

# African Migration and the Transformation of France

## *Interview with Jean-Paul Gourévitch*

by Gerda Bikales

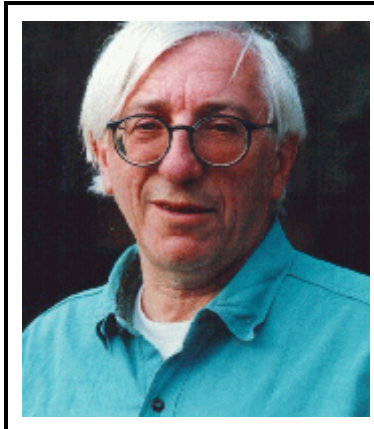
Gerda Bikales interviewed Jean-Paul Gourévitch on the changing conditions of French life due to massive immigration. Gourévitch was born in Paris, to a Russian father and Belgian mother who were naturalized French citizens. His studies were in literature and information sciences; he teaches political communication at Paris XII University. He and his wife Annie, a book dealer, have one son. He is the author of 46 books and numerous articles, on such diverse subjects as African immigration, children's literature, and political imagery. His avocations are tennis, scrabble and collecting cocktail recipes, a hobby that may soon lead to another book.

GERDA BIKALES: *Judging by your list of publications, you are a prolific writer, on many different subjects – French poetry, children's literature, publicity and propaganda, education, and now immigration. What brought you to the subject of African immigrants in France?*

JEAN-PAUL GOURÉVITCH: It is quite true that seen from a distance, a writer who proclaims himself a specialist on political image-making, children's literature, African immigration and who, furthermore, writes interactive novels that invite reader participation, would appear to be in disarray. In our country, we are used to putting labels

on every product, so as to be able to name it, to classify it and to recognize it. A Jack-of-all-trades is easily mistaken for a good-for-nothing.

On that point, I would say that it is salutary in life to work along several tracks at once. I find that it stimulates the mind, allows fresh air to enter and offers a different way of looking at things. As one example: when studying the First World War one can approach it simultaneously through political imagery (it was the first massive use of posters); through children's literature (the heroes of children's books and favorite cartoon characters were enlisted to exalt the fatherland and ridicule the enemy); and through African immigration, as young men recruited in the French colonies were first brought to France at that time, to fight as front-line soldiers. The sharpshooters from Senegal have remained legendary. All of these approaches enrich and modify one's



Jean-Paul Gourévitch

views.

I took a long route to get to African immigration. For about twenty years, and continuing to this day, I have worked as an international consultant on issues relating to the Maghreb<sup>1</sup> and to Sub-Saharan Africa, the very countries from which our largest immigration flows originate. This has allowed me to understand why they leave their country. I have also cultivated friendships and connections with citizens from those countries now living in France, thus gaining insights on what they came for and what reality they encountered here.

At bottom, I believe that the problem of African immigration is one of numbers, and of the transformations large numbers induce in French society, making it the key

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*problematic* of the twenty-first century. That is why, after keeping silent on this subject for a long time, I decided in 1997 to publish in this field.

GB: *You have written a trilogy of books on the subject of African immigration into metropolitan France, of which the last volume, La France africaine [African France], has been especially controversial. Can you give us a conceptual overview of the three books?*

JPG: You may as well say I have written a tetralogy on the subject. The first book, *Afrique, le fric, la France [Africa, Money, France]* appeared in 1997 and was

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reprinted in 2001. It attempted to measure what France has done or failed to do for Africa since these countries became independent, what the costs have been and what results they yielded.

The second volume, *Immigration, la fracture legale [Immigration, the Legal Fracture]* came out in 1998. It laid out the history of immigration into France, the statistical data on influx and settlements, the different positions and opinions on the subject, and its treatment in the media. It proposed the concept of a “legal fracture,” in contrast to a “social fracture,” a term used by Jacques Chirac during his first presidential campaign in 1995. The social fracture posits a France of have-nots at the bottom facing a France of privilege at the top, with a malfunctioning social elevator running between them, while the legal fracture differentiates between a France that is hard-working and deserving and a France of lawbreakers and pleasure-seekers in want of immediate satisfaction. There is no automatic correlation between immigration and legal fracture. Not all immigrants are

lawbreakers and not all who operate in this noxious sphere are immigrants. Nevertheless, when immigration and legal fracture intersect, an explosion is pretty much inevitable. This is shown in the data on urban violence and in studies on various illegal traffics.

The third volume, *La France africaine [African France]*, was published in 2000 and has been reissued twice. It looks at African immigration into France, both from the Maghreb and the Sub-Sahara, explaining its causes, its development and the transformations it produces in the host society, which so often receives it with closed arms. One of these transformations is the exponential growth of the *Economie Informelle [The Informal Economy]* which is the title and subject of a fourth volume, out in 2001.

GB: *La France africaine has two parts, the first one perhaps best described as “The Africans in France.” Can you tell us a little about their history? Where they are from? What attracts them to France?*

JPG: Immigration from Africa is very diverse. The first important influx dates back to the first World War, to those who came as soldiers to “defend the motherland” or as a substitute work force. Not all of them returned to their country. While the number of Sub-Saharan immigrants increased but little, immigration from the Maghreb – often clandestine – has swelled the migrant stream ever since that time and now makes up more than six percent of the country’s population. Starting in the thirties, various measures were tried to limit or regulate this influx.

Maghrebi immigration evolved in the fifties in response to industrial development. It was initially Algerian, but Moroccans and Tunisians also settled permanently on French soil, even as the war over Algerian independence exacerbated tensions between France and Algeria and within the migrant communities. Beginning in the sixties, one can also observe a growing concentration of Black Africans in the suburbs of the French capital (Montreuil became known as Bamako<sup>2</sup>-on-the-Seine) and in some Paris neighborhoods, and to a lesser extent, in Provence and the Lyon region.

But two new variables increased and transformed the migratory flows. The first was the policy of family reunion, introduced by Jacques Chirac when he was Prime Minister in 1975-1976, after guest-worker programs were officially ended. Under certain conditions,

workers could bring their families to France. A second factor was amnesty, granted to 131,000 illegal immigrants in 1981-1982. It became a magnet, attracting a million immigrants in the next five years. To those who later became known as *les sans-papiers* (the undocumented) it signaled the possibility that they too may eventually benefit from social programs already conceded to those established legally in metropolitan France.

Today, work-based immigration is limited to certain targeted professions (artists, computer specialists) but clandestine work, more or less tolerated, goes on in the building trades, the garment industry, restaurants, and security operations. Others come to France to join family, to get quality health care at little cost through universal health insurance, to continue their studies, especially at the graduate level, and to avail themselves of social welfare legislation that is the most generous in Europe and was, until the past few months, one of the most permissive and least likely to lead to deportation. Finally, let us not forget the asylum seekers.

GB: *I have tried to understand the statistical data available from official French sources, namely the National Institute of Demographic Studies (INED) and the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE). From these, I am unable to get a clear idea of the size of the immigrant population and of the direction in which it is evolving over time, up or down.*

JPG: French statistics are false for they mix-up foreigners, temporary residents, and immigrants. Furthermore, the census counts only those who want to be included in it. It is very easy to escape the census count without any penalty – I have personally had this experience.

Everyone knows that the numbers are wrong but no one dares to say it for fear of frightening the French-by-origin population or otherwise encourage xenophobic behavior. The 1999 census form removed all questions about the respondent's parentage, so it is impossible to get direct information on the ethnicity of the French population.

The African population of France, including illegal residents, is increasing very rapidly due to official and clandestine immigration and to differential fertility rates. While the fertility of women from North Africa is slowly getting closer to the national average (2.3 - 2.9,

compared to 1.9) that of women from Sub-Saharan countries remains very high (between 4.9 and 6.8). Looking beyond some fantastical extrapolations which yield somewhere between 1 million and 15 million Africans living on French soil, we can reasonably estimate that there are between 2.3 and 3 million Black Africans (including children) in France today, nearly as many as there are North Africans, who number a little more than 3 million.

GB: *The second part of the book you have subtitled "The Africanization of French Society." This is obviously a difficult subject to discuss candidly. Its publication has stirred controversy in France. Tell us about the reaction to your book.*

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JPG: Controversy arises because some people believe they see the specter of an invasion that will inevitably transform France into a country of Bantu tribes and a dumping ground for the Third World, and induce it to retreat from its own values. But actually what we experience is a gradual mixing within French society. Africans, through their culture (music, jive, sports, handicrafts, superstars), their style of expression (chitchat, rumors, boasting, conviviality, humor, folk medicine, magic), and their economic and social choices (barter, illicit traffics, ethnic solidarity with newcomers and their countrymen, the informal economy) play an important role in this.

GB: *We think of France as a pillar of Western Civilization. How has French society changed after several decades of heavy immigration from North and Sub-Saharan Africa? Would a Frenchman born before World War II feel comfortable and at home in a country transformed by immigration?*

JPG: The reaction of French society is riddled with

contradictions. On the one hand, there is a movement of sympathy for immigrants whose forefathers have fought for France, who have personally known misery, who come from a wretched continent, and who, at least in part, arrived in France only because we went to fetch them.

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On the other hand, the visibility of this population, which makes up more than half the inhabitants in some cities, the connections between immigration and juvenile delinquency, the importation of an aggressive form of Islam, and the display of anti-white racism in some neighborhoods generate hostile and sometimes violent reactions in a part of the French population.

A succession of sometimes contradictory studies by the National Advisory Commission on Human Rights seems to indicate that a saturation threshold has been reached but that legal immigrants who are well integrated are appreciated. The highest expression of disapproval is reserved for youths from immigrant backgrounds.

GB: *You describe the alienation of the young generation, especially the young men. What form does this alienation take?*

JPG: The alienated behavior takes two forms. One, which these young people perceive as a natural reaction to negative conditions, is based on economic status. It starts with misery, grows into rage and ends up as hatred, partly because the youngsters want to enjoy all the

material goods displayed before their eyes but see no immediate satisfaction forthcoming. The other form of alienation, which they also perceive as positive, is the socio-cultural evolution toward an alternative or delinquent culture (graffiti, *verlan*,<sup>3</sup> rap, drugs). Both forms of alienation must be understood in the etymological sense of the word – an estrangement from France's Gallic and middle-class power-nexus.

GB: *The teaching of civics is often proposed in our country as a way to build a set of common values in all students, and a sense of unity in the nation. Has this been tried in France?*

JPG: Civic education has been rehabilitated, most notably by Jean-Pierre Chevènement.<sup>4</sup> It is taught in the schools, but its effectiveness is limited. How much credibility can such education have in the eyes of a youngster who is subjected in the classroom to teachings on morality, citizenship and human rights, but who then sees his older brothers and role models getting away with not paying bus or subway fares, stealing from small children, and showing-off by wearing fancy clothes and driving expensive cars equipped with hi-fi gadgetry that an average working family could never afford?

GB: *In America, assimilation today does not work as reliably as it did in earlier times. We see this most clearly in the area of language. Spanish, especially, is competing with English for acceptance as a national language. France has traditionally been very proud and protective of the French language, so the question comes to mind whether French is also being displaced by immigrant languages? Is the French language changing in response to challenges from African languages?*

JPG: Throughout history, the French language has always been enriched by foreign contributions. It continues to do so through an ongoing process of borrowing words from Arabic, Berber, and Woloff.<sup>5</sup> However, this linear progression is now facing some major problems. We are seeing the infiltration of vernaculars that mock the standard language, notably *verlan* and *ouaiche* (based on homotopoeic sounds). They contaminate the speech of young people and have become fashionably snobbish among adults. We also have a sizeable population that doesn't know French or chooses to speak Arabic.

GB: *Isn't the deepest divide really religion, rather than language? This must be perceived as dangerous,*

*in a nation still conscious of its history of decades of fratricidal religious wars.*

JPG: In France, there are currently 6 to 7 million Muslims, that is to say somewhat more than mentioned in official statements. When one compares the growth curves of Islam and Christianity, it is clear that if the ongoing evolution were to continue at the same pace and under the same conditions, the Muslim religion would be the dominant one before the end of the twenty-first century. Can this happen without a religious war? Nothing is less certain. But prognosticators have often been wrong on such matters. Furthermore, Islam is not monolithic, as we see in the debates going on today within the Muslim community in France.

Finally, we must keep in mind that religious observance among Muslims is changing in two opposite directions: a gradual secularization marked by the abandonment of rituals and the consumption of alcohol and tobacco and, to the contrary, a radicalization which demands and flaunts the distinctive symbols of the faith such as the Muslim cemetery square, the veil for women, and the celebration of religious holidays.

GB: *Just recently, after many years of dispute and indecision, the French government established a Muslim Representative Council, to be the official interlocutor in dealing with the government, on an equal footing with the country's other established religions – Catholicism, Protestantism, and Judaism. In what way will this Council make a difference? Is it expected to become an instrument for integration and improved intergroup relations, rather than the opposite?*

JPG: The decision taken by Nicolas Sarkozy<sup>6</sup> builds on earlier attempts by Jean-Pierre Chevènement to use such a council as interlocutor in discussing the problems of the Muslim community, from financing the construction of mosques to television programming. In theory, then, it is a vector of integration, even though the council today is dominated by radicals, following an election that is not in legal dispute. Sarkozy has been blamed for having “put his hand in a hornets’ nest,” for giving a platform to the enemies of the nation, for financing the education of imams, and for quietly preparing the growth of a forest of minarets under the French sky. However, it is part of the country’s democratic tradition to recognize and even subsidize parties and associations radically opposed to its

politics.

GB: *We have heard a great deal about Jean-Marie LePen, whose political platform calls for an end to immigration. He seems to oscillate between surprising popularity and political irrelevance. After his defeat of Prime Minister Lionel Jospin in the first round of the presidential election in 2002, we now hear little about him.*

JPG: Jean-Marie Le Pen is alive, as demonstrated by the recent *Front National* convention in Nice. His daughter can be counted on to succeed him. Immigration remains his fundamental business. He has gradually enlarged it into a trilogy of “I” words: Immigration-Islam-Insecurity. The Minister of the Interior attempts to deprive him of voters and diffuse the debate through subtle games of politics, which balance firm measures (i.e., charter planes for deportations to Africa) with humanitarian ones, such as quiet amnesties on a case-by-case basis, and a review of the policy of “double indemnity,” which first jails lawbreakers and afterwards deports them.

GB: *What are the foreign policy considerations that arise from such large scale immigration?*

JPG: French foreign policy must strive to act in concert with nearby receiving countries that face the same migration flows. It must also intervene in ways favorable to the sending countries. The goal is to stop the brain-drain, to end the demand for economic asylum by stimulating investments, and advance basic large-scale structural reforms.

The migratory flows go from countries in the South and East toward those in the North, not all of which have the same laws on asylum rights, work-permits, and social services for new arrivals. This obliges the countries in the North, and particularly those in Europe, to define an immigration policy and publicize its decisions, especially as they impact other neighboring countries. For a long time, the policy of France, which has been more generous than that of its neighbors – even as it made a show of wanting to regulate the flows and to fight illegal immigration – has been shaped by a desire to do more and better for “those who choose France.” This has been interpreted by candidates for emigration as encouragement and has fueled hopes of regularization down the road. Today the policy is more restrictive, as a portion of those who come by plane are escorted back to their country before they set foot in France. At the same

time, France tries to plug differences with its neighbors on such issues as “double indemnity,” health insurance co-payments, creation of a database of entrants, while working to speed-up the implementation of a common European immigration policy.

France intervenes to absorb a part of the bilateral debts of the countries of origin and to reduce multilateral debts. It also offers assistance to the Third World, in matters such as health and humanitarian relief. But in its concern for stabilizing regimes and help them move toward democracy, it sometimes ends up offering political, economic and military assistance to governments that have little to commend them. On a broader scale, its search for agreements with African and Arab states attempts to show that the era of colonial and post-colonial politics is definitely over and that controlled immigration today is a way for the West to reap benefits and escape the problems of an aging society.

GB: *How do you see the future evolving? Will globalization continue to send large numbers of migrants from the South to the North, or will technology and innovation change this pattern? What will life be like in a multiethnic and multicultural France, in the year 2050?*

JPG: I have no passion for futurology. I consider it very doubtful that the migratory flows will dry up or reverse themselves in the short run, given the unequal economies of the North and the South. I simply try to inform about technological innovations, made possible by computers and the internet, that could bring about a “virtual immigration,” providing jobs for people without having them leave home. This would check the brain-drain, introduce Africa to the twenty-first century, and create true currents of exchange between the multitude of data banks of the well-functioning countries of the North and those of the South that are still in their infancy.

GB: *Some critics have pointed out that your book is strong on analysis, but fails to project a point of view. You remain in the distance, aloof, disengaged. How do you answer them?*

JPG: They are right. The objective of my work is not to teach lessons or declare what should be done in these areas, which are difficult and often taboo. Rather, it is to provide information and intellectual tools that will help decision-makers and public opinion leaders to make informed choices. This is not disengagement, for to be

able to scrutinize these issues one must always fight disinformation. Fortunately, I am not the only one to venture off on such expeditions and I am pleased to be invited by very diverse educational institutions, associations and entities that recognize the need for expertise divorced from partisanship and from any personal gain.

GB: *You know, as I go over your answers, many of them seem to split off in two incongruous directions.*

JPG: Yes, we live in a very complex world. Nothing is simple or straight forward. •

#### NOTES

1. Collective term designating North Africa, specifically the countries of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia.
2. The capital of Mali.
3. A coded form of slang, marked by the systematic reversal of syllables in the word structure. According to Gourévitch, *verlan* goes beyond mere word play to evoke a symbolic reversal of the social order.
4. Former Minister of Education, later served as Minister of the Interior which is in charge of internal security.
5. Some examples: *bled*, for small town or village; *sidi*, the Arabic word for Arab; *mabool*, for crazy; *kif*, for drugs.
6. An energetic young newcomer of the political right, Mayor of Neuilly, currently Minister of the Interior.