

Wade Graham is studying at UCLA toward his Ph.D. in Comparative Literature. Fluent in French, Spanish and German, he has written an essay entitled "Mex-Eco? — Mexican Attitudes Toward the Environment" which will be published in the winter issue of Environmental History Review. The essay deals with the Mexican approach to conservation and environmental problems, and the possible consequences of large numbers of people who hold these views retaining them as they migrate to the US. We have asked him to follow the developing debate in French immigration policy in that country's newspapers.

## Reportage

# THE FRENCH IMMIGRATION DEBATE: THE SHORT, HOT SUMMER OF '91

By Wade Graham

Public debate over the role of immigration in France has for many years been a quiet affair, the product of a rare consensus between the center and the left on the basic values of the labor market and the right of asylum. France currently counts 3.7 million immigrants or 6 percent of the total population — not including illegals — a number which remains stable from year to year, as the roughly 400,000 new immigrants each year (births in France and new arrivals) are offset by the same numbers of acquisitions of nationality. France, like the US, considers political persecution, family reunification, labor market needs, and humanitarian concern as criteria for acceptance of prospective immigrants. What little audible discussion there is on questions of immigration has typically been distinguished by the propriety of its tone, its solemn respect for ethnicity, cultural freedom, and its liberal appreciation of the plight of the refugee.

Yet, for as many years it has been equally true that a perceptible undercurrent of xenophobia and intolerance persists in France, sentiments kept alive in the socialist era of President Francois Mitterand by Jean-Marie Le Pen and his ultra-right National Front party. For the majority of French citizens, the electoral success over the last decade of Le Pen's anti-immigrant platform (running 14 percent of the national vote and much higher in some areas) is a sad and shameful reminder of their nation's historic culpability. As does the US with slavery, France has its share of skeletons in the closet: the Dreyfus Affair, the deportation of French Jews during the Vichy collaboration, the brutal legacy of the wars of decolonization in Southeast Asia and Algeria.

On the other hand, this majority will point proudly to France's historic role as a *terre d'accueil*, a nation which welcomed and successfully integrated large numbers of Italian, Spanish, Polish, Russian and Jewish immigrants on the first half of this century. Placing itself between the United States, a "nation of immigration by nature," and the

rest of the European countries, which until very recently were solely nations of emigration, France has founded much of its national identity on its ability and willingness to accommodate other cultures and other colors, integrating and assimilating them in a process known as *francisation*, an idea akin to the American melting pot.

In the second half of the century the composition of the migratory stream swung to the Third World, first with large numbers of North African Arabs, more recently joined by black Africans from France's former colonies in West Africa and the Caribbean, and by Turks, Lebanese, and Asians. As in Germany, Britain, and other countries, these immigrants helped fuel the massive industrialization of a Western Europe that was short of workers. However, the need for labor has decreased while the numbers of immigrants both legal and illegal has not and the mechanisms of *francisation* are beginning to show signs of stress.

On the other hand, the economic turndown and the gradual shift from the needs of heavy industry toward the skilled service sector contribute to rising unemployment for unskilled workers. The burden this places on the established immigrant communities is exacerbated by a simultaneous increase in employment of clandestine immigrants at below-market wages. These factors, among others, have naturally set the stage for an upsurge in conflict between native French workers and their immigrant "competition," a conflict which has been very adeptly exploited by Le Pen.

At the same time, France has lately been feeling the effects of unwise urban planning instituted in the years of growth. The writer Edgar Morin expressed the situation thusly:

*The problem of francisation is posed today in the context of a crisis in modern urban civilization. The development of agglomeration and suburbanization at the expense of the city, the loss of solidarity and conviviality, the*

*chronometrisization of life, all of which affects the whole French population, favors, among the most recent immigrants, the "ghetto" response, the clinging to old ties, as in tribal relations. This tendency then favors, among the young...the formation of ethnically closed groups...causing a further brake on assimilation."*<sup>1</sup>

And, from the point of view of cultural cohabitation, the pointed tension which has existed since the Algerian war between a widespread, strong Islam and the basic tenets of the French liberal tradition has lately threatened to worsen, particularly in light of French participation in the Gulf war. These "extreme tensions," writes Morin, "weigh in Damoclean fashion on our future."<sup>2</sup> Adding to all of this is the fact that France has increasingly seen itself gripped by a crisis of national identity. Not only are the Fifth Republic's schools, army, churches and other civil institutions thought to be in serious decline, many commentators actually fear that distinctive French traits are disappearing in the face of European consolidation and the American-led "global cultural homogenization" effected by film and television.

In this climate the question of immigration would seem to acquire a certain urgency. Indeed, although precious few in the public arena have dared to raise the question (beyond Jean-Marie Le Pen and his National Front cohorts) for fear of drawing charges of xenophobia and racism, reservations about continued immigration are common enough in private life. Acrimonious complaints of outdoor cooking, strange rituals, and uncleanliness are daily occurrences in culturally mixed neighborhoods. And, in the French version of our own Welfare Queen stories, one often hears of the Senegalese polygamist residing in the Goutte d'Or in Paris whose three or four wives and twenty children bring in 50,000 francs a month in government subsidies. Projections in the media of an ecological, economic, and demographic catastrophe in the southern hemisphere, with dire consequences for France and Europe, are not infrequent. Such a degree of popular discontent, fueled by the perception that the ruling socialists are unwilling to acknowledge any portion of the problem for ideological reasons, goes a long way towards explaining why 14 percent of the electorate have consistently thrown support to Le Pen.

---

***"...despite the show of public unity,  
the pressures of large scale  
Third World immigration have,  
at some level, weighed on  
the collective mind."***

---

In the 1980s the reactionary challenge posed by Le Pen tended to reinforce the commitment on the part

of the majority to France's revolutionary traditions of tolerance and defense of *les droits de l'homme*. The decade was marked by massive street demonstrations against incidents of racial harassment, and by yearly benefit rock concerts organized by high-profile groups such as SOS Racisme. In September 1990, when a Jewish cemetery in the village of Carpentras was found defaced by anti-semitic graffiti, *within hours* tens of thousands of Parisians had poured into the streets in protest. On the whole, the debate over immigration was one-sided and overwhelmingly focused on the defense of multiculturalism by a united majority against the racist provocateurs of the National Front.

However, despite the public show of unity, the pressures of large scale Third World immigration have, at some level, weighed on the collective mind. This concern is periodically demonstrated by examinations in the media of the status of France's immigrant communities. "Yes, immigrants are a growing part of French life" the articles conclude, "yes, the mechanisms of integration and assimilation are stretched thin... but France can and will succeed in making the immigrants full members of society if we fight to "preserve republican and universalist France."<sup>3</sup> The existence of poor, dilapidated, immigrant "ghettos" in the suburbs was noted with some trepidation, and typically dismissed as part of the process of integration, a reminder to keep up the good work.

These immigrant-dominated areas, occasionally within traditional city centers, such as the Goutte d'Or in Paris, are more often found in the *cités nouvelles*. Collectively known as *banlieue*, the *cités* form a web of faceless conurban agglomerations hastily thrown up in the 60s and 70s on the periphery of every major French industrial city. One such *cit *, Mantes-la-Jolie, was quite favorably described just one year ago in the national press: "28,000 inhabitants, a majority of foreigners, 60 ethnicities live in Val Four e (Mantes-la-Jolie). A model of successful cohabitation."<sup>4</sup> A year later, on the night of May 25, 1991, Mantes-la-Jolie erupted in violence between mostly North African youths and police after an incident involving the arrest of a young woman of Algerian descent, who died two days later in police custody. Over the next two weeks riots raged in other *cit s*: Sartrouville, Vaulx-en-Velin, Mureaux, and again Mantes-la-Jolie. Four persons died, including one policewoman. The police themselves, reacting to public and official censure, marched in Paris to demand from the government clearer directives on the use of force — despite a ban on their demonstration. In the south, the children of *harkis*<sup>5</sup> built burning barricades on the highways around Narbonne and clashed with security forces.

---

***"...after three years without elections,***

---

***France is facing in 1992 the start of two years filled with no less than five election contests."***

---

The politicians warned of a "long, hot summer" of violence, and invoked the US experience of the 60s in hushed tones. The press talked about a *malaise de banlieue*, and pointed finally to the general crisis that gripped France, searching for answers in the spiraling cycle of urban decay, unemployment, drugs and crime which is most acutely evident in the *cités*. Although the long, hot summer failed to materialize in the form of continuous disorder,<sup>6</sup> the government frantically sought solutions in the wake of the rioting. Plans were drafted and put into effect to ship poor immigrant youths out of *banlieue* and into the countryside for R and R. Yet no peep came from the Quai d'Orsay on the subject of the borders, no ruling party politician would broach the country's increasing uneasiness about its immigrant communities, which many citizens, both native and immigrant, felt were beyond the control of the socialists.

However, after three years without elections, France is facing in 1992 the start of two years filled with no less than five election contests. After Mantes-la-Jolie, the conservative opposition coalition RPR-UDF saw an opportunity to take to the offensive. Though the riots subsided, it was a long, hot summer in the French Chamber of Deputies, and on the pages of the nation's newspapers. What follows is a brief rundown of the debate — launched by the opposition and then gradually but decisively taken up by the socialist government — as it was reported in *Le Monde*, a major centrist Paris daily.

**RUNDOWN OF PRESS COVERAGE  
FROM *LE MONDE***

**18 June:** RPR-UDF deputies argue for greater control over immigration. Vocal conservative RPR mayor of Paris, Jacques Chirac, addressing an audience of RPR supporters, says "Integration is one of our traditions, but it has its limits."

**19 June:** Chirac declares that "the threshold of tolerance" has been passed, and illustrates with the comment that "the French worker goes nuts" having to live next to "the noise and odor" of immigrants. He states: "We don't reject foreigners. What is happening is that today there are too many. Our problem is not foreigners, it is that there has been an overdose." Further, he defends his approach to the issue: "I do not sympathize with M. Le Pen. But I don't see why he should have the monopoly on underlining the real issues."

**21 June:** Michael Poniatoski, former conservative

Interior Minister, declares in an interview: "I do not share M. Le Pen's ideas in many areas, but on immigration... I would go further than even he!" Poniatoski proposed the following measures: "the termination of family reunification, the rapid expulsion of foreigners released from prison and of illegals, the termination of family subsidies for non-EC foreigners, the expulsion of foreigners unemployed for more than two years, the reestablishment of internal identity checks, and the installation in the Maghreb (North Africa) of industrial enterprise zones to allow them to maintain their labor force at home."

Socialist Prime Minister Edith Cresson declares the comments of Chirac to be "shocking" and "of a racist connotation." She accuses Chirac and Poniatoski of a rapprochement with the National Front for "electoral reasons."

Chirac defends himself, saying: "This is just what one hears in the streets, and to be honest, it's not worth hiding it."

**22 June:** Vivid reaction on the left to M. Chirac's comments. Cresson and other ruling party figures disclaim that Chirac "meant what he said." Many say "he is not a racist, as far as I know." The charge of electoral politics is leveled again. On the opposition side — after M. Poniatoski, in a *Europe 1* broadcast, compared the presence of foreigners in France to the German occupation — many RPR-UDF deputies are uneasy. Chirac's leadership into radicalization toward the far right is feared to be a trap which will favor the majority socialists in the coming elections. Chirac refuses to back down, refuses to use "wooden language," and vows to "say aloud what everyone is thinking."

In an interesting concession, Cresson, while condemning "demagogy," comes out in favor of stricter interdiction of illegal immigrants and a more careful distinction between political and economic refugees. She cites the growing deficit in the Social Security system as grounds for this posture.

**23-24 June:** A crisis of policy begins brewing in the socialist camp, a split is threatened by minority leftist deputies. President Mitterand cautions against excessive responses, and reaffirms a commitment to the "civil rights" of foreigners. He further raises the question of a provisional suffrage for immigrants, a position which is deemed inconceivable by the opposition. Leftists protested in the French Caribbean, demanding a mobilization "against all forms of racism and xenophobia."

**25 June:** Chirac affirms that he wishes to sound "an alarm": "We are at the limit. If measures are not taken to diminish the tensions, things will deteriorate more and more and will become ungovernable."

Jean-Marie Le Pen, for his part, says that Chirac

"talks like Le Pen, but when he is in power, he will act like M. Mitterand," and further calls Chirac "a man of variable geometry" on the subject of immigration who seeks to "diabolize" the National Front by taking over its positions. The press characterizes Le Pen as "counting the points" and "hilarious" at the direction of debate.

A national TV poll finds that a comforting 50 percent of the public is not against M. Chirac: 15 percent of those polled were "very shocked" by his comments, 32 percent were "somewhat shocked," 17 percent were "perhaps not shocked" while 33 percent were "not at all shocked."

---

***"...senate leader Charles Pasqua proposes the adoption of a quota system, similar to that used in the United States, based on nationality and profession."***

---

**30 June, 1 July:** The weakening Communist Party, once strong in France, is scandalized by the release of an internal platform document calling for immigration reform. Among its statements: "Drugs, violence, delinquency: Should we close our eyes when immigrants are involved for fear of being called racist? No, absolutely not!"

**2 July:** Government Minister of Social Affairs and Integration M. Jean-Louis Bianco announces stricter control of borders and punishment of abuses of immigration laws. On the subject of deportation, Bianco signals that there is a problem with using regular airlines because of "protestations and difficulties" on the part of the deportees. He points out that France currently refuses "85 percent of demands for asylum."

**6 July:** Former Minister and RPR senate leader Charles Pasqua proposes the adoption of a quota system, similar to that used in the United States, based on nationality and profession. Pasqua affirms France's need for foreign labor.

Le Pen continues to stir the soup, saying during a London visit that the "probable invasion of our territory by foreign hordes could lead to a logic of war... justifying the recourse to arms." British Labour Party deputies demand his expulsion from the UK.

**7-8 July:** At a meeting of the Socialist Party steering committee a national congress is called for December to realign party policy on, among other things, immigration, before the 1992 elections. M. Pierre Mouroy accepts the need to deal with the problem of illegal immigration, but cautions that any socialist concessions to "public opinion" on the issue would cause them to lose "the elections, and their honor!"

**9 July:** Former President Giscard d'Estaing advocates a "zero quota" on immigration. The ruling Socialists, in disarray after Chirac's offensive succeeds in galvanizing public opinion, begin to make nearly spectacular concessions. The socialist minority faction of M. Chevenement declares its support for M. Pasqua's quota proposal. Prime Minister Cresson provokes another burst of controversy by envisaging the use of charter flights to carry out deportations. She states, jokingly: "I understand that (an airline) pilot would not want an extremely agitated person on his plane... we must do it another way... you call it charters. Charters are for people going on vacation at lower prices. In this case, it would be completely free and not for going on vacation..." Cresson responds to criticism by saying that she is "neither drifting nor slipping to the right — simply that the law has to be respected." She acknowledges that deportations had been spottily carried out.

**10 July:** Anti-racist organizations express their disquietude at Cresson's proposals, recalling the incident of a charter flight undertaken in 1986 by then-Minister Charles Pasqua to deport 101 Malians, claiming that it was a cruel media spectacle serving no purpose. Cresson responds that not only are the laws not being enforced, and that "the system does not work," but that the Social Security deficit justifies decisive action on clandestine immigration. Cresson blasts the Paris press for announcing that she had been "approved by the National Front."

**11 July:** The government approves a new package of laws on immigration. Although the package reaffirms the right of asylum and the principle of welcoming immigration, it included the following tough measures on illegal immigration: the issuance of transit-only visas, reform of the residence-registration procedures required of all non-EC foreigners, suppression of the provisional right-to-work for people awaiting asylum decisions, and tougher enforcement of frontier controls and deportations. Among the concessions made to the left were the promise to expedite the situation of over 100,000 people waiting for decisions on their asylum requests.

The reactions to the measures were strong on all sides. Many members of the opposition expressed their guarded approval. The Green Party led the left in declaring itself shocked, as "France is abandoning her principles." M. Le Pen called the move "dust in the eyes," a pure "media and electoral bluff" meant to cover the fact that "the government is preparing to grant asylum to 100,000 foreigners." A TV poll concluded that 66 percent of the public was in agreement with Mme. Cresson's immigration dossier.

---

*"...perhaps most fascinating...is the spectacular speed with which a rigid political consensus became fluid and ultimately appropriated for itself some portion of [a radical and unsavory minority viewpoint]."*

---

**13 July:** Opposition leaders, calling Prime Minister Cresson's policies on immigration "twirling around with a wooden sword," demand an extra parliamentary session in September to debate the new measures. The Prime Minister resists the call for an extraordinary session calling it unjustified.

#### THE DEBATE SUBSIDES

After the announcement by the government of its new actions, the debate in France, at least as it was reported in the press, subsided. Chirac and Cresson were soon replaced on the front pages by coverage of immigration issues in other parts of Europe: the deportation of Albanians by Italy, the fears in Germany of an invasion from the East, as well as coverage of immigration-related dramas in the Third World.

The above summary should not be taken for a complete, in-depth picture of the summer's debate over immigration. In France, as anywhere else, the headlines tend to reflect more the posturing and firefighting of politicians than the truly substantive, articulate debate — and in this case, soul-searching — that accompanies any major political change. A great deal of balanced and pointed reflection was published over the summer by commentators on all sides of the issue, which we do not have the space to examine here. What the summary should outline, however, is the degree to which public opinion, once allowed, by the force of events, to surface and resolve itself, can effect major restructuring on issues which have traditionally been moot or taboo. This is acutely the case at election time.

What is perhaps most fascinating about the short, hot summer of 1991 in France is the spectacular speed with which a rigid political consensus that defined itself in opposition to a radical and unsavory minority viewpoint (Le Pen) became fluid, and ultimately appropriated for itself some portion of that viewpoint. The unprecedented moves by the Socialist Party can, of course, be seen as a pure strategy of electoral survival, yet the swiftness of their realization of the movement of public opinion on such a prickly issue is significant. At a certain point it became obvious to the ruling party — as it had so long ago to M. Le Pen, and, after Mantes-la-Jolie, to the opposition — that a strict adherence to the liberal tradition on immigration

was politically untenable in contemporary France. Interestingly, it was only after the barrier posed by the taboo of "racism" had been breached — by risking the charge, by having the charge flung and then miraculously fail to stick to anything — that the French political mainstream's overdue realignment with public opinion could be undertaken.

One should point out that, as yet, no further decisions have been taken, nor have the calls for a "zero quota" subsided into the din after the Socialists' timely maneuver. With the coming elections as well as the challenge of agreeing to a Europe-wide immigration policy looming, the issue of immigration promises to remain a lively battleground in French political life.

\* \* \*

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Le Monde*, 5 July 1991.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 13-19 September, 1990.

<sup>5</sup> Harkis: former Algerian combatants on the side of France who were repatriated to France after the war. Left in rural camps, the harkis and their families have waited since 1962 for the government to fulfill promises of resettlement, aid, and citizenship.

<sup>6</sup> Disorder failed to materialize with the exception of the children of the harkis who maintained and even stepped up their demonstrations and occupations, until the end of summer brought real concessions from the government.