants themselves).
Only the ordinary "populationists" (who emerged at the end of the
nineteenth century under the inspiration of such demographers as
Jacques Bertillon), haunted as they were by the theme of the de-
cline of the French "race," understood the question of immigration
in terms of "assimilation" or "integration" and thus as a durable,
irreversible phenomenon.[6]

   I have now reached the central political problem posed by the

----

   6 French nationality law of 1889 (combining the jus soli and the jus sanguinis) reflects
the compromise that arose, as of that era, between those who saw the immigrant as a foreigner
whose presence was temporary and those who saw in him, and especially in his children, a
future Frenchman, who thus must be assimilated with haste.

comparative study of immigration in France and in the United States:
the question of the myth of origins and its role in the functioning of
modern societies. When one compares France and the United States
politically, one cannot avoid quoting Tocqueville: "the public," he
affirms, "is always affected by its origin. The circumstances which ac-
companied their birth would aide their influential development for
the rest of their career."[7] This remark seems fundamental for those
who wish to understand the radically different manner in which
American and French have, until now, understood the role of immi-
gration in their history. In the case of the French, neither the "ethnic"
question nor that of immigration played a role in the circumstances
which accompanied the birth of the French republican nation. Mass
immigration only began in the second half of the nineteenth century,
at a time when the structures of the French nation had already been
in place for quite some time. Even though, as Eugen Weber showed,[8]
regional diversity remained significant in France until the end of the
nineteenth century. The beginnings of political centralization date
from the sixteenth century; the origins of linguistic unification and
codification date from the seventeenth 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 United States upon its birth, and no large scale linguistic battle
(like that which always pitted the Flemish against the Walloons in
Belgium).

Furthermore, and again I turn to Tocqueville, unlike the United
States, where republicans were able to elaborate their constitution
without opposing an aristocratic "ancien régime," 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 antiaristocratic and anticlerical mobilization explains, far
beyond the philosophy of the Enlightenment, the essential aspects
of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. Behind the
haunting theme of equality is found a violent rejection of all privi-
leges (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 qualifica-

7 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (London, 1835–40).
8 Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen* (Stanford, Calif., 1976).

tion (acquired at school and measured by the passage of competitive examinations). The rejection of discriminations based on origin does not exclude the ethnic, 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 (in which the individual is sovereign and which concerns his religion, his race, and his family culture). The rejection of the criteria of origins to appreciate the social value of individuals and the confinement of "religion" to the sphere of "private life" 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 (due to the antiquity of the process of political homogenization mentioned above) reaffirmed by revolutionary action, in turn led to a hypertrophy of judicial criteria for nationality as the fundamental principle of social classification. Once again, initial circumstances can weigh heavily on a nation's subsequent history. In a recent study, Lawrence Fuchs notes the importance of the theme of a frontier (mobile and passable) in American mythology.[9] Equally 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 United States. Since the battle of Valmy in 1792, the French have seen as first and foremost a boundary to be defended, to be preserved against attacks from invaders. As opposed to the United States, France is a small country, a full world, defined, whose territory is totally "cleared" and populated, and has been for some time. The French nation is seen as a *state* (State) and not an *evolution*. This rigid concept of the 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 régime 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.[10] On the other hand, for those who wish to enter the

---

9 Lawrence H. Fuchs, "Thinking about Immigration and Ethnicity in the United States," in *Immigrants in Two Democracies*, 39–65.

10 On this subject, I would like to refer to the old, yet essential work, Albert Mathiez, *La Révolution et les étrangers* (Paris, 1918).

French nation, there is no longer, at least officially, discrimination based on race and religious or ethnic origin. As a whim, I would say that in republican logic everyone has the right to universalism, provided he or she is French.[11]

The disfavor regarding origin brought about by the nascent Republic, combined with this vigorous notion of a fixed frontier which would be seen as a rampart between "them" and "us," help explain why in France we speak of "immigration" ("others coming to our land") and not "ethnicity": thus we see how profoundly dependent we still are on the initial circumstances in which our two republican revolutions occurred. A word must equally be said regarding the means by which a national society can perpetuate certain of its original traits. That which has often been analyzed in terms of the "soul of the people," or more recently as "national identity," should be conceived much more materialistically in terms of institutionalization. As Emile Durkheim understood, what we "inherit" (often without knowing it) are words, judicial norms, and classification statistics which are fixed, having long been stabilized as initial circumstances of national construction. Take, for example, language. The entire "French" manner of thought regarding immigration has been marked by the resources and gaps present in the French language in defining social realities. I believe the difficulty of grasping immigration as a historical process is situated in linguistic pecularities. One must return to the seventeenth 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 (refugee in France and then in Great Britain) showed, the French notion of "civilization," which according to him was not easily understood by foreigners, designates the result of a cultural process more than a process itself. "It expresses the autosatisfaction of a population whose national frontiers and specific characteristics are no longer questioned, and have not been for centuries, because they are permanently fixed."[12] Such words are but obstacles for thinking of immigration in terms of a contribution to French culture.

The example of the statistical device is another major illustration of the manner in which the founding principles of a national society

---

11 It is known that Jean-Jacques Rousseau anticipated the dilemma that the Republic of France was never able to resolve the contradiction between the universal (man) and the particular (the citizen, the national). I am not tackling the colonial question, which would complicate the outline presented here. Since the French nation has always been strongly tied to a territory, to a fixed space (the hexagon), the colonial world has never really been considered an integral part of the nation. That is why the rejection of ethnic or racial principles in the "home country" was imposed at a much slower rate in colonial law.

12 Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process* (Oxford, 1982; 1st ed. 1939).

are able to perpetuate themselves from generation to generation. As
we know, the question of race (Blacks and Indians considered as for-
eigners) 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. Con-
versely, from the beginning in France, the classifications held by the
administration were based on "socioprofessional categories" and on
the right of nationality.[13] As of the Third Republic, all questions con-
cerning religion, language, and ethnicity were forbidden in taking
a census. This restriction has made it extremely difficult for histo-
rians to write, for example, the history of Jews in France and has
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" (defined by their national member-
ship) who disappeared from the historical scene when they or their
children became legally French. In addition to language, law, and
statistics, another essential instrument at the disposition of national
societies to transmit their original vision of the world rests in the
channels of diffusion explicit to collective memory. Here, I will limit
my remarks to books which explain the "history of France." Again
we must return to the pre-Revolutionary period, to the eighteenth
century, to understand the construction of the problematic of legiti-
mate "ancestors" of the French people. 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 beginning 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 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 Frank-
ish aristocracy. The myth of "our ancestors, the Gauls," which would
be conveyed for more than a century by historical manuals (includ-

13 The first census worthy of the name appeared in the middle of the nineteenth century.
From the start, in place of the basic distinction between French and foreigners was catego-
rization by nationality, enriched by statistics on "naturalized" immigrants, who even today
constitute an essential part of our information on the subject. As for the dominance of "socio-
professional categories," republican power only restated the principles of classification used
by the monarchy. See the first "statistical scale" of Vauban and the role of the Physiocrats.

ing in 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 Augustin Thierry, Michelet imposed the theme of the French public 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 both a nourishing and assimilating land and as an abstract democratic principle which triumphed over all enemies, both internal and external, with the Revolution of 1789. At the end of the nineteenth 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 Ernest Lavisse, author of historical manuals which constituted, up until World War II, 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 privileged one).[14] This rapid evocation suffices 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 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 French and American mythologies: in the American case, the Revolution inaugurated the "melting pot," and the process continued throughout the entire contemporary era; in the French mythology, the process of a fusion of peoples came to an end with the French Revolution, rendering invisible and unbelievable all "redefinitions" of the French public as having started with the contemporary waves of immigration.

The Political and Scientific Effect of the Reversal of the History of Immigration

Language, law, statistical devices, and mythology of origins thus merged to render the thought of immigration as a historical problem practically inconceivable. This reversal of collective conscious-

---

14 Addressing all the young children of France, he wrote in the introduction to his textbooks: "Your ancestors the Gauls were valiant. Your ancestors the Franks were valiant. Your ancestors the French were valiant." Quoted by Pierre Nora, "Lavisse instituteur national," P. Nora, ed., *Les Lieux de mémoire*, vol. 1: *La République* (Paris, 1984), 1:247.

ness provoked a veritable century-long blindness of research in the
social sciences on this question. Considering the role of historians in
the production of the myth of origins mentioned above, one should
not be surprised that the question of immigration remained absent
from their preoccupations until the 1970s. But if one examines the
other disciplines, in which the worldly dimension of immigration
should have, at the very least, appeared in their reflections on as-
similation, the report is the same. Since the end of the nineteenth
century, only the disciplines of economics and law have given con-
sistent attention to immigration as a problem, concerned as these
disciplines were with food supply, labor market, labor mobility, and
the rights of nationality. Durkheimian sociology ignored this ques-
tion.[15] Sociologists eventually promoted research on the subject in
the 1960s; in an intellectual situation dominated by Marxism this
work emphasized the work lives of immigrants and their economic
exploitation. Finally, until recently, the only two fields which inte-
grated the question of history in their reflection on immigration have
been anthropology (initially physical anthropology) and demogra-
phy, two disciplines which were intrinsically preoccupied with origins
and genealogy. But both these disciplines approached this problem
with an extremely pessimistic and negative view, making apocalyptic
predictions for the future to the detriment of the serene analysis of
the past.

From the end of the nineteenth century on, the question of as-
similation would be posed in terms which would not vary until the
1950s. All discussion on the subject rested on one dilemma, a veri-
table squaring of the circle: either the waves of immigrants "flood-
ing" into France would integrate themselves, in this case causing the
French population to lose its "identity," or the immigrants would
not be assimilated, thus putting the political unity of France at risk
due to the formation of "national minorities." This is underlined by
Jacques Bertillon, one of the most influential French intellectuals at
the end of the last century, who even today is still considered as the
"Founding Father" of demography. Bertillon announced the next
appearance in France of a *Fremdenfrage* (foreign question) compa-
rable to Russia or Austria-Hungary, "aggravating our fear for the

---

[15] Although he wrote his principal works at a time when the question of foreigners
dominated the French political scene, Durkheim wrote practically nothing on immigration.
Between the two wars his students Marcel Mauss and Maurice Halbwachs no longer consid-
ered this question unworthy of sociological research; however, they saw it only as an American
problem at a time (1930) when France actually had one of the highest rates of immigration
in the world! See for example, Maurice Halbwachs, "Chicago, expérience ethnique," *Annales
d'histoire économique et sociale* (Jan. 1932).

future that foreigners of the same nationality will group themselves in certain corners of the territory: Italians along the Mediterranean, Spaniards along their border, Belgians in the North, Germans in the East."[16] Fifty years later anthropologist Robert Gessain and the historian-demographer Louis Chevalier (professor at the Collège de France) developed the same argument in the first National Institute of Demographic Studies workbooks devoted to the question of immigration.[17]

But it was the writings of André Siegfried, published just after the Second World War, that best expressed this logic and its contradictions. Similar to Tocqueville, to whom he was often compared, Siegfried was in his time the foremost French connoisseur of American realities. He was also elected to the Collège de France and was considered the great forerunner of French "political science." In addition, he was the first to approach the question of immigration from the Franco-American comparative angle. Beginning with the premise that immigration in the two countries is an ancient historical reality, Siegfried concluded that the process of assimilation which occured in both countries did so according to the same laws: at least three generations needed to pass to complete assimilation; but in reality, all depends on the races involved. In the United States, the "nordic races" assimilate themselves more quickly. On the contrary, "when dealing with exotic races such as the Chinese, the famous melting pot of races no longer functions." Similarly, in France, the integration of Italians and Spaniards is relatively easy, "but the Chinese always live as foreigners." In the case of France, adds the author, assimilation is even more difficult than in America because "our country has been settled, closed, almost achieved (in the greatest sense of the term) for more than two centuries," and old organisms have more difficulty assimilating new elements.

Shockingly, within this argument is found all the republican mythology mentioned above, making the French Revolution a body congealed for eternity. But when one examines Siegfried's proposed solutions to the problem of immigration, one sees that they are irreconcilable with the great principles of 1789. According to him—and Louis Chevalier, who said the very same thing at the same time—the

---

16 Jacques Bertillon, *La Dépopulation de la France* (Paris, 1911).

17 Louis Chevalier wrote: "Recent developments have sufficiently underlined the dangers that organized minorities bring to a country, from the point of view of domestic policy, foreign policy and even the economy"; and Robert Gessain would like to see an "anthropological science" capable of "defining more or less ethnically homogeneous zones." See Louis Chevalier, ed., *Documents sur l'immigration*, Institut National d'Etudes Démographiques, Travaux et Documents, no. 2, 1947.

remedy is that finally the French government should equip itself with an immigration policy. The latter must be examined from the point of view "of the preservation of the traditional national character"; it should thus "admit the elements capable of assimilation and exclude the others." Consequently, Siegfried is an affirmed partisan of the policy of an ethnic quota similar to the one that was put to work in the United States during the 1920s, "even if", he adds, "from the point of view of principles, it can be contested because it is tainted with racism."

We are now at the heart of a decisive contradiction which, in large part, explains the impossibility of an immigration policy in France until recently. French intellectuals are incapable of thinking of the question of assimilation in any way other than in terms of "ethnic compatibility" (what is now called "cultural distance"), whereas the practical solutions to such a problem contradict the principles of the French Revolution which were definitively fixed in republican law. Since Adolphe Landry's speech in Parliament in 1915—he was a demographer and minister of the population between the two wars—until 1945, when General de Gaulle wrote his "recommendations" aimed at limiting the naturalization of Mediterranean immigrants (especially Italians), the veritable leitmotif of French political thought on immigration remained unchanged: namely, that in order to preserve the identity of the French people a policy of ethnic selection must be applied. However, it was impossible to do so officially without publicly ridiculing the fundamental principles of the Republic.

What is "National Memory"?

I will conclude by placing this analysis of the French and North American cases in the context of a more general theoretical debate on the notion of "collective memory."[18] The current prevailing approach to this question (particularly in France) consists of equating the "I" and the "We." The argument assumes, as Pierre Nora pointed out in his introduction to the first volume of *Les Lieux de mémoire*,[19] a fundamental equivalence between the individual and the collective. Like Jules Michelet before him, Nora writes as if France were a person, who acts, suffers, and remembers. For more than a century the

[18] See on this question, John G. Gillis, ed., *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton, 1994).
[19] Nora, ed., *Les Lieux de mémoire*, vol. 1: *La République*.

field of political history has developed this paradigm by reasoning in terms of collective entities such as the state, the community, the party, the nation. This tendency is reinforced in the United States today by anthropological and textual perspectives which view the nation as an "imagined community," that is, as a collective representation. Such an approach is perfectly legitimate and has generated many fascinating studies. As an explanatory framework, however, it falls short of answering many questions raised by such notions as "identity" and "national memory."

The angle I have sought to develop in my own research is conceived as complementary to the one described. It raises a question which the paradigms of political history and anthropology take for granted; that is, how do we explain the passage from the multitude of diverse individual perspectives to the collective "we"? This question is at the core of the sociological approach developed by Max Weber, for whom the object of sociology consisted of "deconstructing" reified entities elaborated by law, political history, and philosophy—the party, the state, the nation—in order to understand the individual activities behind them. Such a "deconstruction" is profoundly radical, revealing not only the multitude of group memories which lie behind a given "national memory" (social class, gender, ethnic community), but also the individual memories which are hidden behind these collective group identities themselves. The hypothesis it suggests is that *all* collective identities (nation, ethnic community, social class) are subjected to identic 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 variety 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 state recognizes its rights and makes certain material advantages available, and members of the community are subjected to certain rules, elect their representatives, and so on.

Applied to the study of memory, this perspective is central to understanding the agenda which underlies Maurice Halbwachs's writings on the subject (nowadays often cited without reference to their theoretical implications).[20] Individuals are Halbwachs's point of

---

[20] Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago, 1992; 1st ed. 1964).

departure, and his entire work is devoted to understanding the socio-
logical mechanisms which condition the passage from individual rec-
ollection to collective memory. According to Halbwachs, we all have
personal memories (*souvenirs*) 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 remem-
bers them differently according to the position he or she was in at
the time and according to other events experienced in a lifetime. In
order for these recollections to produce "collective memory," Halb-
wachs argued, they have to be "objective" (*objectivée*); in other words,
they must be fixed in writing and constantly recalled by speeches,
monuments, and commemorations. Individuals can then link their
personal memories to a collective representation of the past. "Entre-
preneurs of memory" play a key role in this process; it is they who
choose, from an infinite variety of individual memories, those which
are best suited to support their cause and transform them into collec-
tive memory. Collective memory is not made "at will," however; only
by evoking past events which were intensely experienced by a group
of individuals can "entrepreneurs of memory" hope to mobilize the
group in question. To paraphrase Halbwachs, it might be said that
collective memory is likely to be effective when the "wave system"
of symbols elaborated by spokesmen (monuments, flags) succeeds
in making "each individual's receptor (that is, personal memory)
vibrate."

What I have argued, in this respect, is that a "collective memory"
of immigration had not yet been forged in interwar France because
two alternative expressions of collective identity held the stage. Both
drew force and legitimation from recent traumas in the nation's his-
tory: Entrepreneurs of "national memory" constantly evoked the
First World War, and entrepreneurs of "working-class memory"
based their discourse on the traumatic experiences of labor (repres-
sion of strikes, work accidents, and so on). The problematic suggested
by Maurice Halbwachs therefore raises another question: What hap-
pens to a collective memory which can no longer serve as a reference
to the individual recollection of lived experiences? This, he argues,
is the moment of passage from "lived history" to "learned history,"
from collective memory to tradition. The stakes involved in memory
become more abstract, more remote from the preoccupations of the
mass of individuals; its definition is increasingly monopolized by ex-
perts for upholding the level of mobilization and collective vigilance
which are needed to keep memory alive.