

Five immigration myths

François Héran*

Immigration has developed into such an emotive issue in this country that it is becoming hard to separate fact from fiction. Using the evidence available, this study attempts to dispel some of these myths.

◆ Myth number 1: Immigration in France is “massive”

Certainly, France has a long tradition of immigration, but there has been no massive influx for a quarter of a century. In fact, immigration is less a factor in its population growth than that of any other European country—a mere fifth to a quarter (Figures 1 and 2). France has an annual natural increase of 200,000 for an estimated net migration count (migrant arrivals less departures) of around 65,000. Even in the unlikely event of French statisticians being completely off the mark, and their European colleagues right on it, and even doubling France’s net migration count while leaving that of neighbouring countries unchanged, immigration would still account for no more than 40% of its population growth, leaving France on the bottom rungs of European countries by scale of immigration (Figure 2).

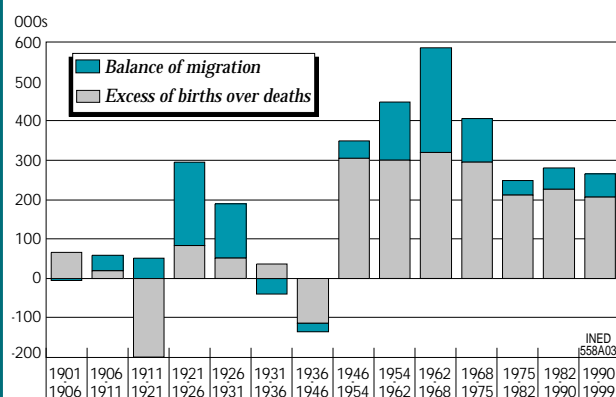
Although reported in Insee and Eurostat’s annual statistical reviews of demographic trends, and in each March issue of *Population & Sociétés*, this fact is overshadowed by the opposing picture of a France losing native population while being swamped by a rising tide of immigration. Where does this misconception stem from?

First, a congregation effect may produce extremely high concentrations of immigrant populations in some local authority areas. But more important is the failure

to distinguish the “here and now” from the legacy of the past. France was certainly a high immigration country after World War One (when net migration accounted for two thirds of population growth) and from the 1960s to the mid-1970s (when it still accounted for 40% even in mid-baby boom) (Figure 1) [1],[2]. Historians have rightly stressed the longer-established and more sustained contribution that immigration has over time made to the development of French society compared to other European countries, particularly visible among the working class and intellectual community.

France certainly has big integration issues to address in the educational system and the labour market, but these mainly relate to the children of the big

Figure 1 – Demographic profile of 20th century France



Interpretation: between the 1911 and 1921 censuses, France had a negative natural increase (200,000 more deaths than births) and a positive balance of migration (40,000 more immigrants than emigrants). During the recession of the 1930s, immigrants were repatriated (negative balance) and there was a net deficit of births. The post-war baby-boom was followed by a sharp rise in immigration, slowing sharply after the halt to labour migration in 1974.

Source: Insee Censuses.

* Institut national d'études démographiques

migration inflows of 1950-1974 who reached working age in the midst of a recession. There is a big public debate on this today, but it should not cloud the very different issue of current immigration levels which, however the numbers are added up, still fall well short of the thirty-year-ago levels, and are nowhere near those of present-day Germany and southern Europe: French official curbs on immigration are more effective than generally allowed, plus the fact that France's low economic growth rate has reduced its pull-factor.

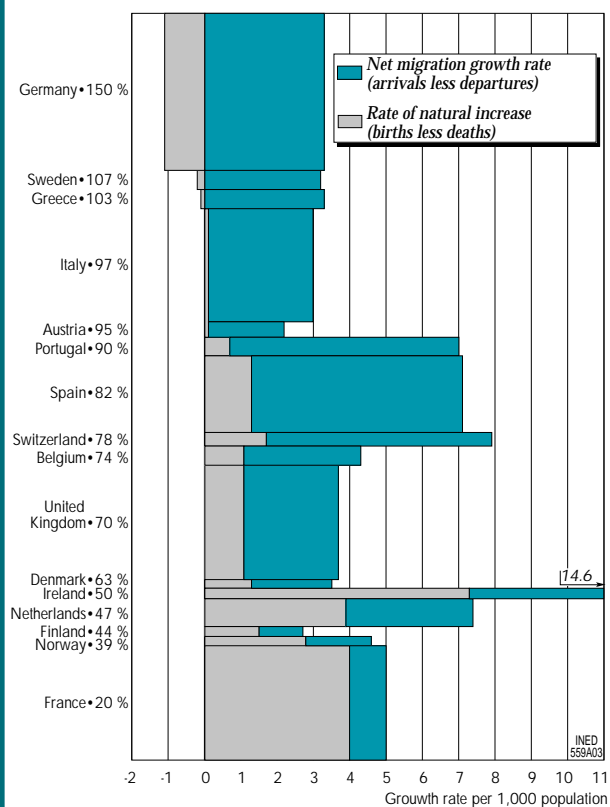
These briefly cited order-of-magnitude figures for immigration are not to deny the pressure from immigration at the borders, especially from asylum applications. But it is less an invasion than a steady stream of growing numbers of students from France's former colonies in Africa and Asia. It has nothing in common with the massive immigration into Germany from the countries of the former Soviet Union and former Yugoslavia, nor the labour migration to Europe's rapidly expanding Mediterranean countries.

◆ Myth number 2: Most of France's fertility is due to immigrant families

Another counter-factual argument is that the main factor in France's recorded natural increase—by far Europe's biggest—is births to immigrants. Insee logically does not record children born to immigrants in France as immigrants, since they have not crossed a border. As a result, children born in France to immigrant parents are recorded in natural increase (the balance of births and deaths) rather than in the balance of migration. Does that distort our demographic situation compared to that of our neighbours? This is an issue common to all European countries, and French demographers are simply following general practice. Were they to change that, all immigration countries would have to follow suit, which would leave the cross-classification of countries unchanged.

Will an evaluation of the recent contribution of immigration to French fertility help to set the record straight? The calculation has recently been updated for the 1990s by Laurent Toulemon using the "Family History Study" survey linked to the 1999 population census. This will be examined in detail in a forthcoming issue of *Population & Sociétés*. Suffice it to say that the immigrant/native-born French fertility gap is much narrower than currently claimed. In the period 1991-1998, average parity in metropolitan France was 1.72 for all women, and 1.65 for native-born Frenchwomen alone. Immigrant women make up just one twelfth of women of childbearing age, too few in number to materially affect the national total fertility rate (the difference between 1.65 and 1.72 is only 0.07 children). Their average parity can be estimated to be 2.2 children, of whom 0.6 born before their arrival in

Figure 2 – Demographic situation 2001, main western European countries, rank-ordered by percentage of migration in total growth



NB: the width of the bars (columns) shows the population of the countries; the areas are therefore proportional to the surpluses and deficits.

Interpretation: A crude rate of natural increase of 4 per 1,000 and net migration growth of 1 per 1,000 makes France the European country where immigration contributes least to annual population growth (just 20%), compared to Germany at the other extreme, with a net deficit of births (negative natural increase less than -1 per 1,000) and net migration growth above 3 per 1,000, accounting for over 50% of overall population growth.

Source: Ined (www.ined.fr)

France, and 1.6 born in France. This finding comes as no surprise given the sharp fertility decline in southern Europe, and even more so the Maghreb (7-plus children per woman around 1970, in the region of 2.5 today), which is also becoming significant in the capital cities of sub-Saharan Africa.

The reason this convergence is not seen by the general public is the time lag. Second-generation immigrants who are more visible in the public sphere were born fifteen to twenty years ago in an essentially pre-transitional stage of fertility. The stereotypical immigrant family with an inordinate number of children will soon be a thing of the past.

◆ Myth number 3: Uncountable irregular immigration means "countless"

Simply because irregular immigration is strictly speaking uncountable does not necessarily make it

countless. The intermittent regularization campaigns staged in European countries in fact enable a general approximation to be made because any hint of an opportunity to become legitimate finds a speedy response among the undocumented community.

In fact, the undocumented migrant population is always overestimated [3],[4]. France regularized around 132,000 immigrants in 1982, and granted approximately 90,000 out of 130,000 applications in 1997-1998 (discounting duplicated applications). The mistake would be to aggregate the stock and flow data, because the evidence in both cases suggests an average residence span of ten years or so for undeclared migrants, meaning that they have been included in the balance of migration for the ten previous years. This adds an extra 13,000 migrants a year, 25% up on Insee's provisional net count (50,000 in an average year). This is clearly a significant adjustment that could in all conscience be increased still further without seriously affecting the general immigration count, which is by and large steady. France is far from conducting the large-scale regularization campaigns that Spain, Italy and Greece have had to do in the past five years with sometimes over half a million applicants.

Another approach is to focus analysis on the key areas of undeclared work which is the main income provider for irregular immigrants. As one section of the 1997 Weil report [4] remarks, over 90% of off-the-books work is found in the building and civil engineering industry, tourism, farm work, clothing manufacture and domestic service. Investigations in these sectors found irregular immigrants working alongside even larger numbers of undeclared native-born workers, limiting the maximum number of immigrants involved. Some of this irregular immigration is due to the seasonal and temporary work regulations, which make reporting an administrative burden for the employer and unprofitable for the worker.

Myth number 4:

◆ Official statistics are incapable of counting immigrants properly

Migration flows are not easily measured—only some arrivals are logged by official agencies and return migration is unobservable. But because the demographic equations add up, some of the gaps can be filled. Second-generation immigrants born and raised in France are included in population, social and educational statistics.

Accounting inconsistencies can always be found when the details are examined, but the role of demographers is not to force reality to produce “perfect data”. Trying to identify the social source of biasing factors is preferable to trying to suppress them. There is evidence from an Insee longitudinal survey, for

example, that a growing share of older migrants who came to France in their youth tend over time to self-report retrospectively as “French born” rather than naturalized. Over time, they cease to feel like immigrants. It would be ridiculous to dismiss this as “misreporting” and require Insee to correct it: it is a clear sign of successful integration.

A similar case is families who may be uncertain whether their French-born children are native French (which they are, under the double *jus soli*, if the parents were themselves born in French Algeria pre-1962) or naturalized at age 13, 16 or 18 (by application of single *jus soli*, with an option for earlier application). As a result, some families report on census returns a nationality not yet acquired. Should demographers call for government action to dispel these uncertainties? That is not part of their remit.

Turning the population census into a large-scale rounding-up exercise, forcing immigrants to register in order to claim social services would drive a hole through the crucial relations of trust between Insee, local authorities and the community on which the census rests. It would also be a head-on challenge to the statistical system for keeping track of the French population. This system—it cannot be over-emphasized—is, with that of Britain, the most liberal in Europe. There is no duty to report changes of address to the town hall for recording on population registers, unlike neighbouring countries where it is a general obligation, and often determines access to education and social protection. Where these registers are computerized and centralized (as in Belgium and the Nordic countries), all families, including immigrants, can be tracked and traced. But the past casts a long shadow: the only period in France's history when change-of-address reporting was compulsory was under the Vichy government, which used the information to carry out the Velodrome d'Hiver roundup in July 1942. That system was abolished with the Liberation, and no statistical agency wants it re-introduced.

Myth number 5:

◆ taking in immigrants means opening the door to “the world's poor”

Adam Smith thanked the poor for voluntarily moving into prosperous areas to equalize wages between areas. But even this earliest proponent of the first of many types of gravity model acknowledged that “a man is of all sorts of luggage the most difficult to be transported”. Many researchers have pointed out that actual migration numbers are far below economic and demographic predictions [5]. People have countless reasons to stay put: attachment to kith and kin, their country, skills that are non-transferable because

insufficiently standardized. In fact, on a world scale, only one in forty people (2.5%) have moved abroad, often due to local conflicts, and their first choice is a neighbouring country [6].

The expression “the world’s poor” conjures up immigration from the developing countries, the poorest in the world. But where exactly do migrants stand on the social ladder of their society of origin? Rarely on the lowest rungs, and often above mid-way. Portugal is an informative case in point: more of the emigrants of the 1960s and 1970s were small farmers from the North than poorer casual farm labourers from the Alentejo. Likewise Spain, where an older study of Southern Andalusian mountain villages was instructive [7]. All departures for all possible destinations over an eight-year period were recorded. This revealed a highly hierarchically-organized migration system, where the probability of long-distance migration increased with educational level, even if that was lower than the average qualification level in the host country. The poorest (agricultural workers, people with poor literacy skills, with families to support, comparatively elderly) became labourers or jobbing builders in adjacent provinces. Young people with basic literacy headed for the dams and factories of northern Spain. Only the cream (younger people with the minimum level of schooling and some savings) were able to move to France, Germany or Switzerland.

But there are few such studies. The only recent large-scale survey focussing both on countries of origin and of destination is that commissioned by Eurostat from the Nidi (Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute) [8]. It found higher educational levels among migrants than non-migrants in the cases of Turkey, Egypt and Ghana, but the converse in Morocco. But there is a paucity of socio-economic data in developing countries: labour economists trying to assess the impact of migration on skill and income distribution in origin and destination areas (the double brain-drain impact) find reliable data hard to pin down [9]. Nevertheless, migrants broadly-speaking are a selected population compared to the non-migrant populations of societies of origin: they are healthier, better-educated, more enterprising, with sufficient funds to defray the costs of travel and settlement, the establishment of networks merely lightening the financial cost of migration.

The main motive for migration is to be sought less in individual poverty than in State weaknesses. Apart from civil war and persecution, both producing floods of refugees, many countries are too poor to provide the minimum guarantees needed to plan for the future (administrative disarray, political instability, failing infrastructure). People who have a minimum level of resources and want a better life will look elsewhere for

the guarantees that will enable their self-fulfilment, which may blur the distinction between economic migration and political migration. This link between governance and emigration remains largely unexplored. Voting with one’s feet in this way is the ultimate argument in a critique expressed through an often ill-defined dream of emigration. The Nidi survey revealed that while a high proportion of the migrant country population dream of emigrating northwards (varying from 20% to 40% according to country), very few (under 5%) planned on doing so within two years, and only a tiny minority had begun making any real preparations.

* * *

Without reasonable control of flows, efforts on both sides to fit in, and effective action against forms of discrimination (whether at work in the host environment or in certain communities), immigration cannot become an “opportunity for France”. Demography can help inform the debate by refuting the popular myths. Immigration is not on a massive scale, mainly illegal, bringing high fertility or poverty, nor is it uncountable. It is just largely unplumbed. ■

REFERENCES

- [1] Michèle TRIBALAT (dir.) - *Cent ans d'immigration. Étrangers d'hier, Français d'aujourd'hui*, coll. “Les cahiers de l'Ined”, No 131, 1991, 302 p.
- [2] Fabienne DAGUET - Un siècle de démographie française, “Insee-Résultats”, 1995, 306 p.
- [3] Xavier THIERRY - “Les entrées d'étrangers en France: évolutions statistiques et bilan de l'opération de régularisation exceptionnelle de 1997”, *Population*, 55 (3), 2000, Ined, p. 567-620
- [4] Patrick WEIL - “Populations en mouvement, État inerte”, in: Roger FAUROUX et Bernard SPITZ (dir.) - *Notre État*, Paris, R. Laffont, 2001, p. 413-433
- [5] Graziella CASELLI, Jacques VALLIN and Guillaume WUNSCH (dir.) - *Démographie: analyse et synthèse*, t. 4: *Les déterminants de la migration*, Paris, Ined, 2003, 225 p.
- [6] Gildas SIMON - “International migration trends”, *Population & Sociétés*, No 382, Ined, September 2002
- [7] François HÉRAN - “Le système des migrations dans l'arrière-pays de la Costa del Sol”, in: A.-M. BERNAL *et al.* - *Tourisme et développement régional en Andalousie*, Paris, Casa de Velazquez, 1979, p. 95-133
- [8] Jeannette SCHOORL *et al.* - *Push and pull factors of international migration: a comparative report*, The Hague/Luxembourg, Eurostat
- [9] François HÉRAN (dir.) - *Immigration, marché du travail, intégration*, Commissariat général du Plan, Paris, La Documentation française, 2002, 230 p.