

The perception of immigration in France: from facts to identity mythologies

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Abstract

The monetary and industrial crisis of the 1970s established in the French public debate many beliefs about the supposed effects of immigration on the economy and demography. This anti-immigration argumentation grew, as a result of the wave of contemporary attacks on Europe, of the rhetoric mingling immigration and terrorism. These dogmatic positions on immigration have important consequences for migration policy and for living-together. Based on this observation, – this article aims at proposing a critique of the most widespread beliefs concerning immigration, in the light of their production context, their logical validity and their confirmation by the facts. From the gratuitous accusation to the slight amplification of reality, the arguments put forward against – or, sometimes, in favour of, – immigration are generally reversed by the facts. However, these beliefs do not need to be based on objective data to thrive.

Key words: immigration, migrant crisis, France, popular beliefs, terrorism

Postrzeżenie imigracji we Francji: od faktów do mitologii tożsamości

Streszczenie

Kryzys monetarno-przemysłowy w latach 70. XX wieku utwierdził we francuskiej debacie publicznej wiele przekonań na temat rzekomych skutków imigracji dla gospodarki i demografii. Argumentacja przeciwko imigracji wzrosła w wyniku fali współczesnych ataków na Europę, retoryki mieszej imigrację i terroryzm. Dogmatyczne stanowiska w sprawie imigracji mają poważne konsekwencje dla polityki migracyjnej i wspólnego życia. Wykorzystując tę obserwację, autorka niniejszego artykułu proponuje krytykę najbardziej rozpowszechnionych przekonań dotyczących imigracji, w świetle kontekstu ich powstawania, logiki i zgodności z faktami. Od bezpodstawnego oskarżenia do przesadzania faktów, argumenty wysuwane przeciwko – lub czasami na korzyść – imigracji często są niezgodne z rzeczywistością. Jednak przekonania nie muszą się opierać na obiektywnych danych, aby się rozwijać.

Słowa kluczowe: imigracja, kryzys migracyjny, Francja, popularne przekonania, terroryzm

Kofi Annan, emblematic UN Secretary-General and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, wrote in the French newspaper *Le Monde*: “Since there are borders, men cross them to visit foreign countries, but also to live there and to work [...] As long as there are nations, there will be migrants. Like it or not, the migrations will continue, because they are part of life. This is not to prevent them, but to better manage them and to ensure that all parties cooperate more and better understand the phenomenon” (Annan 2006). This call, which opposes the systematic denunciation of the migratory phenomenon the long time of analysis and understanding, rings today even more accurately than in 2006: is not the “immigration crisis” that we know everywhere in Europe, more than a situation of economic and demographic danger, a crisis of interpretation and understanding of the migratory phenomenon, coupled with a crisis of anxiety?

It is true that immigration has always been a divisive issue. With passion, some defend, sometimes in a silly way, the cultural and economic enrichment provided by an idealised immigration; with perhaps still more passion, others like to sound pessimistic abusing superlatives to denounce a migratory surge, an occupation of the territory, and toxic influence on French demography, economy and identity. So that in France, for forty years, the best way to spice up a dinner with friends or a political rally has been to discuss the beneficial or malefic nature of immigration. The problem that arises is the same as with other themes that are too passionate: the immigration issue is a fertile ground for dogmatism, stubbornness, and prejudice, whereas it is arid land for rational, objective and a good faith debate. The goal is usually not to fight confusion and amalgam, but to use sophisms and false-truths to convince the other of the merits of his position.

This problematic lack of reasoning in the immigration debate has almost been the same in terms of the migration policy pursued by the French state over the last fifty years. Since governance is no longer, in France, as much a matter of big ideas and long-term vision as an immediate satisfaction of the spontaneous social representations of public opinion and political communication, a *virile* migration policy is needed to protect from the accusation of *laxity*¹. There is less question of appeasing the debate and learning from the past than sticking closely to spontaneous social representations, poll results and possible electoral gains (Laacher 2012: p. 11). This resulted in several waves of hardening migration policy, which were based much more on the fears and

¹ Among many other examples, see the recent statements of the French Prime Minister, who, questioned about the current hardening of migration policy, said “to assume” despite the “criticism of beautiful souls” (Association France Presse 2017).

fantasies of a large part of the French than on objective data and scientific analyses aimed at understanding the phenomenon and estimating these consequences. This inconvenient management of the migratory question has the immediate consequence that France is no longer the host country it used to be². It also has a mediate consequence, perhaps even more dramatic: the beliefs – for many of them, unjustified – that have been born over the years have lastingly settled in the political and societal landscape, being somehow “sanctified” by their transcription in law, despite the fragility of their foundations.

Starting from these initial observations, we wish to make, in this study, a modest contribution to the fight against the false-truths of the French public debate on immigration. To achieve this aim, we will use the following methodology: for each of the two main themes selected, we will deal initially with the context of birth and development of the main ideas on the subject, to examine, in a second step, one by one these ideas and the arguments associated with them, subdividing them if necessary. Doing this implies certain objectivity: it is not a question of defending or defeating the migratory phenomenon, but of putting each belief in its proper place according to the quality of the argument that justifies it. But the need to reach a certain level of objectivity to give this work a scientific value raises many difficulties.

These difficulties stem, in the first place, from our own subjectivity. It is primarily sociological: a critique of the ideas received about immigration in a given society would imply, to be objective, having a point of view external to it. It is then due to ideology. A question such as immigration is difficult to reconcile with objectivity because it is so passionate. Even if we try in this work to put aside our political opinions on the question, they will appear, at least, in the choice of sources, in the interpretation of the data and in the conclusions that we will retain. As an illustration, we note that our bibliography lacks arguments aimed at deconstructing pro-immigration rhetoric.

In the second place, they hold the subjectivity of others. Whether it is sources on the political and historical context of the birth of these beliefs about immigration, or available figures on immigration, the work on this subject often has a pronounced ideological dimension. Very often, the sources we use have the stated purpose of revealing the misconceptions about immigration. Also, their authors must find arguments against the received ideas, take the opposite, which bends their reflection (Laacher 2012; Zerrouky

² Witness the following statement, tagged by an activist on the facade of a French state building: “accueil de merde” (“shitty welcome”).

et al. 2015; Laurent 2015; Meyer 2016). Our bibliography also includes journalistic sources. On this subject, they participate in misinformation quite regularly, relaying rumours or not always showing sufficient fact-checking, consistent with journalistic ethics (Association France Presse 2017; Dange 2018). Even the sources that consist mainly of figures, and which follow a scientific methodology (Nowrasteh 2016; Chojnicki et al. 2018) can be criticised at the yardstick of some of their methodological weaknesses, even if they have the honesty to raise those issues they are aware of.

Lastly, difficulties are due to the incompleteness of the data available on the subject. Our results will be particularly biased by the absence of official statistics in France on the migratory origin. The French tradition is that we do not distinguish, most often, immigrants according to their origins in the available data on the impact of immigration in France. Therefore, we do not pretend to objectivity and neutrality. We only claim our desire to reduce the impact of bias as much as possible.

The immigration beliefs that will be discussed can be schematically presented as belonging to two distinct time periods:

(I) the great crisis of the 1970s has generated many beliefs about the effects of immigration on labour, the economy and demographics, to which were added, in response to the terrorist attacks in United States and in Europe at the beginning of the 21st century,

(II) other beliefs having for common denominators the questions of French identity and security.

The economic and demographic beliefs of the French on immigration: an amplification of reality

Immigration experienced a “golden age” in France during the glorious thirties. However, the economic downturn marked the beginning of its stigmatisation as the main cause of the end of full employment and an aggravating factor of the economic crisis. Taking note of this change in mentalities, the legislation becomes hardened towards immigrants, with sometimes counterintuitive consequences, likely to fuel xenophobia (A). The arguments of the opponents of immigration crystallised, at that time, around three themes: demography, economy, and work. They still have great success today, despite a relative lack of empirical confirmation of their reality by studies (B).

A) The structuring of immigration criticism following the monetary and industrial crisis

From the second half of the nineteenth century until the economic crisis of the 1970s, immigration was almost never questioned. Indeed, until this crisis, the immigrant was perceived in France as a *work force*, serving the expansion and economic development of the host country. Perceived as an economic agent who came to work, not as an invader came to “take advantage of welfare”, the immigrant could easily obtain a residence permit. The state did not need to control immigration, except in terms of supply and economic demand (Laacher 2012: p. 59–60). Nevertheless, the fall of this “golden age”, which can be located around 1973, was brutal. With the oil crisis, work became rare. Then, the question is asked: who will benefit in priority from this rare commodity?

Then settled a first fear about immigration, that of an unfair competition in the wages and the jobs, that the main French party of extreme right will develop and maintain by very effective slogans: “the French first”, “An immigrant who leaves is a French who finds work”, or “3 million foreigners, it is 3 million jobs stolen from the French”. This paradigm of immigration reversal quickly translated into law, particularly in 1974, when Valéry Giscard d’Estaing suspended economic immigration. This decision, which had to be a temporary solution, an emergency measure, perpetuated in law, as the recent justification of the state of emergency in ordinary law. In 1977, when France passed the threshold of one million unemployed, the Government would go much further, allowing massive dismissal of foreign workers and setting up a “return assistance” (in fact, an economic incentive to depopulation). These measures, as drastic as they are, do not mean the end of immigration to France. Immigration flows have had to contend with this new data, which has resulted in the emergence and amplification of illegal immigration. Public opinion discovered illegal immigration, and associated it with ideas of delinquency, clandestinity and moonlighting (Laacher 2012: p. 59–60). But it was above all the shift from labour immigration to settlement immigration that triggered the shift in consciousness on the issue of immigration. As we said earlier, before the crisis, the generally shared belief, both by immigrants and by the French authorities, was that they were passing through France, or in other words that their presence was entirely conditioned to work, on the principle of the *noria*: coming to work a few years in a foreign country to go back with money and new skills. But with the French policy of “all exit is final”, the immigrants, in addition to not wanting to leave, began to bring

their families to France. If they could no longer join them freely, then they would come.

Also, quite counter-intuitively, the anti-immigration policy has favoured a much more “intrusive” form of immigration, which many French will begin to hate very quickly, and which will cause many fantasies of order of identity, demography and economy. On the one hand, we could not “welcome all the misery of the world” or, in a more politically correct way, “if we welcome everyone, we cannot welcome them in good conditions”. This declaration, which is more than common sense, has quickly turned into sociological truth for many politicians. On the other hand, there is this fear of invasion (“the galloping demography of immigrants”) and dilution of national identity (“we are at home, they aren’t”). These few historical reminders of the emergence of the first generation of criticism of immigration in France allow us to put forward a hypothesis: the genesis of beliefs about immigration is less to be found in immigration facts than in economic crisis. The crisis, coupled with the emergence of *governance by affects* (Lordon 2013) and simplistic and populist discourses, would have quickly made immigration the scapegoat of French problems. To confirm this intuition, we must now use the emblematic arguments of this period to confront them with the data we have today.

B) The scientific validity of economic and demographic beliefs about immigration

To what extent are the arguments confirmed by the facts? We will successively examine beliefs about the effects of immigration on the labour market (1), public spending (2) and demography (3).

(1) The supposed effects of immigration on labour have historically been the first to have imposed them. There is an important quantitative discrepancy between the anticipated effects and the levels identified by the studies, even if the intuitions of the majority are not unfounded, for instance about the effects of immigration on unemployment (1.1) or wages (1.2). (1.1) “*Immigrants steal jobs from the French*” is an assertion often heard in the public debate. This reasoning is as follows: if the labour market is a cake, then immigrants play the role of the new guests. As a result, many “natives” would be forced to give up their share for the benefit of immigrants. Therefore, to reduce unemployment, we must limit immigration. There were many studies on this subject, in France and abroad. There is usually a two-fold conclusion: the massive arrival of immigrants at the local level has the effect of slightly increasing the unem-

ployment rate in the area concerned. But this effect is very temporary – of the order of a few months or a few years – and the employment rate then rises to its initial rate or exceeds it because of the economic stimulation produced. There is also a short-term effect, but we cannot speak of a *permanent effect* of immigration on the unemployment rate (Chojnicki, Ragot 2012: p. 65). In these circumstances, it is difficult to say that immigrants steal French jobs.

(1.2) “Immigration pulls salaries and wage conditions downwards” is the second assertion that we hear most often in this theme. To resume our analogy of the cake, immigrants would reduce on the one hand the size of the shares of the “natives”, by the competition that they would exercise by accepting lower wages, and on the other hand the quality of the ingredients of the cake, in accepting substandard working conditions. On this point again, according to the economists, there is a very limited impact of immigration on the amount of wages, but it would be almost negligible (Chojnicki, Ragot 2012: p. 50). In addition, there is no deterioration in wage conditions due to immigration (Chojnicki, Ragot 2012: p. 50).

(2) The analysis of the effects of immigration on French public expenditure also leads to a nuanced conclusion: although according to a very widespread idea, immigrants benefit quite a lot from the aid schemes put in place by the French government. State (2.1), immigration does not have the effect of a catastrophe on public finances, being, from an accounting point of view, relatively neutral for the State. In these circumstances, removing immigration would not solve the debt crisis (2.2).

(2.1) “Immigrants do not work and prefer to benefit from State aid”. From a logical point of view, this argument does not hold, in that it is most often presented simultaneously with the belief that immigrants steal French jobs, even though they say absolutely the opposite just after. However, from an empirical point of view, the majority of available analyses have concluded that immigrants have indeed more recourse to these aids than natives, all other things being equal (Chojnicki, Ragot 2012: p. 94–95). This could be explained primarily by the combined effects of their socio-economic characteristics that are worse than the average and by the higher number of children per household (Chojnicki, Ragot 2012: p. 94–95).

(2.2) “Immigration weighs on public spending”. It would be tempting to deduce from the previous point, that because immigrants benefit more from state aids than natives, then immigration weighs heavily on public spending. Quite counter-intuitively, it seems that immigration is, at the scale of Europe, neutral or even positive for public

finances (Laurent 2015: p. 7)! This is explained by the fact that immigrant populations are statistically younger than the native population, and therefore more concentrated on the active age group where the contribution to the net budget of the State is positive (Chojnicki, Ragot 2012: p. 94–95). In France, the available data suggest that the impact of immigration on public finances is neutral or very slightly negative (Chojnicki et al. 2018: p. 1). In addition to the surprise it brings, this leads to an interesting conclusion: the optimal level of immigration cannot be determined from an accounting point of view, because of its relative neutrality for public finances.

(3) The presumed impact of immigration on French demography is surely the issue that gives rise to the most fantasies. This is reflected in particular using the lexical field of physics and natural disasters (“air holes”, “difference in demographic pressure”, “invasion” ...) – and therefore non-human – to describe this yet very human phenomenon. Despite their alarmism, these beliefs are very unfounded, whether it is the absolute number of immigrants arriving in France – the so-called *French immigration exception* (3.1) – or the fear of an “extinction” of the native population (3.2)

(3.1) “France welcomes more immigrants than elsewhere”. There are indeed passionate debates on this subject, borrowings of social and political fantasies, on the number of immigrants (legal and illegal) who come to France each year (Laacher 2012: p. 111). Some supports the existence of a “French exception” in immigration matters. If we look at the figures, 8% of the French population is of immigrant origin, 25% of whom are immigrants from the European community (Laurent 2015: p. 1). This level of immigration is relatively low compared to other European countries, including those with an equivalent level of development, and also compared to migration rates in France’s past (Chojnicki, Ragot 2012: p. 32). In addition, the acquisition of French nationality was not “sold off”: its rate is like that of 20 years ago (Laurent 2015: p. 4) But where does this prejudice come from? In our opinion, it is explained by the reputation of France to be a land of asylum, by a bias due to the overrepresentation (38%) of immigrants in Ile-de-France (Chojnicki, Ragot 2012: p. 27) and by an overestimation of the quantitative importance of the waves of refugees that reached France following the Arab Spring and the Syrian refugee crisis (Laacher 2012: p. 23; Laurent 2015: p. 2.).

(3.2) “The French population is gradually being replaced by a population resulting from immigration, which will lead France to its loss”. Halfway between the demographic and identity concerns, this assertion is even more alarming than the others by denouncing a risk of dilution, or even the disappearance of the French identity

because of the cumulative effect of the entry of new immigrants in France, and the exceptional birth rate paid to women of immigrant background (Laacher 2012: p. 181; Chojnicki, Ragot et al. 2016: p. 16). It is true that the birth rate of women with a migrant background (2.6 children/woman) is higher than that of “natives” (1.8 children/women), especially for women migrants outside the European Union. (3 children/woman). Even if immigration contributes about 20% of the increase in the French population (Chojnicki, Ragot 2012: p. 25–30), this is still 80% of children from the “exceptional French birth rate”. It is not so much a “common sense finding” that immigration must be limited to protect the “original” French identity.

The presented analysis of classical arguments against immigration demonstrates that the vast majority of assertions maintained in the speeches on immigration in France, without being quite wrong³, exaggerate the quantitative importance of the migratory phenomenon. This gap between the reality and the perception of the migratory phenomenon is translated by unreasonable solutions, even if the migratory problem is less important than the common sense see it. Today, with the more recent arguments that followed the terrorist attacks, they compose a French *identity mythology*.

The security and identity beliefs of the French on immigration: the reign of amalgam

The image of immigration in France was affected by the beliefs born in the 1970s, but they remained confined to economic and demographic issues. Since 2001, and even more in 2015, the French have associated immigration with ideas of terrorism, insecurity and even “clash of civilisations”. These new arguments against immigration add up to the first one to create the context most hostile to immigrants that France has known (A). However, the links between immigration and terrorism seem to be less robust than those commonly developed between immigration and invasion, or immigration and unemployment, except in a euphemistic version of themselves (B).

A) The transformation of immigration criticism into a perceived context of clash of civilisations and terrorism

The attacks of September 11, 2001 constituted a real *game-changer* in the history of the perception of immigration in the West, as it was interpreted as a declaration

³ It is true that an increasing share of the population is born of the miscegenation of people under the effect of immigration or that a massive influx of immigrants to a specific area of the territory causes a slight rise in the unemployment rate.

of war of the Muslim world to the Western world. It permanently tied the theme of radical Islam, terrorism, and immigration, in the law, as evidenced by certain articles of the Patriot Act in the US (Ceyhan 2001: p. 1, 7, 17), but especially in minds. These three themes constitute, according to some authors (Laacher 2012: p. 103–104) and the majority of opinion polls, the three major issues of the beginning of the twenty-first century in Europe. In France the French National Front, which had been greatly weakened since the 1990s, since the traditional arguments used against immigration had lost impact on the public opinion, found a second youth.

However, the impact of the New York attacks on the perception of the French immigration is very little compared to the Islamist attacks that have affected France and its close neighbours since 2015. In the climate of *national unity* and the exaltation of patriotism that followed (Lecatelier 2017: p. 1), the French fell back on themselves, even though many terrorists were French. In designating a common enemy – the Muslim immigrant – the French found in their compatriots friends, according to a well-known dialectic (Schmitt 1932: p. 66). Accused of facilitating terrorism, immigration was once again decried as a source of many evils, despite repeated calls from many actors in public life to avoid amalgam. This climate led to a further tightening of migration policy, as evidenced by the 15% increase in evictions and the multiplication of “punch” measures in the Calais jungle.

Nowadays in France, a multiplicity of factors inherent in the contemporary situation explains that it is immigration that is accused. First, the rise of Islamophobia⁴ – due to the convictions of the terrorists – is generating amalgams in the minds between fundamentalist Muslims and moderate practitioners. However, since a portion of immigrants is of Muslim faith, distrust of immigrants increases almost mechanically. Simultaneously with this rise in Islamophobia, we are witnessing in France a resurgence of identity and nationalist discourse. For example, the attempted constitutional revision proposed by the French President in the aftermath of the attacks of 13 November 2015, providing for the removal of nationality for terrorists. Of purely symbolic order, this measure had no other message than this one: the opposition between national and foreign levels must structure the vision and the division of the world of everyone (Laacher 2012: p. 36).

This is also evidenced by the increasingly frequent denunciation of the failures of the French integration policy and the risk of the development of commu-

⁴ Even if the French are not more intolerant than twenty years ago towards the Muslim community, the crises and the media framing of the events have a real effect on this index. On the other hand, Muslims are badly accepted compared to many other minorities (Damgé 2018).

nitarianism in France. It is easy to understand that this climate does not favour the acceptance of immigration, which, according to this reading grid, aggravates the phenomenon. Finally, due to increased security considerations following the attacks and measures allowed by the state of emergency and subsequent anti-terrorist laws, immigrants – mainly Muslim – live under the yoke of many powers given to the administration, whose risk of abuse is not to be proved, be they house arrest, S-registration or blank notes, which contributes to making their living conditions more precarious in France. As for the oil crisis in the 1970s, it is above all conjectural factors that influences the evolution of the perception of immigration in France, more than a fact checking.

B) The plausibility of theses linking immigration and terrorism

The trauma of 2001 was followed in the French-speaking world by a series of writings – relatively isolated – that directly linked the issue of terrorism to immigration (Laacher 2012: p. 124). The general idea that emerges from these declarations and pamphlets is the following: we must see in every person who treads the national soil illegally a *potential enemy*. Far from the marginality of the beginnings, these beliefs today have a certain success for a substantial part of the French, in the context of a terrorist and migratory crisis in which France is plunged. It is because of this omnipresence that we will devote the last part of our reflection to discuss the theses that put, at least partly, the weight of terrorism on the shoulders of immigration.

It is possible to distinguish at least three positions linking these two themes, which we have classified in increasing order of intensity: immigration as a parallel phenomenon to terrorism (1); immigration as facilitating terrorism (2); immigration as a nest of terrorists (3).

(1) “Immigration and terrorism are distinct phenomena, even if they have a common cause: war”. According to this first thesis, it is above all the war in the Middle East that causes these two phenomena: on the one hand, the inhabitants of a war zone flee the conflict and become refugees, a small part of which will go to Europe; on the other hand, this war feeds resentment towards the West and allows radicalised groups to recruit, thus to attack the lives of Europeans. The attacks and the refugees also would be correlated (because they are “children of the war”) but would also be carefully distinguished (because the immigrants are not more terrorists than the rest of the population). It is therefore not necessary to limit immigration because of terrorism.

This first thesis seems difficult to question as the premises that support it seem certain (or, at least, commonly accepted).

(2) “Terrorism benefits from immigration” and “immigration helps terrorism”. Although very different in their moral and political implications, these two theses lead to a common conclusion: it is necessary, in the name of national security, to limit or stop immigration, as well as to review our integration model. But whereas in the first thesis terrorism uses immigration without its knowledge (by hiding among its flows or trying to convert immigrants), the second implies the sympathy of immigrants for terrorism (if not their material help by participating in jihadist propaganda or hiding terrorists). The first thesis is quite plausible, especially as it is confirmed by a serious and wide-ranging study⁵, which concludes that “although the flows of immigrants do not contribute in themselves to the rise of terrorism in the country terrorist organisations rely on them to recruit and spread their ideology”. The second, much less plausible, insofar as it starts from the premises that the Muslims are, in consequent proportions, jihadists. But the data show that only a minority of Muslims claim Salafism, and that in this minority, only a very small part is “revolutionary” or “takfirist” (Zerrouky et al. 2015: p. 1), so quick to help the terrorists. The greatest risk with these beliefs is finally that of a double political discourse which would cover its Islamophobia under the acceptability of the first belief, while managing to limit immigration.

(3) “Terrorists are immigrants” and “immigrants are terrorists”. These last two theories are no longer content to establish a link between immigration and terrorism: they assimilate one of the categories to another. For the supporter of the first belief, when an attack is committed, there is a very high probability that it is the work of an immigrant. This was repeatedly affirmed by Prime Minister Viktor Orban in Hungary (Kaminski 2015), and by a significant part of the French far right, which greeted the election of the latter. This theory is large enough belied by recent data. On the one hand, a large study conducted in the United States between 1975 and 2015 showed that the annual risk of being killed by someone other than a foreign-born terrorist was 253 times greater than that of being killed by a foreign terrorist (Nowrasteh 2016: intro.). And on the other hand, most of the terrorist attacks in Europe since 2015 have been perpetrated by French or Belgian nationals. The only migrant who intervened in these attacks

⁵ The authors of the study, Vincenzo Bove and Tobias Böhmelt of the University of Warwick, have used data from the World Bank and the Global Terrorism Database of the University of Maryland to cross-reference available information on migration flows in 145 countries, between 1970 and 2000. It was published in the famous “Journal of Politics”.

is considered a hero for saving several people in the Kosher hypermarket (Meyer 2016: p. 49–57). However, even if these terrorists have a European nationality, it has been noticed that they all belonged to communities of immigrant origin. The second belief is more radical: for its supporters, immigrants arriving in Europe are terrorists. French Senator Jean-Louis Masson expresses nothing less when he says “today’s immigration is the terrorists of tomorrow” (Vignal 2015). This theory is probably as hard to scientifically validate as the assertion: “all redheads are wizards”, or any other belief as reductive and totalising.

Conclusions

Looking closely, the most common beliefs about immigration in people’s minds are not all wrong. Many of them show some common sense: yes, terrorists can use migratory flows to hide themselves; yes, immigrant women have proportionately more children than native women; and yes, we cannot surely welcome all the misery of the world, but it is all about measurement. And that is where the problem lies: the effects we associate with immigration are greater than the effects measured by rigorous indicators and observers of the phenomenon of immigration. Why? It is because the *truth base* of popular beliefs about immigration is distorted, magnified, and fantasised in people’s minds. It is because some are looking for a scapegoat on whose back to put the full weight of the crisis, when others are looking for a good cause to protect with good feelings. It is because we enjoy a melodramatic and intuitive reading of the phenomenon more than a rational approach. It is because, due to the “snowball effect” recently put forward by a study published in the magazine *Science* (Vosoughi et al. 2018), a lot of misinformation about immigration is coming to our ears and to our eyes, at least in social media.

Finally, it is because the majority accepts the belief, that immigration can be designated as the main cause of the structural and conjectural problems facing the state – unemployment, the economic crisis or terrorism, – the beliefs surrounding the immigration phenomenon, even if they are based on some objective data, are not looking for more objectivity. The same thing happens with the naïve and deluded arguments used by some who defend benevolence towards immigration. To sum up, the result is that the door of our country is closing or opening, not due to a dispassionate and rational national choice, but being pushed by the wind of the conjuncture and the moods of the people. The French must stop choosing between an irrational defence and an irrational

condemnation of immigration if they want to be able to place the cursor of its migration policy in full knowledge of the facts.

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