



La République et ses autres: Politiques de l'altérité dans la France des années 2000

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BOOK REVIEW

La République et ses autres: Politiques de l'altérité dans la France des années 2000, by Sarah Mazouz, Lyons: ENS Editions, 2017, +282 pp., €24.00 (paperback), ISBN: 978-2-84788-869-0

Immigrants cross the territorial border, only to face a series of other, internal, often invisible but vitally important borders. The first stages of a migrant's life – and more often than not, the entirety of the migrant's experience in the new country – take place in that conceptual space between the external territorial border and the internal, invisible but formal boundary demarcating citizens from aliens. Consequently, immigration yields additional migrations, this time not spatial but rather political, as the migrants move from one status to another. But whereas the migrants' own initiative, combined with help from friends and relatives, powers the move across the territorial frontier, the intervention of state agents proves decisive in determining who can crossover status boundaries and under what conditions.

Yet, acquisition of formal membership, or status citizenship, does not necessarily yield everyday citizenship, a subjective recognition by both the self and by others that one is a fully accepted member of the national people among whom one lives. Instead, different forms of categorical membership take priority, defining the social boundaries among citizens, with the result that persons enjoying formal state membership but of origins perceived as foreign are nonetheless treated as if they do not belong.

Sarah Mazouz's book provides an incisive, on-the-ground analysis of the policies that the French state has pursued in responding to these two types of others, one within the bounds of formal citizenship and the other one residing outside. Based on analysis of documents, in-depth interviews and participant observation, Mazouz takes the reader inside the state to examine the aborted launching of France's policies aimed at ending racial discrimination against citizens and their replacement by a new found effort at naturalizing foreigners – bringing resident foreigners across the citizenship divide, albeit one compromised by the same ideological resistance to attacking racial discrimination.

In this account, the story begins at the informal, social boundary, separating first- from second-class citizens, who rather than gaining the acceptance due to full citizens, instead are treated as if they do not belong, undergoing discrimination. To be addressed, that experience first had to be discovered, then documented and last tackled with tools that would ensure that all citizens – regardless of origins – received fair treatment, whether in employment, housing or in public space. Yet, doing so proved exceedingly difficult since the Republican ideology insisting on the fundamental commonality of the citizens stood in the way, first, of defining discrimination as a specific phenomenon, distinct from racism; second, of identifying those French citizens who recurrently experienced discrimination; and last, of explicitly developing methods of combatting

discrimination that would replace second- with first-class citizenship. Instead, policy-makers slipped back towards the established paradigm, which conceptualized the issue as involving the disparities at the internal, formal border distinguishing citizens from resident foreigners, rather than those informal, social boundaries that separate citizens of different origins. Hence, even though racial discrimination emerged as a public policy issue in the late 1990s, the precise problem that those policies were meant to target disappeared from view. With objectives set from on high cloudy from the start, implementation at the level of the relevant administrative unit – in this case, a prefecture in a department of the region of Ile de France, surrounding Paris – led to a further blurring of focus. Anti-discrimination efforts were assigned to officials of lower importance and lesser influence, who themselves lacked belief in the goal; and the resistance in principle to recognizing differences among citizens – for example, by religion – undercut the legitimacy of policies that would attack the differences among citizens recognized in everyday practice and that comprise the basis of discrimination.

Mazouz then follows the flow of policy, which having abandoned the sphere of discrimination among citizens, adopts new measures targeted at the more familiar domain of divisions between foreigners and citizens. As a state that effectively turned peasants into Frenchmen, France historically proved similarly capable of transforming foreigners into the equivalent of natural-born citizens. On the books, French policy provides broad access to citizenship, not simply guaranteeing citizenship to the France-born children of foreigners, but accepting dual nationality, charging applicants unusually low fees, and allowing naturalization after a relatively short period of five years of residence, a requirement waived for citizens of former French colonies as well as for countries where French was the official language. Even foreign students can seek French nationality – in contrast to the United States, where a student visa is conditional on an intent to return home after the completion of studies and years of residence spent on the student visa have no bearing on eligibility for citizenship. Yet, what looks good on the books fails to translate into practice, as rates of citizenship acquisition remain low and the average wait before obtaining citizenship papers is long.

In shedding light on this disparity, Mazouz's book proves its greatest value, providing the first account, of which I am aware, based not only on interviews with naturalized citizens but observations of the interactions between the street-level bureaucrats who process the applications and the applicants themselves, as well as insights gleaned from her own, concurrent experience of naturalization. Access may be broad, but the demands made of the prospective citizens are exacting and the circumstances under which citizenship is granted allow unusual room for bureaucratic discretion. To begin with, applications are taken at the prefecture – a location well known to the would-be citizens as this is the very same office they visited, time and again, and often with unpleasant results, to obtain and then renew their residence permit. As is the case everywhere, foreigners wanting citizenship need to put themselves under the microscope, which is why compiling a dossier of documents that fully establishes their identity and traces their trajectory from birth to the moment of application is an inherent part of the process. And as elsewhere, applicants worried about a blemish on their

record postpone the decision to apply for a later day, which helps explain why naturalization is so protracted even though the residency requirement is slight. Yet, not only do the French impose documentary requirements of a particularly exacting nature, the relevant information is tightly rationed, leaving applicants – even the best educated and most knowledgeable among them – guessing as to the precise nature of the information that has to be furnished. Successful applicants also have to satisfy requirements for linguistic assimilation, for which objective criteria have nowhere been set, though bureaucrats often use applicants' skill in complying with the complicated documentary requirements as an indicator of assimilation. The scope of linguistic assimilation is all too easily expanded to include cultural assimilation, or at least, the bureaucrat's ad hoc assessment as to what comprises the relevant French norm and the degree to which it is met by the applicant. Consequently, attributes bearing no relationship to competence in French – such as the wearing of a veil or other garb indicating adherence to Islam – all too often enter into a sphere where they don't belong, namely the consideration of applicants' degree of linguistic assimilation.

Thus, while viewed as an exemplar of assimilationism, the French state makes immigrant assimilation into the citizenry very hard. Indeed, assimilation *a la française* has historically taken a different form than in classical settler states like the United States or Canada, where naturalization has been both promoted and celebrated, quite unlike the situation in France. In recent years, however, France has taken a page from the settler state's book, initiating naturalization ceremonies to which Mazouz attends in the last major section of her book. Conceptualizing these ceremonies as a "rite of institution," Mazouz highlights their fundamentally ambivalent nature, at once separating those "good" immigrants accepted into the people from their less desirable counterparts remaining outside, yet also separating the immigrants' past membership in a foreign, less desirable people from the new, superior condition obtained as a result of entry into the French nation.

For this reader, the greater contribution of this book – roughly split into halves – stems from the analysis of naturalization procedures and ceremonies. To some extent, the reaction may reflect my own parochial concerns: the troubles of anti-discrimination policies strike me as closely related to the particularities of the French; by contrast, naturalization is an immigration universal, as every democratic country that accepts immigrants needs to find a way of allowing them to enter the citizenry. And having obtained inside access to the process, not simply by virtue of her own experience as an applicant for French citizenship but via observation of interviews between agents and applicants, as well as in-depth interviews with the bureaucrats interacting with applicants and testing their linguistic assimilation, Mazouz's analysis of naturalization conveys unusual insight and provides particular value. Though she doesn't use this language, Mazouz provides an exemplary study of the illiberalism of the putatively liberal immigration states of the west, willing not only to use illiberal means to control access at the territorial border but also to apply illiberal means at the internal border. As this book shows, they do so by discriminating against long-term residents whose extended settlement have turned them into de facto citizens, but

can only become de jure citizens by leaping over the large obstacles to membership that the citizens and their state have put in place.

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