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## Immigration is Always Political

By K.A. Dilday

OCTOBER 2007

**PARIS**—France's national museum and immigration research center, Cite nationale de l'histoire d'immigration opened in early October to governmental silence and amidst anger and controversy over new policies toward immigrants. In a showy gesture, some weeks earlier, eight prominent academic immigration experts wrote a public letter announcing their resignation from the museum's committee. They resigned as a protest against the French president's creation of a new position — minister of immigration and national identity. The museum, though, was never a project of Nicolas Sarkozy, France's new president. He ignored its existence, as the museum was largely perceived as a project of Jacques Chirac, Mr. Sarkozy's immediate predecessor as president. Even with the presidential cold shoulder, the museum lumbered toward its opening day.

When I arrived at a press preview the day before the museum was to open, the main exhibition was in disarray. Sheets of metal lay on the floor, display cases were unlocked, and in some cases drawings of the objects occupied the place where the object should be. We gingerly maneuvered around it. The State of France, which loves a public ceremony, forsook the opportunity to inaugurate the museum. The French League for the Rights of Man called instead for an inauguration by the citizenry. The weather was bright and sunny the first Sunday the immigration museum opened. Hordes of people came. The line to enter ran up two long flights of stone staircases and around the gates of the Palace of Porte Dorée, a 1930s building that once housed the Museum of African and Oceanic Arts, (whose collection was absorbed into the Musée du Quai Branly, a large museum of prehistoric art that opened in 2006.) After the end of the Museum of Immigration's opening day, Mr. Sarkozy's minister of culture stopped by, the only representative of the government to do so.

The immigration scholars allege that linking the terms immigration and national identity in one ministry makes immigration sound like something negative. They also believe that the ministry, headed by Brice Hortefeux, has a confusion of powers. "While being primarily responsible for matters of policing and control, the department is also in charge of "promoting national identity" and of defining a "policy of remembrance" in relation to immigration. It holds undivided new powers in matters of political asylum and shared authority over a broad range of administrative services, including the 'Directorate of Remembrance, Heritage and Archives' of the Ministry of Defense. "This confusion of roles and remits is unacceptable and alarming," they wrote in their statement.

France has long been a county of immigration, the first in Europe according to immigration historians. In the late 1800s, most of the immigrants were from neighboring European states, Belgium, Germany, Spain, Italy and Switzerland. During the 1930s the pace of immigration was higher than that of the United States. Yet, it wasn't until the 1970s that an African country, Algeria, become one of the four largest sources of immigrants to France. This history of France as a "pays d'accueil" (country of welcome) is well documented by the museum.

While excited about and supportive of the museum, some visitors were angry

about the new immigration bill, most specifically, the plans to encourage DNA testing if immigration officials doubt the veracity of a family reunification immigration applicant's claim of blood ties to a French resident.

"It's about time," Vivien, a 44-year-old French woman of Antillan origin said about the museum as she waited for friends before ascending to the main exhibition. "The left were in power for 14 years and they never got this done." She appreciated the right's initiative in creating the museum. (Former President Jacques Chirac is a member of the same center-right party as Mr. Sarkozy.) She was angry about the new measures recently passed by the government that would ask for DNA testing from immigration applicants. "It's like the Nazi era."

Jocelyne, a 44-year-old woman who only lived in mainland France for five years, from age 15 to 20, before returning to her native Martinique, was equally enthusiastic about the museum but followed with a harsh appraisal of the current situation for immigrants: "The rhetoric has gotten worse," she said. "It's extremely racist. The racism in France has a special form." The DNA testing, she said, "It's just like what they did to the Jews." A French man of Italian origin whom I spoke to was so upset about the DNA testing that he asked for a moment to collect himself. "Have you seen the movie Gattaca?" he asked. Gattaca is a science fiction movie that depicts a world where people are ranked according to their genetic makeup as read on their DNA.

The Nazi comparison is easy to make but in many ways it does not hold. An applicant can request the DNA test to relieve the burden of providing other

more easily disputed forms of proof, which often take years to be reviewed, investigated and approved by the French government. Of course, familial relationships are not only genetic, but when a familial relationship is in doubt, if the applicant claims a genetic bond it can be proved quickly through DNA testing and the tests will be reimbursed if the genetic bond is proven. In doubt is whether the DNA will be used to screen for other things. Although one is already required to undergo a medical examination before permanent residency in the country is approved, the doctors do not draw blood at these visits. "It's disgusting," said Fadela Amara, Minister of Urban Affairs, using a street word to describe the law passed by congress only days before the museum opened. The outspoken Ms. Amara, a women's rights activist was plucked from the Socialist party by Mr. Sarkozy. He responded to her and other critics of the new law by griping, "The English already do it."

And it is true. DNA testing in immigration applications is already used in Great Britain and the United States. And according to the French government it is also used in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, Norway, the Netherlands and Sweden.

There are other parts of the bill that are more likely to slow down the rate of family regroupment. One proposed stipulation requires that applicants be tested for knowledge of the French language in their home country. If they fail this knowledge test, they will be given training and then retested. It applies to all family reunification applicants under age 66. The applicant must also have more finances at their disposal, either personally or with the family member in France. It would allow

population censuses on the basis of racial and ethnic origins in order to conduct research on the "diversity of the origins of the persons, of discrimination and integration," something that has long been forbidden in France. Patrick Nestoret of the Center for Studies of French People of Antillean Origin, told me that he supports gathering statistics based on the origins of the people so that racism can be quantified. He left the organization SOS Racisme, because of their resistance to it.

Mr. Sarkozy is aggressively pursuing his policy of cataloguing the French population. The police actively look for clandestine residents of which the government promised to expel 25,000 illegal immigrants in 2007. The



Thomas Mailaender's photos of cars waiting to drive on the ferry from Marseille to Morocco, 1979, part of the temporary exhibition at the Center of the History of Immigration

country's prime minister recently chastised various prefectures for not meeting their deportation targets. Police are getting more aggressive and, according to news reports and a press release from several leftist organizations, five clandestine immigrants have jumped out of windows, at least one to his death, out of fear of police who had entered their buildings.

Patrick Weil, one of the immigration scholars who resigned from the museum committee, made clear that in many ways the nature of the objection comes down to style. He told me he agrees that France has an appropriate level of immigration and should not increase the number of people it lets in. "What I object to is the insulting way Sarkozy has gone about it," he said. Mr. Weil also served on the High Council for Integration during the presidency of Mr. Chirac.

When Mr. Sarkozy announced plans to create an immigration research center under the auspices of the government in the week before the museum opened, Weil and other prominent immigration experts Gerard Noirel and Benjamin Stora complained that it was an attempt to politicize immigration research by subsuming it in the government. But not everyone is happy with the current state of non-governmental immigration research. In the weeks before the museum opened, Mr. Nestoret commented on the lack of people of immigrant origin involved in the organization of the museum. "It is always like that in France," he said. "There is no interest in real integration."

Jacques Toubon, the director of the museum project, was in a difficult position as the museum prepared to open. At the press briefing he refused to answer any questions touching on the sensitivity of the museum's opening and stressed that the museum was not political. But immigration *is* political. The first rooms visitors see in the museum, on either side of the first-floor entrance hall, are colonial administrators' offices—a replica of the office of Hubert Lyautey who served in Morocco and Paul Reynaud, a former prime minister who also served as the overseeing general administrator of all colonies from Paris. It was impossible for the curators to avoid the political discussions and social attitudes toward immigration. A display of political cartoons reflected the



*Frescos on the wall of the replica of the office of Paul Reynaud, minister of colonies in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The artist was inspired by "the myth of the good savage."*

attitudes toward immigrants. Many of the earlier cartoons reminded me of the postcards I picked up at the rally of the anti-immigration National Front Party. The cartoonists caricatured immigrants. Jews were drawn with large hooked noses, Italians and Spaniards had greasy hair and twirled moustaches. Now the National Front focuses on Turks and other Muslims.

At the museum, I sat on a bench in front of a screen that showed different images of boxers. The man sitting next to me watched while he rolled up two posters he had acquired. In its opening week, the museum gave them away. He had been born in France, but his parents emigrated from Armenia. "The museum shows the history of the people who make up France," he said. "It's a good thing for the country, to know where it comes from."

The Museum is truly a spectacular place, interactive



*An installation depicting the crowded living situations of many immigrants in France.*

and informative with a mixture of artwork and installations. The curators found immigrants who created a record of their passage to France. At the press opening, one of the curators described the emotional moment as a 70-year-old woman deposited her grandmother's small, battered valise in the display case. Her grandmother had given it to her to carry on the boat that took her to France.

It's hard for me to understand the nature of the French protests. All too often they seem, like Mr. Weil, to be concerned with style more than substance. DNA tests are not the issue; family reunification policy is. Much more ink and energy had been devoted to protesting the DNA tests. The increased financial requirements will likely keep out far more people and at the moment family reunification is one of the few means to immigrate to France as a right rather than a privilege. (Asylum, the other by right, is much more difficult to prove).

Getting angry about the deportation of clandestine immigrants is much easier than deciding what to do with them. During the years that the Socialists were in power, clandestines in France were allowed to go about their lives with little harassment, but neither were their needs addressed. They were abused as low-cost workers, something that continues, and they live their lives in the shadows. Once, shopping in a supermarket, I left a bag of groceries I had purchased at the door, as is required when you enter another market. When I came out five minutes later, someone had taken it. "Who steals tea, milk and a few vegetables?" I thought. But late in the day, outside that same supermarket I saw women, most likely clandestine immigrants, picking through the supermarket's dumpsters for edible refuse.

France loves a protest, and protestors love a grand gesture. The Museum of Immigration opened and hordes passed through it even though the immigration scholars resigned from the board to protest an act by a government that had no interest and little involvement in the museum. People who can't prove that they have enough money — \$8,000 per person per month when I applied for a permit — will not be allowed to enter France. Perhaps the law allowing the use of DNA tests will be withdrawn if the word Nazi is uttered enough times and give the illusion that a significant battle in the fight for the right to immigrate has been won. □

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