



Citizen Outsider: Racism, Marginalization, and Immigration in France

Jean Beaman

As refugee crises have emerged and immigration has increased in many regions of the world, several Western countries have become highly nationalistic, with debates surrounding border control and citizenship often dominating political conversation. But it's not just newcomers who have raised these discussions. Based on her forthcoming book, this piece by Jean Beaman shows how second-generation immigrants from North Africa in France, who are legally French citizens, get treated as outsiders and denied "cultural citizenship" because of their backgrounds.

At the end of my interview with Djamila in her office in the 8th *arrondissement* near Gare Saint-Lazare in central Paris, the 49-year-old of Algerian origin sighed and said:

"I think we see racism more and more these days in France. When I was younger, I remember some experiences. It all seemed normal... I didn't experience it as much as other people. I remember often hearing "Return to your country." So, people thought that. But you know my country, it is here, so how do you want me to return to my country? I heard that. But today [I hear that] even more... I had thought that as I grew older, that would change, that it would subside, that it would fade. We would no longer mark differences, or distinguish between people. And I see that we do differentiate between people. We do it more and more. And I regret that, I find that sad."

"Differences like what?" I replied.

"For example, there is discrimination. It is not necessary to pretend otherwise, there is discrimination. I mean that for someone named Rachid Ben Something, it is difficult for him to find an internship... Or it is not only a question of a foreign-sounding name, because there is also a territorial racism. If you live in 93 [the administrative number for the Seine-Saint-Denis *département*, the *banlieues* located northeast of Paris], it's the same thing. You have difficulties, you could experience difficulties just because of where you live. So, if we clearly see every day that there are small marks or indications... But I also believe it is because France has not addressed certain problems in its past, it has not always acknowledged its past."

To Djamila, "France belongs to everyone who lives here." She recognizes, however, that this is theory more than practice, as French society places barriers to full inclusion for *Maghrébin*-origin individuals, even those who are "successful" in terms of education and employment and "do everything right."

Despite the racism she witnesses in France, Djamila sees herself just as French as any other French person. She grew up in the 20th *arrondissement*, in the east of Paris, where she continues to live with her partner. She has worked hard to get to her executive-level position in a membership-based association. Yet her success does not shield her from the prejudices and mistreatment shown to her less economically successful North African-origin counterparts. Djamila remains troubled by how other French people still see immigrant-origin individuals as different, as foreigners.

Place Jean Jaurès in Saint-Denis, a northern *banlieue* of Paris



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Djamila is one of the 45 middle-class children of North African, or *Maghrébin*, immigrants I interviewed in Paris and its surrounding *banlieues*, or suburbs.¹ One clear finding is that they are denied cultural citizenship because of their ethnic origins (Beaman 2017). In this context, cultural citizenship means being able to traverse cultural-symbolic boundaries around a particular national identity. This is a corrective to previous theories of immigrant incorporation and second-generation assimilation. The anthropologist Renato Rosaldo (1994) first coined the cultural citizenship framework to refer to how the United States denied Latinos full social inclusion despite their legal citizenship. This framework helps us to understand how descendants of *Maghrébin* immigrants in France are denied inclusion into mainstream society, despite how they feel fully French as a key part of their identity. It demonstrates how individuals like Djamila can be French, but not “French.”

French republicanism and North African migration

French republicanism does not recognize distinctions, including race and ethnicity, among its citizens, despite how French colonialism and the subsequent migration of people from former colonies to France are crucial to understanding racism and marginalization in France. Contrary to its national ethos, some scholars of French history (Kastoryano 2004; Peabody and Stovall 2003; Wieviorka 2003) recognize that France has imposed racial and ethnic boundaries in constructing its national identity. Though emigration from the former French colonies of Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco to France began in the early 1900s, labor demand during World War I brought immigrants

¹ The respondent sample includes 24 men and 21 women with an average age of 32. About 55% of respondents are of Algerian origin, 26% are of Moroccan origin, and 17% are of Tunisian origin. In all, 35% of respondents live in Paris and 65% live in the *banlieues*, mostly the inner-ring *départements* of Seine-Saint-Denis, Val-de-Marne, and Hauts-de-Seine.

from these French colonies en masse to France. These immigrants, expected only to be temporary residents, often settled in the *banlieues* of major cities because they offered cheap housing and factory employment. The number of *Maghrébin* immigrants continued to increase with World War II, the end of France's Fourth Republic in 1958, and the Algerian War of Independence in 1962. According to the French census, more than half of the immigrants who arrived before 1974 came for employment-related reasons, and another third came to join their husbands or family. A substantial segment of the North African second generation descended from this population (Silberman *et al.* 2007).

A primary school in the Paris region, bearing the national motto “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity”



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Because the French census does not ask about race and ethnicity, there is little data on the North African second generation. However, large-scale quantitative studies have combined the data on individuals' country of birth and parents' country of birth to show that 26% of children born to immigrants in France are of *Maghrébin* origin. To be more precise, 14% are of Algerian origin, 9% are of Moroccan origin, and 4% are of Tunisian origin, according to the 1999 Study of Family History. Most research on this population focuses on unequal treatment and discrimination and their disadvantage vis-à-vis “whites,” particularly with regard to educational attainment and labor-market participation (Barou 2014; Meurs *et al.* 2006; Simon 2012).

My study focuses on middle-class children of North African immigrants, who are educated, hold professional types of jobs, and are upwardly mobile compared to their immigrant parents. Yet unlike their white counterparts, middle-class North African-origin individuals do not experience the full advantages of occupying a middle-class status. The *Maghrébin* second generation can achieve upward mobility through education, yet face a “glass ceiling” (Rojas-García 2013), or an inextricable barrier to being seen as truly French. Much research on the second generation in Europe and the United States focuses on the degree to which they are assimilated, acculturated, or

integrated, particularly in terms of specific outcomes (Alba and Waters 2011; Alba and Foner 2015; Crul and Mollenkopf 2012; Waters 2000; Waters *et al.* 2010; Zhou 1997; Zhou and Lee 2007). While Djamilia can be seen as all of these—for example, in terms of educational attainment and achievement of a middle-class status—she is still alienated from mainstream French society because of her *Maghrébin* origins.

***Le plafond de verre* [the glass ceiling] and citizen outsiders**

This “glass ceiling,” or *plafond de verre*, reveals how France is undergoing a racial project (Omi and Winant 1994). This racial project marks different groups of individuals as racially and ethnically distinct. It uses racial categorizations to mark people, or to signify differences among people. This racial project partially stems from France’s colonial history in the Maghreb and elsewhere. It applies racial meaning without officially substantiating racial and ethnic categories, so that it can racialize the North African second generation in a context in which the only meaningful identity is French.

Rue Poulet in Château Rouge, a Parisian neighborhood with significant numbers of residents with African origins



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Members of the North African second generation are “citizen outsiders,” a term which Cathy Cohen (2010) uses to characterize the precarious social locations of African-American youth, in that they are citizens yet treated on the margins of society. The middle-class North African second generation is both inside and outside of the citizenry—they have made it, so to speak, but only to a point, as they are continually reminded of their “suspect” citizenship and often questioned by their fellow citizens. They are denied cultural citizenship from a young age, which continues into

adulthood in a variety of domains, including the workplace, higher education, Islam (in terms of how they negotiate their identities as Muslims when Islam itself is marginalized in France), residential location and how they think about where they live, and the public sphere or everyday public life. They are suspect at both micro and macro levels, from having their identity checked by the police—*les contrôles d'identité*—in public spaces to growing up with few representations of *Maghrébin*-origin individuals in government or popular culture.

For example, Farid, a 29-year-old of Moroccan origin who lives with his family in the western *banlieue* of Poissy, is denied cultural citizenship in relation to employment and his identity as a Muslim. Even though he agrees with the republican tenets of relegating religious practices to the private sphere, coworkers continually remind him of the “strangeness” of being Muslim, such as when he has to explain why he is not eating meat at work dinners because it is not halal. Farid feels his experiences in the workplace are more difficult because of his North African origins. “As soon as we make an effort,” he explained, “we find a wall in front of us... As for me, I had a lot of trouble finding my first job after I finished school. It took 1½ years for me to find my first job, but my classmates who were named François, Édouard, Frédéric, it took them six months or four months to find a job, but for me it took 1½ years.” Until recently, Farid had a successful career working at a bank. He was laid off due to the economic crisis. Yet Farid was quick to note that the bank only laid off *Maghrébin* workers; white coworkers who started their jobs after him were not laid off. He remembers one of his colleagues suggesting he change his name to one that is more traditionally French, like Pierre or Jacques. He was encouraged to hide one marker of his difference—here, his North African-sounding name—in order to fit in. “They don’t want me, they tell me to integrate. Me, I don’t want to integrate,” Farid explained. “I am French, I don’t need to integrate, I was born in France, I respect the laws of the Republic... but they still tell us, ‘No, you are not French. You will never be French.’ They tell us that because our parents have foreign origins and that automatically we do too... we are sometimes obligated to hide our differences as if we are ashamed of them. But I’ve arrived at an age when I tell myself, ‘It’s my difference.’ I am not looking to put it out front, but I don’t want people to tell me to hide it.”

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