

# | The Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration: site of transmission and public education

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France has long remained a 'country of immigration that it ignores', to adopt the expression of the historian Philippe Dewitte,<sup>1</sup> even though immigration has existed as a massive phenomenon for over two centuries, and the French population has been profoundly changed as a result of this foreign contribution. Ignorance or denial, this state of affairs falsifies the perception that the French have of their own identity. The major challenge of the Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration (CNHI) is to influence this representation, to approach the historical reality in order to enable a better grasp of what constitutes 'French identity'.

In order to attain this goal, the CNHI will install a permanent exhibition retracing two centuries of immigration history in France, together with a media library, a cultural programme, temporary exhibitions and a web site, in sum, services conceived as diverse means to collect, preserve and transmit the traces of the past and the present of immigration in France. If the CNHI strives to be a resource for specialists on the subject, it intends above all to be a site of transmission of this history, aimed at as wide a public as possible, and to give centrality to this

migratory phenomenon throughout the contemporary world.

Supervision of the CNHI, shared by two other administrative ministries, the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Social Cohesion (under the Ministry of National Education), clearly manifests the willingness of public authorities to have this institution orientate itself toward the transmission of France's immigration past to a school audience. One of the roles of primary and secondary education is the formation of responsible and discerning citizens. The Cité can contribute to this formation by enabling a better understanding of what constitutes the identity of contemporary France. In order to better fulfil this mission, the CNHI has been endowed with a Pedagogical Committee, charged with defining the major orientations of its educational policy. Its education department implements this policy to allow the best possible cooperation between the resources offered by the CNHI and the Ministry of National Education.

### Immigration history at school

The name assigned to the Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration invites us first off to reflect upon the teaching of a particular discipline, history, which is the object of a specific and mandatory educational programme from the second cycle of primary [or middle] school until the *terminale* [final year or upper sixth form].

Systematized under the Third Republic (1870–1940), history as an academic discipline then assumed a civic goal, that of educating French citizens to be proud of their nation and its political

republican system. The actual outcome of this educational programme was undoubtedly more complex and subtle, in that it simultaneously involved the development of judgement, and the education of critical minds, capable of analysing human and social situations under different forms. Yet academic history preserved the role of transmitting a collective memory and of introducing the students into a collective consciousness of belonging. Otherwise, it was generally the history-geography teachers' responsibility to fill the hours of civic education that reappeared in the secondary-school curriculum by the 1890s.<sup>2</sup>

The history programmes were constructed in such a way as to give students fundamental reference points based on the historical past of humankind. Their structure thus revealed a choice, effectuated according to precise objectives. The more one approaches the contemporary period, the more one sees that history taught in school (both primary and secondary) was centred on two aspects: international relations and the history of France. The programme consisted of teaching students the facts, enabling them to situate themselves in the world and to comprehend fundamental knowledge about the identity of the country in which they live. Immigration history education thus became essential here. Work conducted by historians during the 1980s, and notably after the 1988 publication of Gérard Noiriel's pioneering book *Le Creuset français. Histoire de l'immigration (XIXe–XXe siècles)* [The French Melting Pot. History of Immigration (19th–20th Centuries)], largely demonstrated, in fact, the influence of immigration on the constitution of contemporary French society. To be deprived of

immigration history would amount to being deprived of one of the basic facts of French contemporary history. As the sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad has written: 'To work on immigration is to work on France: on the France of yesterday, thus the history of France, the history of the French population and, even more, on the history of the French nation.'<sup>3</sup>

Yet, if immigration in France is an ancient phenomenon,<sup>4</sup> having begun over two centuries ago and having become significant by the end of the nineteenth century, there had not yet developed the same historical study of this question. Not until the late 1980s was its field of inquiry formulated. Now we know that there still exists a lag between the university's treatment of a question and its transposition into the school teaching programme. This fact is translated in two ways. Firstly, the programmes may require a long time to integrate the advances of historical research. Secondly, the teachers themselves may require new training, because they have not been trained to handle these thematic questions as they were not – or very rarely – included in university courses when they were students. Thus, according to a study<sup>5</sup> led by the Institut National de Recherche Pédagogique (National Institute for Pedagogical Research) in the early 2000s, almost all the teachers questioned estimated that they did not have sufficient knowledge in the domain of immigration history to be able to tackle the theme in their courses.

Faced with these needs, with the lack of support for treating the immigration theme which none the less appears fundamental, the CNHI offers the pedagogical means (until now

non-existent or difficult to find), assembled in one place on the same site, not only in terms of continuing education tools for teachers, but also for pedagogical support to make possible a better approach to the theme of immigration with their classes.

### **An interdisciplinary pedagogical offer for school audiences**

One of the roles of the CNHI is to be a site of popularization, an 'interpretation centre'<sup>6</sup> on immigration research conducted by the social sciences. The centre is thus making available thematic bibliographies and film lists for teachers, as much to allow them to complement their knowledge as to prepare resources likely to be used with their classes. In a similar way, the education department is establishing chronologies and files of summaries of pedagogical implementation propositions<sup>7</sup> tied to education programmes. These tools are being diffused on the Cité web site. Along with these teaching tools, the Cité is contributing to the continuing education of teachers in collaboration with apprenticeship training sessions organised by the academic authorities.<sup>8</sup> From the inauguration of the CNHI, some sessions will be held for teachers to guide them in the utilisation of the available resources, as well as the lecture programmes.

The CNHI will itself, moreover, function as a pedagogical tool put at the disposition of teachers with their classes. The permanent exhibition is central to this plan. Without being conceived as 'a museum for school classes', it could be a precious aid for a school audience. To this end, the education department is elaborating

its support material for visits, conceived in function of class levels and educational programmes, permitting teachers to construct their independent visits. Some specific guided tours are also proposed for school groups, as well as workshops to examine themes more thoroughly.

A museum facilitates cross-fertilizations, through diverse media, first of all, that the classroom cannot provide. Objects, archival documents, posters, photographs, sound recordings, video installations and the like are put on display along the itinerary. The diversity of display items allows an interdisciplinary exchange, sometimes rather difficult to organize in a school context, even though this interdisciplinarity is indispensable to comprehend a full-scale social phenomenon like immigration.

Granted, the exhibition retraces two centuries of immigration history, but this fact does not signify that only the discipline of history is featured. The presence of animated maps,<sup>9</sup> the theme of the voyage and the frontier,<sup>10</sup> like that of housing logically touches on geography. A history of vocabulary surrounding words about immigration,<sup>11</sup> a sequence on languages,<sup>12</sup> composed simultaneously of games, a video installation,<sup>13</sup> and interviews with foreign authors who have chosen the French language, offer resources within a framework of education in French as well as other living languages. The exhibition is enlivened by a series of art works (photographs, video installations, sculptures<sup>14</sup>) allowing an approach through the plastic arts. An initiation into ethnology, not in itself a subject taught

within the French school system, will be made possible through many angles, such as the sequenced reading of exhibit objects of everyday life, for example, in the sequence *De(s)constructions*,<sup>15</sup> composed of a selection of around forty 'icon' objects, constituting French cultural heritage, and delving into their authentic origins. Throughout their visit, moreover, students will be invited to ask themselves questions on civic order, whether it be about problems tied to the evolution of law or to the question of stereotypes, and the portrayal of or regard toward the other. Posters offer a particularly rich support for this type of approach. School visits to the museum would thus make possible the link-up between various disciplines, and through it, a better understanding of a complex phenomenon, that of immigration.

The entire exhibition plan, adapted to school audiences, takes as its goal to show and to make visitors aware of the major role that immigration and immigrants play in the French national construction. The designers of the permanent exhibition have searched to give a global account of immigration in France, 'to give some markers to those who want to understand this great demographical and social adventure that was, and still is, immigration in France'.<sup>16</sup> In an extracurricular framework, this could have an advantage, in replacing the migratory phenomenon over the long duration, of lessening the drama of an often dolorous history and memory for its actors, amongst whom some of the students are the inheritors, or even the representatives. Yet recourse to individual memories and to biographies, far from having been neglected in the

permanent exhibition, also presents major pedagogical interest.

### **History, memory and the school: what possible uses of the CNHI?**

The question of memory, and its ties to history,<sup>17</sup> is at the heart of contemporary questions on identities and their construction. Immigration itself touches on the question of identity, and notably on national identity. And the school age is precisely the moment during which individual identities are constructed. The CNHI thus finds itself at the epicentre of topical issues, which pose problems to the academic institution. Since the 1970s, the school has been asking itself if it ought, and in what way, take into account the specificities of students with foreign backgrounds, of the immigrants themselves, or their children.

It seems that we have arrived at a relative consensus on the subject of teaching immigration history. The question is still little and poorly taken into account within school programmes, and often left to the individual teacher's initiatives. However, the idea that immigration history is an important element in comprehending the construction of France is becoming more and more widely shared. In France, history in the schools maintains, more or less, the role of the 'great national novel' in which each individual ought to be able to find his or her place, in which individual, family or community memories ought to be able to recognize themselves or at least not to feel rejected. It is also for this reason that the history of immigration must be studied at school, to allow the students, inheritors of this history, to attach

their family memories to their country: 'The history of immigration attaches itself to the national history and renders logically and comprehensively the fact of a presence come from afar.'<sup>18</sup> Many teachers resent the necessity of treating these questions in their courses. Yet perhaps because of the quasi-absence of immigration history (at least explicitly) in the programmes, but also because of the scarcity of pedagogical supports, the question is often broached, with the best of intentions, through students' private family souvenirs. This practice provokes questions, such as that raised by Sophie Ernst: 'In any case, work on history is fundamentally the obligation of the school, but memorial research is troubled within the context of an obligatory public education. Memory cannot be obligatory.'<sup>19</sup>

All the more given the fact that here, far from allowing immigration history to be posited as a memory common to all French people, whatever their family origins, this has pedagogical consequences of 'shunting otherness back to students who are, besides, often in full search of identity', as a researcher in the science of education observed.<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps the Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration can itself, in the realm of memories, offer a framework to teachers in which to start studying this question. The permanent exhibition plan, which cross-references individual testimonies and life narratives in regards to 'major history', indeed invites visitors to make this round trip between individual destiny and collective fate. Moreover, through this network of associations on which it stands, the CNHI is in

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contact with numerous witnesses to this history of immigration, amongst whom many have the desire and the capacities to relate an account of their experiences before school classes. One of the tasks for the Cité's education department is undoubtedly to explore that area of research, and accompaniment of exchanges amongst witnesses and school groups within the framework of museum visits, media library workshops, or encounters in academic establishments. This might be a means to approach the question of memory without the forced recourse to family souvenirs which intrude into the private domain, but not the school.

The Cité's mission of transmission obviously does not end with the school audience. But this sector does call for specific methods, some of which will also be destined for a wider public, whether it be children outside the educational system or adult groups. Specific workshops or intervention methods adapted for school children could as such be available to function for a diverse audience, and vice versa.

### | NOTES

1. Dewitte, Philippe (2003) *Deux siècles d'immigration en France* (Two Centuries of Immigration in France), Paris, La Documentation Française.
2. Under the form of courses in civic education in middle school (*collège*) and a civic, judicial and social instruction course (*Enseignement civique, juridique et social*, ECJS) in high school (*lycée*). Often entrusted to history/ geography teachers, these teaching programmes can also be taught by teachers from other disciplines.
3. Sayad, Abdelmalek (1990) Les maux à mots de l'immigration (The Ills over Words of Immigration), *Politix* No. 12, p. 7.
4. The word 'immigration' is used here in the meaning that Gérard Noiriel gives it: a displacement including the passage over a frontier, and which can only exist from the moment when the legal concept of 'nationality' was put into place, thus at the beginning of the nineteenth century.
5. Corbell, L., Falaize, B. *et al.* (2000–03) *Entre mémoire et savoir: l'enseignement de la Shoah et des guerres de décolonisation* (Between Memory and Knowledge: Teaching about the Holocaust and the Wars of Decolonization), INRP/IUFM, Versailles (research report).
6. Toubon, Jacques (2004) *Mission de préfiguration du Centre de Ressources et de mémoires de l'immigration* (Planning Commission for the Centre of Resources and Memory of Immigration), La Documentation française, Paris.
7. Propositions elaborated by the teachers participating in groups of pedagogical reflection organized by the CNHI since 2005, in collaboration with the academies of the Île de France.
8. During the planning process, these actions had been taken in partnership with the academies of the Île de France, for reasons of geographical proximity.
9. Prologue to the exhibition.
10. First part of the itinerary, *Émigrer* (Emigrate).
11. Prologue to the exhibition.
12. In the third part of the itinerary, *Diversités et cultures* (Diversities and Cultures).
13. Sedira, Zineb (2002) *Mother Tongue*.
14. Togu, Barthélémy (2004) *Climbing Down*.
15. Third part of the itinerary.
16. Blanc-Chaléard, Marie-Claude (2001) *Histoire de l'immigration*, p. 3, L'Harmattan, Paris.
17. See Traverso, Enzo (2006) *Le passé, modes d'emploi. Histoire, mémoire, politique* (User's Guide to the Past: History, Memory, Politics), La Fabrique, Paris.
18. Ernst, Sophie (2003) L'école et les mémoires de l'immigration. Au milieu du gué (School and Memories of Immigration: in the middle of the

ford), in Lorcerie, Françoise (ed.), *L'école et le défi ethnique. Éducation et intégration* (School and the Ethnic Challenge: education and integration), ESF INRP, Paris.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Falaize, Benoît (2006) L'immigration dans les classes, entre reconnaissance politique et estime de soi (Immigration in the Classroom, between political recognition and self-esteem), *Education and Management*, May, p. 47.