

Overcoming the Identity Divide

Article by François Gemenne

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Reducing the debate on immigration to a question of statistics allows us to forget that behind these numbers are real people. This now dominant framing of the debate illustrates the success of the far right in setting the narrative on migration within the political agenda. If we do not move beyond this narrow understanding of migration, with its fixation on national borders and security, we are doomed to remain locked in to an endless debate, exploited for political gain, while the genuinely pressing crises of our age remain neglected.

Much ink has been spilt in the French press about February's TV debate between Marine Le Pen and Gérald Darmanin, France's interior minister. For most, the debate's most memorable moment was the slanging match that saw the minister acknowledge that his opponent was "republican", but "too soft" and "wobbly" on issues surrounding Islam, while Le Pen claimed that she herself "could have written" the minister's book on Islamist separatism.

It was another exchange that stuck in my head, however, one that delighted the detractors of Madame Le Pen: the moment when she claimed that, in 2019, France issued 461,000 residence permits to foreigners. She was immediately corrected by the minister and the two journalists hosting the debate, Léa Salamé and Thomas Sotto, who promptly pulled out a graph showing that France had in fact "only" granted 277,000 permits in that year, visibly pleased to have caught out Le Pen.

But what would have happened if Marine Le Pen had been wrong in the other direction? If she had under-estimated the number of residence permits? It's a safe bet that nobody would have corrected her or would only have done so discreetly. And the president of the Rassemblement National party would have been only too happy to express her horror at this underestimate. The takeaway from the programme was that an effective immigration policy is necessarily a restrictive one; that is vital to show "that we don't grant as many residence permits as all that". But make no mistake: the Rassemblement National's goal was for this graph to be shown on air, without further explanation. Because that's the image that sticks in the viewer's mind: whether it's 277,000 or 461,000, it's a lot, it's too much, and it keeps getting bigger and bigger.

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Although we're talking about legal immigration, we never say who these people are. They are students (33 per cent), and spouses or children who joining their families (32 per cent). These two categories alone account for two thirds of immigration.^[1] The rest are people

recruited by French employers (14 per cent), or people in danger in their own countries to whom we're providing protection. But the gross figure gives the impression of a homogenous group whose size must be cut at all costs. It's never mentioned that, if numbers are rising, it's also because our universities are attracting more foreign students, there are more and more mixed-nationality couples, our economy is more dynamic and we're protecting more people. We worry that France is attracting foreigners, rather than celebrating the fact.

Migrants, plural

If we're now obsessed with immigration numbers, it's because we always talk about the people behind them in the plural: foreigners, migrants, illegal immigrants, refugees... We imagine a homogenous, cohesive group, which makes it threatening, whereas most immigrants don't know one another. They come from very different places, under very different conditions, and for very different reasons, but that's generally enough for us to view them as different from ourselves.

We talk about immigrants as if their legal status were an integral part of their identity, and even as if this status were passed on to their children: we talk about "second- or third-generation immigrants", yet these concepts having no legal meaning, and simply reduce those so defined to their status as foreigners.

Because we view them as different from ourselves, we are quite willing to project onto them particular qualities: if we're pro-immigration, we see in each migrant an opportunity for France, perhaps even a potential Nobel laureate or an Olympic gold medallist. And if we're anti-immigration, we see in each migrant a burden for the public purse, or a threat to social cohesion, or even national security. Both of these are normative judgments. While seemingly opposed, each view mutually reinforces the other: both reduce immigrants to their status as migrants and limit them to it.

Furthermore, in French we now talk of *migrants* rather than *immigrés*, as if the use of the present participle – instead of the past participle – reassures us that these migrants are just passing through, have no intention to settle and will never be part of the national community. Indeed, the makeshift camps that migrants set up are now systematically destroyed to prevent them from becoming a permanent feature in the area and thereby visible to all.

Pull-factor theory, a nebulous concept now accepted by much of the political class, posits that, for immigrants, the choice of destination country is above all determined by the reception conditions in that country. Despite the concept having been long disproven by countless empirical studies, successive governments have continued to worsen reception conditions for migrants, convinced – wrongly – that this will discourage new arrivals.

A managerial approach to migration

Reducing immigration to mere numbers on flows and levels has logically led to a managerial approach where the emphasis is on control. From looking at figures on deportations or successful asylum claims over the years, you would be hard pressed to tell apart the actions of any government, regardless of stripe.

Having failed to come up with any real policy on immigration or asylum, left-wing governments have become stuck in a meaningless “tough but humane” approach where management take precedence over policy, at pains to show they are not “softer” than right-wing administrations. Controlling flows and borders has for the most part replaced a welcoming immigration policy, with disastrous results: over 20,000 migrants have drowned in the Mediterranean since 2014, a situation that many have resigned themselves to.

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This absence of an immigration and asylum policy, an absence which dehumanises migrants by reducing them to mere numbers, has its roots in an astonishing political oversight: the right to freedom of movement. Collectively, we remain prisoners of what I call the “immobility paradigm”: we are unable to let go of the idea that, in an ideal world, everyone would stay where they lived, and there would be no migration.

This leads us to see migration as a temporary phenomenon, a problem to solve or a crisis to manage. And, seen through this lens, migration is clearly an example of political anomie[2]. “The State, a sedentary construction, is by its very nature contemptuous of the nomad,” writes François De Smet[3]. We are faced with a political misapprehension: if migration is an example of anomie, why are we surprised at our inability to develop an immigration and asylum policy worthy of the name? Why are we surprised that the mentality is to accept as few people as possible, in the harshest possible conditions? Why are we surprised at our desire to make immigration invisible?

Yet it is hard to admit the profoundly structural character of migration: to do so would mean recognising the pointlessness of policies that try to resist this; it would mean recognising that it isn’t how open or closed borders are that determines migration.

Division on the Left

In the absence of a political vision for immigration on either the left or the right of the political spectrum, the far right has filled the void, setting the agenda on the issue ever since. The very moment that, following the Front National’s electoral success in 1984, then prime minister Laurent Fabius conceded the party had “asked the right questions, but offered the wrong answers”, he cast the far right in the role of asking the questions and resigned democratic parties to providing the answers. Since then, the far right’s vision of migration has dominated the political and media agenda. Its mindset, concepts, and vocabulary have gradually contaminated the entire public debate and are now widely expressed by nativist commentators.

As for the Left, since the mid-1980s it has fallen back to a strictly reactive position on these matters. Incapable of providing leadership on immigration and asylum, in opposing the far right it has done little more than throw up roadblocks – each sadly overcome, one after another – and preach republican values that today seem disconnected from reality in the country.

Only the far right has really bothered to develop a coherent political vision – loathsome but coherent nonetheless – on migration. And therein lies the trap: the Right finds itself reduced to running after the far right, claiming to present a bulwark against it, while the Left is busy trying to mend the rifts within its ranks.

Recent controversies surrounding secularism, separatism, white privilege, the influence of so-called “Islamism” in French universities, and “non-mixed meetings” are also sources of conflict and division on the Left. These issues are so divisive for the Left because they expose the huge gap between its principles and reality. A part of the Left sees in universalism a core value: to achieve equality, the Republic must be blind to its citizens’ differences.

But others, sometimes denigrated as “racialists” or “intersectionals”, point out that this equality doesn’t exist in reality: discrimination based on skin colour or ethnic origin is rife, widely documented, and an obstacle on the road to equality. The latter criticise the former for being blind to discrimination and hiding behind principles that are hypocritical and disconnected from reality; the former accuse the latter of assigning each a skin colour and undermining the unity of the Republic by encouraging an identitarian interpretation of society. And each accuses the other of being racist and insulting.

I don’t believe these two strands are fundamentally irreconcilable: both recognise the need to fight against discrimination. But the universalist strand takes a prescriptive approach, while the intersectional strand takes a descriptive one. The universalists say what should be – sometimes believing that this very statement itself will have performative virtue – while the intersectionalists insist that the systematic nature of discrimination must be recognised. In the eyes of the Republic, there is only one type of citizen: there are no Whites, Blacks, or Arabs. But in reality, this is not the case when it comes to recruiters, nightclub bouncers, or estate agents.

So long as the Left continues to confuse the ideal with reality, its arguments will continue to fall on deaf ears, while only those of the far right will be audible.

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Environmentalism as a new universalism

As things stand, the lack of understanding is profound and divisions appear insurmountable. But it seems to me that environmentalism offers an opportunity to overcome them. Universalism, as it’s currently talked about on the Left, has lost its cosmopolitan dimension: paradoxically, it’s a national universalism, which considers citizens as equals so long as they are on the right side of the border. For everyone else, it’s as if this universalism has renounced its universal dimension, as if it cannot conceive of itself beyond national borders. Today, these national borders are considered a marker of collective identity, which explains the desire of many to keep them closed.

Environmental issues, however, force us to consider the impact of our actions beyond our borders: fighting climate change or the loss of biodiversity is primarily about making sure the Earth remains habitable for the most vulnerable. It means accepting that we have a responsibility towards those who live beyond our borders and a duty to consider them our equals. Because it is they, not we, who will be the first and hardest hit by the consequences of our actions.

If we are unable to develop a genuine cosmopolitical vision on these questions, if we limit the fight against climate change or biodiversity loss to the narrow confines of our national borders, then we've already lost. But if the Left manages to make environmentalism the foundation of a new cosmopolitical vision, a universalism can emerge that is not the remnant of a principle disconnected from reality, but a catalyst for planetary fraternity. Something which, in the Anthropocene epoch, would give true meaning to the third and final part of France's republican motto.

This article was originally published by AOC in French, in the framework of the Nuit des Idées 2021.

[1] Figures from the Ministry of the Interior, 2020

[2] A state of decline of the shared values and norms in a society, generally following a period of rapid political upheaval, as theorised by sociologist Emile Durkheim.

[3] François De Smet (2015). *La Marche des ombres. Réflexions sur les enjeux de la migration*, Bruxelles : CAL.



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