

*Articulating the “Problem of
Immigration”:* Nationalism and
*Dominant Mythological Formations
around Immigration in France*

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Introduction

Over the past few years, rising nationalism has widely been discussed as a prominent phenomenon of the global landscape. From the elections of Donald Trump in the United States, Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey, and Narendra Modi in India to the Brexit and the rise of far-right parties across Europe—in Italy, Austria, Hungary, Finland, Sweden, Spain, France, and elsewhere—the momentum of nationalist and populist politics has been felt across the globe and become visible through

“the rise of new parties, the electoral success of nationalist candidates, or the shift of public discourse of established parties” (Bieber 2018). In France, rising nationalism has manifested itself through the consistent growing presence of the far-right party Rassemblement National (RN), but also and—maybe even more significantly—through the spread of nationalist rhetoric, issues, and politics across the political spectrum and beyond parties such as the RN that are traditionally nationalist and security-centered. In particular, one issue that simultaneously reveals and fuels the rise of nationalism, as it has dominantly been articulated as one of the strongest threats to the Nation and the national community, is immigration.

The construction of immigration as a threat to the Nation and its “natives” is not a new phenomenon. The widespread popularization of different types of myths constructing immigration as a problem or a threat first occurred during the late decades of the 19th century, during the later stages of development of France as a nation-state and a period of strong expansion of nationalist frameworks (Noiriel 2007). Today, in a global and national context marked by globalization and the intensification of migratory movements, mythological formations that articulate immigration as a threat are made particularly salient as the “problem of immigration” prevails in the political and cultural landscapes and finds itself at the center of public conversation, political

debate, media discourse and electoral campaigns. This understanding of and approach to immigration leads to increasingly nationalist and security-centered policies and logics of exclusion¹.

Whether in the past or in the contemporary context, the “problem of immigration” stands as the crystallization of mythological formations enabled by and entangled in situated, concrete, material phenomena, articulated as threats to the existence, wellbeing, or preeminence of the Nation and of the national community. As such, the “problem of immigration” simultaneously reveals and fuels virulent nationalism. In this paper, I deconstruct three types of mythological formations that have articulated immigration as a threat to the Nation: mythological formations that 1. frame immigration as a threat to economic and material welfare, 2. frame immigration as a threat to social peace and security, and 3. frame immigration as a threat to national identity. My analysis is informed by the method and theory of articulation as

1 Since 2017, the centrist government of Emmanuel Macron has consistently toughened its stance on immigration, which critics have widely interpreted as a way of appealing to right- and far right-wing voters. Recent measures and policies include the implementation of quotas for economic immigration, the stricter and faster implementation of deportation procedures as well as the widening of criteria for deportation, increased restrictions applied to healthcare access for asylum seekers, and consistent dismantling and “clearing” of migrant camps (Vie Publique 2018, Fisne 2019, Onishi 2019, Piser 2019, Lhaik 2021).

developed in cultural studies (e.g. Hall 1986; Slack 1996; 2016), as well as a Barthesian conceptualization of myth, which I will define in the following section.

On the Concepts of Myth and Articulation

Contemporary scholarship on immigration and nationalism is rich and prolific. Important work is done at the macro-analytic level which engages state actors, national politics and international relations, and economics and historical perspectives, exploring and deconstructing mechanisms of immigration control and policies (Kaushal 2019; Hollifield 2020), the use and implications of discourses around immigration and nationalism by populist parties (Yilmaz 2012; Lochocki 2018; Halikiopoulou 2019), as well as different frameworks of nationalism, their ramifications and ethical limitations (Triandafyllidou 2001; Larin 2020; Joppke 2020). A substantial body of literature also engages with survey and public opinion research to identify and analyze popular attitudes towards immigration and nationalism in the contemporary context: looking at citizens' sense of nationhood, sense of identification with Europe, and their attitudes towards immigration (Bonikowski 2017; Visintin et al. 2018; Gustavsson and Miller 2020; Coenders et al. 2021), exploring the relations between citizens' exposure to immigration and their attitudes to the topic (Clayton et al. 2021), exploring connections between the level of skills of immigrants and citizens' nationalistic

attitudes (Moriconi et al. 2021), investigating the impact of the refugee crisis on attitudes towards immigration and national identification in Europe (Conti et al. 2019; Van der Brug and Harteveld 2021), or comparing the stability of immigration attitudes with other contemporary potent socio-cultural issues such as gender egalitarianism (Lancaster 2020).

Looking at immigration and nationalism through the framework of myth, such as developed by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* (1972), offers a perspective that complements the macro-analytic and survey-based, quantitative literature, in that it engages more closely with the cultural domain and the mechanisms of cultural imagination. Myth offers a lens through which one can better understand and deconstruct a particular context by giving insight into the processes of formation of collective values, fears and aspirations, and their implications. It enables to uncover the historical and political dimensions of those dominant premises and narratives that stand out in a particular cultural context as commonsensical, natural, and almost unquestionable.

Barthes (1972) defines myth as a “semiological system” (a system of signs) and a “type of speech” (that is, “any significant unit or synthesis, whether verbal or visual”) that conveys particular meaning in a given context (109). A few key aspects of Barthes’s definition of myth are especially relevant to this analysis. The idea that myth is

a “type of speech” entails two things: 1. that anything “conveyed by a discourse” can become a myth; and 2. that myths have a “historical foundation”: therefore, they can be ancient or recent, strong or weak, they can change, they are not eternal, they are not fixed (ibid., 108, 119). In addition, and most importantly, myth has a distorting function: “it transforms history into nature” (ibid., 128). Myths de-historicize their own foundations, and as such seem to carry obvious, immediate, and present significance that disavows historical complexities. In myth, the historical-cultural associations that are made between a signifier (form) and a signified (concept) become naturalized. In this way, myth is perceived as “innocent speech” and constructed as “depoliticized speech” (ibid., 142). According to Barthes, “myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact” (ibid., 143). The power of myth thus lies in the fact that “myth is read as a factual system” whereas it is a “semiological system”; that is, a “system of values”: through myth, nature supplants culture (ibid., 130). However, myths should not simply be understood as “widely accepted falsehoods” (Rodman 1996, 30). As Gilbert Rodman (1996) puts it, “one of the things that distinguishes ‘myth’ from ‘fact’ isn’t that the latter (‘fact’) is true and the former (‘myth’) isn’t, but that the truth value of facts can [generally] be readily

verified, while the truth value of myths isn't necessarily subject to straightforward proof or disproof" (31).

I use myth to refer to the various cultural and semiotic associations, or articulations, that emerge from factual and material events and experiences, and that "naturally," or "commonsensically" come with the word immigration. In addition, I refer to *mythological formations* as clusters of myths—myths that intersect, interact, nourish each other, and articulate complex formations that become frames of intelligibility. Developing an analysis focused on myth and mythical formations enables to highlight the ways in which semiotic connections are grounded in historical contexts and events that become erased, thus naturalizing and depoliticizing those connections through discourse. Myth explains why factual, "evidence-driven" discourse can remain ineffectual in framing and understanding particular issues or events. It helps explain and deconstruct particular cultural approaches and ways of making sense of concrete phenomena. I combine this definition with the concept articulation, that enhances the interconnectedness and dynamic character of myths.

Scholars in cultural studies have proposed articulation as a concept, methodological framework, or theory of linkage (Slack 1996, 113). Scholarship around the theory and/or method of articulation has mostly been influenced by the work of Stuart Hall, who famously defines

articulation as “the form of a connection or link that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions” (1986, 53). Jennifer Slack (2016) writes that “the rudimentary insight in articulation theory is that any unity (or identity) is constituted in and by linkages with other elements or forces in a social formation” (2). Articulations are linkages, relationships, connections between various elements that constitute a particular unity or identity in a particular context. They are linkages that are “not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time” (Hall 2016, 121). Articulations are thus ongoing processes of linkage which can be broken, transformed, re-created in ever changing historical contexts and situations. Unities are constructed through and by processes of articulation, but also through and by processes of disarticulation and re-articulation. Articulation is a “theory of context” that enables one to look at “how elements in a social formation are linked,” emphasizes “the process of linking elements together” and considers “the unities (or identities) formed in and by the process of linking elements together” (Slack 2016, 1). In other words, articulation serves to “map out” a context by identifying and analyzing the unities or identities that bring the context into being, as well as the links that form those unities, while recognizing that they are always in the process of being constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed. In this essay, I focus on the articulation of various types of myths into mythological formations that stand out as hegemonic frameworks

through which immigration is approached and understood. To that purpose, I also attempt to “map out” some of the cultural and political context that enables the articulation of particular myths constructing immigration as a threat or a problem. The first mythological formation that I turn to revolves around the economic and material implications of immigration, as the opposition between immigration and the Nation’s economic and material welfare is historically one of the first and most powerful formations articulating immigration as a threat.

Immigration as a Threat to Economic and Material Welfare

Debates around immigration often come with myriads of postulations as to what immigration will *cost*: whether literally, in terms of a country’s economic, material and financial resources, more metaphorically, in terms of the wellbeing of the national-citizen population, or both, as these two aspects often come closely articulated with one another. Looking at discourses around immigration in the French public sphere today, the myth that immigration occurs at the detriment of the national-citizen population (and in particular of its lower classes) in terms of economic and material welfare is strikingly prevalent. The construction of an opposition between the economic and material welfare of the Nation and its “natives” and that of immigrant populations is histori-

cally well-entrenched, and it has structured immigration discourses and practices since the late 19th century and the very emergence of the “problem of immigration” in the public sphere (Noiriel 2007). It continues to be potent in the contemporary cultural landscape around immigration. This opposition has been articulated through myths according to which foreign workers deprive the national-citizen population of employment and, more recently, through myths according to which foreigners use up welfare resources at the detriment of the average citizen.

The ideas that “immigrants take national jobs” and that “there would be less unemployment if there was less immigration” are commonly expressed and encountered today, even though they have been factually disproved (de Blin 2013; Harnouze 2012). Historically, in France, the concern with the protection of national employment has been an important aspect of (anti-) immigration discourses and policies, and arguably emerged as one of the first articulations of the “problem of immigration” in the public space. Gerard Noiriel (2007; 2008) finds that the emergence of the “problem of immigration” is inherently tied to the dramatic reconfiguration of the French political landscape that occurred in the 19th century, paired with the completion of important processes of nationalization of the country, and the emergence of a widely accepted conception of France as a nation-state across all classes of the population. In this context, he

argues, recurrent conflicts between local and migrant workers during the last decades of the 19th century began to be looked at through a *national* lens. More specifically, the question of immigration and its impact on national jobs emerged in the political and public spheres following a particularly violent movement against Italian industry workers in Marseille, in 1881 (Liens 1967, 14). Known as the *Vêpres Marseillaises* affair, the conflict marked the emergence of immigration-related issues in the press, framed in nationalist terms. According to Noiriél (2007, 2008), the abundant press coverage of topics related to labor conflicts between local and migrant workers, relevant to a great portion of lower- and working-class populations, was a powerful way to expand the reach of nationalistic narratives to all classes of the French population and was part of the larger process of nationalization of the country. The concern with the protection of employment, structured for the first time in terms of a national/foreigner dichotomy, appeared as an effective vector for mobilizing lower- and working-class groups to that end and framed immigration as an inherent problem, even threat, to the French population.

The nationalistic binaries that emerged in the late 19th century, tied to the later stages of the construction of France as a nation-state, are “lines of tendential force” that articulate the hegemonic understanding of immigration today (Slack and Wise 2007). The myth that

immigration is a menace to national (blue-collar) jobs continues to be potent and powerful, as it circulates and emerges in (anti-)immigration discourses despite factual counterarguments and evidence presented to disprove it, and despite the fact that economic immigration is strictly regulated, precisely in order to preserve national employment. This simultaneously reveals the importance of the myth in concrete approaches to immigration, and its persistence.

Additionally, in the contemporary context, the discursive opposition between immigration and the economic and material welfare of the Nation and its population is articulated by and through a few other pervasive myths and narratives. Immigration is more often than not approached in superficial cost-benefit terms where what would benefit migrant populations is deemed too big a sacrifice for the national-citizen population. The ongoing claims of dominant right-wing parties for the need to suppress or restrict the *aide médicale d'état* (AME), a social benefit that exists to cover some medical expenses of undocumented or irregular foreigners, are a good example of this type of perspective and its prevalence in contemporary immigration discourses. Although AME expenses only represented 0.5% of the French health insurance fund (*Assurance Maladie*) total expenses in 2019, and although multiple restrictions already apply to be eligible to get the benefit, les Républicains and Rassemblement National both argue that it is too large an

expense, that it is robbing French nationals of their own resources, and that it furthers the growth of so-called “medical tourism,” nourishing the myth that foreigners seek to come to France to use (and abuse) its advantageous healthcare system (Binhas 2021; Costard and Savoye 2019; Rassemblement National 2018).

These lines of argument tie into the wider myth, prevalent in anti-immigration discourses, that foreigners have easy and unlimited access to social welfare—in particular healthcare and housing—without contributing to society, and that this access is to the detriment (material and financial) of the national-citizen population. The narrative has even been pushed further as the status of undocumented/irregular migrant populations has been put at odds by some political leaders with that of poor, lower-class or marginalized French citizens. During the 2019 European elections campaign, Marine Le Pen stated in a speech that “incoming migrants make more money than a retired pensioner who has worked his entire life” (Le Pen 2019). In 2017, Nicolas Bay, Vice-President of Rassemblement National and representative at the European assembly, tweeted his indignation regarding the “fact” that “in the middle of winter, illegal migrants stay in hotels while the homeless sleep on the street” (Bay 2017). Such types of claims, amplified by the media, have generated ongoing national controversies and conversations around the presupposed abundance of resources made available to undocumented migrants upon

their arrival, as opposed to the lack of resources made available to other national-citizen groups in need.

These myths that contribute to articulating a dominant discursive opposition between immigration and the economic and material welfare of French citizens simultaneously frame any sort of humanistic approach to immigration negatively, as a form of unrealistic bourgeois fantasy. This has been a distinctive rhetorical strategy in contemporary far-right discourses around immigration: anyone who does not seek to solve the “problem of immigration” by implementing stricter immigration policies is oblivious or indifferent to the precarious material realities of the lower classes of the population. Within that line of argument, being “in favor” of immigration becomes a symbol of privilege and of higher social status—a sign of one’s belonging to the elite, whose standpoint on immigration shows the lack of care and consideration for authentic hard-working people. Although such populist appeals and mythological constructions generally emerge from right and far-right discourses, they have also been taken on by other parties and structure debates around immigration in significant ways, as their opponents find themselves responsible for disproving, deconstructing, and arguing against them. This illustrates how, despite their non-factual nature, mythological constructions become part of arguments that hold sway in public debates, and against which factual discourses and arguments often remain quite powerless.

This equally holds true for the mythological formation that I turn to in the following section, and which articulates immigration as a threat to the wellbeing of the Nation and its native community through myths that revolve around crime and insecurity.

Immigration as a Threat to Social Peace and Security

The articulation of immigration as a threat to social peace and security is a powerful, dynamic and complex construction shaped by the articulation of various cultural-historical myths. It is certainly not exclusive to France: the premise that immigration threatens and disrupts social peace and security has broad ramifications, easily visible in immigration discourses and policies across the world. In the case of France, myths associating crime, violence, terrorism, and the *banlieues* are especially potent in the contemporary context.

The association between immigration and crime is not peculiar to contemporary discourses or approaches to immigration. Rather, it stands out as another “line of tendential force” that articulates the hegemonic understanding of immigration. Historians who have studied media representation and public discourses around immigrant populations in the 19th and 20th century in France find that foreigners were dominantly represented

as aggressors and criminals—vagabonds, spies, traitors, charlatans, and so forth. Noiriél (2007; 2008) talks about the emergence of a “figure of the barbarian” in the press and in educational materials of the time, that clearly articulates foreignness to criminality. He ties the emergence of this figure to both the expansion of nationalist/ic frameworks and the particular media economy of the late 19th century—when reporting and sensationalizing crime emerged as a powerful means to audience maximization. Today, and taken out of their particular historical context, figures like foreign spies or itinerant peddlers that linked immigration, crime and insecurity at the time might appear less relevant: the suspicion of foreign spies, for example, is less prevalent in the current cultural landscape than it was during parts of the 19th and 20th centuries. But it is not difficult to think about contemporary figures of the (im)migrant that maintain and nourish an articulation between immigration and crime in the 21st century—the prevalence of discourses about terrorism on the one hand and illegal migration on the other, for example, offer viable insights into what those figures may be.

In the case of France, the ongoing question of the *banlieues* also stands out as one of the most visible and powerful formations through which immigration, crime, violence and terrorism are invariably articulated together in political and media discourse. The word “banlieue” itself has a long history and no simple meaning. It

could roughly and in its most literal sense be translated as “suburb”, referring to the neighborhoods or townships peripheral to a large city. In usage though, *banlieue* refers more often to a “vaguely urban zone that is on the margin and folds onto itself”: it refers to a form of spatial entity but connotes social peripheralism more than it does spatial peripheralism (Vieillard-Baron 2011). In common usage, especially in media and mainstream political discourse, “banlieue” refers to those “problematic” urban areas in the periphery of large cities, where the majority of people are immigrants or “come from immigration” (the difference is rarely made in public discourse), and where poverty, crime, delinquency, insecurity and violence are particularly salient. In itself, the banlieue is a complex mythological construction that gives a particular set of meanings to real and concrete social phenomena: it appears as the crystallization of all the social problems that weigh down French society (Avenel 2009).

Media and political discourses since the 1980s have linked the “problem of the *banlieues*” with the “problem of immigration” (Avenel 2009). Various experts, intellectuals, politicians and journalists have contributed to the establishment of a relationship of causality between the social problems that characterize the *banlieues*—crime, delinquency, violence, poverty—and immigrant populations. Many have consistently entertained the idea that if areas where immigrant populations are

concentrated are the most affected by these problems, it is at least partly because of these populations themselves (Liogier 2012). As several scholars have pointed out, that relation of correspondence is (unsurprisingly) flawed and false—criminality and violence levels rise with higher levels of poverty, and high levels of poverty are predominantly concentrated in those urban areas where immigrant populations live (Liogier 2012; Hajjat and Mohammed 2013). Nonetheless, in dominant media and political narratives, criminality, violence and other social phenomena more salient in the banlieues are explicitly associated with the ethnic and cultural identity of banlieue populations, rather than with the social realities (poverty, unemployment, lack of access to public services in those urban areas) that affect those populations (Cesari 2005; Deltombe 2007).

More particularly, in the 21st century, the focus has increasingly been on the articulation of the *banlieues* as self-segregated communities where religious radicalism and terrorism emerge. The notion of self-segregation is omnipresent today through the word *communautarisme*, which is used to broadly refer to the affirmation of ethnic, cultural or religious differences by a few minorities over the rest of society or, in the recent words of Emmanuel Macron, to a separatism, a “will of secession from the Republic” (“Macron appelle...” 2019). Debates over the threat of *communautarisme*, most often targeting the Muslim community, have thus dominated

conversations about immigration and the *banlieues*, with the various terrorist attacks of recent years held as tangible evidence that the phenomenon is real. In 2021, the bill on separatism proposed by the Macron government seems to concretize these discourses. Aiming at “fighting separatisms,” “strengthening secularism” and “consolidating Republican principles,” the bill includes several measures that have raised controversy in France and internationally: restricting homeschooling on the grounds that it favors Islamic radicalism; intensifying oversight of religious practices and of organizations; reinforcing the principles of secularism neutrality by forbidding public service providers to wear any sign of their religion, and more. Numerous major organizations, as well as various academics, administrators and journalists, have opposed the bill, criticizing its security-centered rationale and arguing that it “will further fragment French society” on top of “throwing generalized suspicion against the Muslim community” (Ligue des Droits de l’Homme 2021). In contrast, conservative leaders consistently claim that “there is a link between terrorism and immigration” and that “immigration, communitarianism and Islamism” are directly related, perspectives that seem to be shared by the political majority (“Attentat...” 2021; les Républicains 2021).

The construction of immigration as a threat to social peace and security principally occurs through the articulation of myths that link immigration to crime, violence

and terrorism, crystallized in dominant discourses and narratives around the French banlieues. Through these associations, immigration emerges as a cause of insecurity, but also as a cause of fragmentation of French society through recent discourses on *communautarisme* and the said self-segregation of *banlieue* populations. The cultural identity of these populations is framed as inherently problematic to French society in terms of its physical security, but also in terms of the very identity of the Nation. In the following section, I deconstruct the ways in which immigration is articulated as a threat to national identity.

Immigration as a Threat to National Identity

National identity is a mythological formation that is inherently tied to the ideal of the Nation, and that has been utilized by conservative leaders pushing nationalist, anti-immigration discourses and policies into the mainstream in recent decades. The articulation of immigration as a threat to national identity occurs through and by myths that hold the figure of the (im)migrant as inherently inassimilable to the values and culture of the Nation. Today, as I will describe, this construction is most visible in debates and policies that antagonize French secularism (*laïcité*) and Islam, constructed as the most incompatible identity factor of immigrant populations.

During the 2007 Presidential elections, Nicolas Sarkozy made national identity a central theme of his electoral campaign, an act widely described in the media at the time as the “return” of debates around national identity in France. Vincent Martigny (2009) finds that Sarkozy’s presentation of national identity during the campaign was centered around three main themes: 1. the assimilation of the Nation to French Republican principles (following the Constitution of 1958 which states that “France is a Republic that is indivisible, secular (*laïque*), democratic and social”), which asserts preeminence of civic principles and values over ethnocultural ones; 2. the refutation of colonial memory and the celebration and glorification of French history; and 3. the injunction to cultural assimilation for foreigners and the implementation of immigration policies aimed at further restricting access to residence and citizenship (Martigny 2009, 33-34; Bonichou 2006). Once he became President, the creation of the Ministry of Immigration, Integration, National Identity and Co-development—which was one of his electoral promises—raised controversy and faced strong opposition coming from parties of the Left, academics, journalists, and the nonprofit sector, who denounced the creation of the Ministry as the institutionalization of xenophobia and racism. The Ministry was abolished by the government in 2010, and while some critics saw that as the proof that its creation was just part of Sarkozy’s electoral strategy, others deplored that Immigration was then placed under the umbrella of the

Ministry of Internal Affairs (Ministère de l'Intérieur), thus clearly linking immigration to questions of national security (Vampouille 2010).

What is interesting about Sarkozy's discourses and actions, aside from the demonstration of how to bind immigration to national identity, is that his approach highlights the way in which the Nation has been conceptualized more broadly in French political history. Martigny highlights how Sarkozy's approach to national identity continued the discourses and practices carried out by political leaders since the 1970s, both on the Right and on the Left, and further shows that his presentation of national identity was "extremely typical of an authoritarian civic republicanism inscribed in French tradition" (2009, 24). Historians and political science researchers have long explored and analyzed the processes of formation of the Nation and national identity in France. The works of Noiriel (2007), Thiesse (2007), and Martigny (2009) highlight two foundational myths of the Nation that can be traced back to the late 18th century: one that holds it as a political entity structured around republican, universalist values and principles, that assimilates nationality to citizenship; and the other that holds it as a cultural entity through an emphasis on French history and the idea of an exceptional and unique cultural heritage and identity. The Nation is thus articulated as a unified, indivisible, homogeneous entity structured by fixed and unquestionable civic principles

(democracy, secularism, and so forth) and by (often glorified and romanticized) cultural elements that construct Frenchness—among them the French language, particular events and figures in French history, an imagined French “way of life”, etc.).

In discourses around immigration, the mobilization of these myths of the Nation thus easily pose immigration as a problem or as a threat, in the sense that any body external to this “imagined community” can bear cultural differences that may compromise or disrupt its fixed, “core” identity (Anderson 1983). It is precisely this line of argument that Nicolas Sarkozy and other members of the political and intellectual elite have brought forward over the past decades, as new migration phenomena have emerged and anxiety around globalization has continued to intensify. The emphasis on the “incompatibility” of migrant populations with French society, grounded in the presupposed cultural identity of these populations, has become increasingly central to debates around immigration. Coupled with the pervasive idea that immigration has significantly and uncontrollably been increasing over the past years (a widespread, but false belief), it directly articulates immigration as the executioner of national identity, and even of Western civilization at large.

In particular, the “incompatibility” or “inassimilable” character of immigrant populations to the Nation and

its identity have been articulated in the 21st century through discourses that antagonize French Republican principles (especially the idea of secularism) and Islam. One of the vectors of the myth of immigration as a threat to national identity has, in fact, undeniably been centered on Islam—or rather on *Islamism*, that is, “Islam as an enemy ideology rather than Islam as a religion” (Fieschi 2020). The spread of a nationwide anti-Islam or anti-Muslim sentiment and the emergence of conversations on the place of Islam in French society are commonly situated in the late 1970s and early 1980s, almost two decades after postcolonial immigrants were first largely recruited to fill the demand for cheap workforce (Deltombe 2007; Liogier 2012). The 1990s and the first decades of the 21st century have been marked by countless controversies, several legislative and juridical measures, and the anchoring of discourses around Islam/ism as a threat to national security and identity in electoral campaigns.

Controversies on the “Islamic veil,” as it is called in French, started in 1989 with the Creil affair, when three middle schoolers were suspended from school as they refused to remove their headscarf. In 2004, a law was passed to prohibit students in public schools to wear “signs or clothing through which [they] ostensibly express any religious affiliation” (Art. L.141-5-1; Loi 2004-228; 2004). Since 2006, ongoing conversations on whether mothers who wear the “Islamic veil” should be

allowed to attend school meetings and other extracurricular events have divided both political leaders and public opinion. In the early 2010s, conversations on whether long skirts constitute an “ostensible” religious sign have followed the expulsion of a few Muslim girls from their respective schools. Since 2017, each summer, controversies arise around the Burkini, a full body covering swimsuit now prohibited in several townships. At the core of these debates is always the premise that the Republican principle of secularism (*laïcité*) is threatened or violated by the religious practices of Muslims, which is framed and understood as a problem not only by the Right, but across the political spectrum as a whole (Fieschi 2020). And if the events described here essentially target Muslim women and their bodies, other topics—such as halal food in school cafeterias, the construction of Mosques, the prayer, the offering of Arabic as a foreign language in schools—are also consistently brought forward and presented as both immediate threats to French secularism and signs that France is undergoing a process of “islamisation” synonymous with the loss of national identity, and caused by immigration (Liogier 2012). In addition to these discourses, the ongoing conversations and current legislative measures taken against Islamist radicalism and terrorism (discussed in 2.) add to the formation of a strong prejudice against Muslim minorities in the contemporary context.

Conclusion

Myths that dominate the contemporary social, political and cultural landscape on the question of immigration and that articulate immigration as a threat or problem in various ways are deeply rooted in France's history, and more particularly in the later developments of its formation as a nation-state. The emergence of an ideal of the Nation, and the development and spread of nationalist frameworks in the 19th and 20th centuries, have structured the ways in which foreignness, ethnic and cultural diversity, and migration are hegemonically approached in French society. Whether in the past or in the contemporary context, the myths that have shaped the "problem of immigration" are enabled by, and entangled in, situated, concrete, material phenomena collectively approached and represented as threats to the existence, wellbeing, or preeminence of the Nation and of the national community. Three dominant mythological formations that have shaped the "problem of immigration" since the late 19th century, and that continue to be active and prevalent today, are articulated by discourses and myths on economic and material welfare, social peace and security, as well as national identity.

Discourses focused on the economic aspect of immigration are often grounded in populist appeals and a strong discursive opposition between the material wellbeing of national-citizen groups and that of (im)migrant popula-

tions. Discourses that focus on social peace and security, typical of conservative approaches to immigration and international affairs, have established a powerful mythological connection between immigration, crime and insecurity, most visible and active today through debates and legislation on the banlieues, separatism, and Islamist terrorism. Finally, discourses focused on national identity emphasize an incompatibility, a form of inassimilable character of the (im)migrant grounded in a different cultural identity, assumed and represented to be fundamentally at odds with French culture and Republican values. In 2021, Islam/ism stands out as the vector that most powerfully articulates this myth, as the fear of an “islamisation” of French society has become one of the most powerful anti-immigration arguments.

There is no doubt that myths of the Nation are not the only “lines of tendential force” that have articulated the “problem of immigration” in France. The three anti-immigration narratives analyzed in this essay emerge from nationalist frameworks, interwoven with other forces that are historically situated. Frameworks of white supremacy, colonialism, eurocentrism and orientalism are constitutive of the ways in which difference and foreignness have been approached and constructed. Today’s fixation on Islam and the Muslim community, for example, needs to be understood in a broader framework that considers French colonization and decolonization, post-colonial immigration, the politicization of Islam at

the global scale, and the Eurocentric and orientalist bodies of knowledge and frameworks articulated to those events.

In addition, the dominant mythological formations that articulate the “problem of immigration” today in France are likely to be found and echoed beyond the French national context. If nationalist frameworks and discourses have historical peculiarities and mechanisms attached to the construction of particular Nations, immigration—by posing questions of inclusion and exclusion inherently attached to the concept of nation-state—easily finds itself at the center of nationalist discourses and politics, regardless of the individual context of a nation. One might find that the mythological formations that articulate the “problem of immigration” in France operate elsewhere in similar ways. For example, they might echo powerful narratives and discourses on immigration found in other individual European countries, or discourses found at the level of the European Union. Further, the impact, influence, or role of a supranational entity such as the European Union in the articulation of dominant and nationalist myths and narratives around immigration, is certainly consequent and also worth exploring.

Finally, 21st century discourses and practices around the “problem of immigration” point out the resurgence of strong nationalist frameworks that increasingly seem to

be pushed into the mainstream. As Anne-Marie Thiesse (2009) argues, the ideal of the Nation provides a lens through which one can understand a particular context that is complex and difficult to grasp. It stands as a hegemonic formation that has provided frameworks for organizing and making sense of French society as a nation-state, constructed for several centuries as a “territorially bound” community with a unique national identity (Mendelsohn 2017). In the face of unprecedented historical circumstances that seem to challenge the foundations of the nation-state, nationalism emerges as an attempt to preserve the ideal of the Nation and the frameworks of meaning-making that it provides. This is certainly true beyond the French context and its particularities, as the rise of nationalist frameworks, discourses and politics appears to be a global phenomenon. But as globalization and migration are contemporary phenomena that call for new ways of understanding and organizing our societies, it becomes increasingly necessary to think and develop frameworks of intelligibility that break with the systems of dominance and oppression attached to virulent nationalism.

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