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Geographic origin of individuals in French population censuses¹

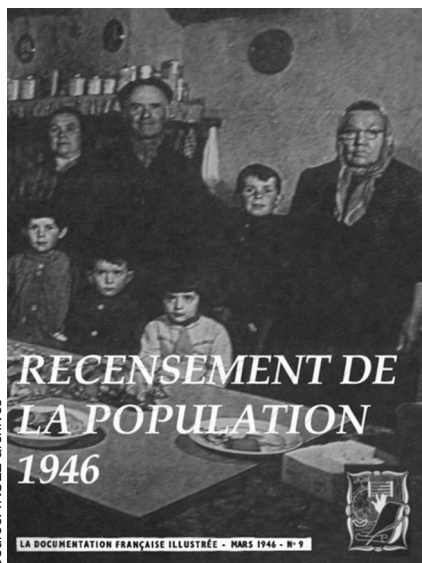
✍ Olivier Monso* and Thibaut de Saint Pol**

In the nineteenth century, France introduced political and legal criteria aimed at establishing who was or was not a member of the national community. To this end, questions on geographic origins were added to the nominal lists and individual schedules in French censuses. By the end of the century, the emergence of Nation States had redrawn the political map of Europe. Amid rising immigration, France's concern was not only to count the population but also to draw a statistical distinction between French and foreign residents, and between French citizens by birth and naturalized citizens. In the second half of the twentieth century, statisticians increasingly sought data about origins; this information now needed to cover the life histories of new entrants to the national community. After reviewing the historical background, this article compares the treatment of origins in France's general population censuses with examples from other countries. The authors thus shed light on the distinctiveness of the French approach—in particular, its classification of persons by national citizenship and by means of French nationality acquisition.

The general population census counts the set of persons forming the population of a State at a given moment, by means of an operation in which all the State's residents must take part. It is not, strictly speaking, an enumeration of individuals but a tool providing information on different characteristics of the population. The nominal lists and, from 1876 on, the individual schedule were compiled for the purpose of describing the demographics of each municipality (*commune*): How many men and women live in it? How many young and elderly people? How many economically active and inactive persons? Questions were later extended to other topics such as the number of payroll employees and business owners, and the number of children attending school in their municipality of residence. Analyzing the population by origin was not an initial priority. Rather, it was gradually incorporated into the questionnaires owing to factors as diverse as variations in migration flows, changes in French nationality law, and French foreign policy.

The concept of nationality emerged at the time of the first censuses

Under the Ancien Regime, officials compiled comprehensive hearth rolls (*relevés des feux*) for the kingdom,



Source: INSEE archives

but the notion of a direct population census for all of France was not introduced until the French Revolution, with the “police act” of July 22, 1791. But “if, by census population, we mean a detailed, per-capita listing of a country's inhabitants, we can say that no true general census was conducted in France before the nineteenth century.”²

In 1833, France established a Statistical Office (Bureau des Statistiques) and decided to conduct a census every five years, in years ending in 1 or 6. This period saw the construction of the French Nation-State. The voter-enfranchisement issue crystallized the authorities' will

to determine who belonged to the community and who did not, and the issue of individuals' origins emerged in the census.

Conceptualizing the “foreigner” in terms of his or her “nationality” is a fairly recent approach. As Patrick Weil notes (2002), “when the Revolution began, there was no explicit definition of a French person. Under the Ancien Regime, the jurisprudence defining the boundary between the French person and the foreigner developed in incidental fashion, through legal disputes

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1. Originally published in *Courrier des statistiques*, French ed., no. 117-119 (2006), pp. 33-42.

2. *Résultats statistiques du recensement de la population en 1901*. The volume's introduction provides a detailed history of French censuses and their methods.

arising from estate problems.” At the time, the foreigner was, above all, the person one did not know. Local recognition of the individual was the decisive criterion, establishing membership in a community. The Revolution broke with this tradition by abolishing the symbols of power vis-à-vis the foreigner, namely, *droit d'aubaine* (the sovereign's right to inherit the property of foreigners residing in France at their death) and the authority to grant French nationality.

The first law on *nationality*—although the concept itself was not actually used—was contained in the Napoleonic Civil Code. The term itself did not appear until the early nineteenth century. In France, it was first used in administrative documents around 1820 and in a literary text, by Madame de Staël, in 1830. The appearance of a notion of “nationality” therefore coincided with the implementation of the first general censuses of the French population.

In 1851, the very year when access to nationality was modified by the enactment of the double *jus soli* (*double droit du sol*),³ a question on nationality was added for the first time to the census, along with a question on religious affiliation. Naturalized French persons were distinguished from other French persons, and foreigners were classified by nationality. This innovation was

motivated by the State's need to determine who belonged to the nation. In the Ancien Regime, persons born in a given place were deemed to “belong” to that place. One example of the consequences of this practice is that children not born on French soil could not inherit from their French parents (a form of *droit d'aubaine*). In the nineteenth century, a new need to differentiate between nationals and foreigners arose. Place of birth or place of residence would not suffice as a criterion. Official statisticians accordingly introduced a question on nationality in the census.

In response to protests, the questions on religion and nationality were withdrawn in the following census (1856) (Dupâquier 1965). They were restored in 1861 in the household schedule (itself introduced in 1856) and in the tables published at the time, although they did not appear in the nominal lists.⁴ They were kept in 1866 and in 1872. At the latter date, only nationality reappeared in the nominal lists. The question on religion was finally eliminated in 1876 with the introduction of the individual schedule.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, nationality and place of birth⁵ were therefore gradually adopted as criteria for distinguishing between French residents. In the same period, international statistics—in the wake of the 1853 Brussels Congress, attended by Adolphe Quetelet—turned to the linguistic criterion to draw the same distinction, found, for example, in the Prussian censuses (Labbé 2006).⁶

Nationality categories proposed: a pragmatic, political approach

France used seven categories to classify foreigners in 1851. They mainly concerned neighboring countries, from which most foreigners came: Belgians, Spanish, British, Germans, Italians, and Swiss; the seventh category—Poles—was the exception to the rule. The choice of nationality criterion was ambiguous:

few countries were on the list, and some States did not yet exist as such. For instance, the Piedmontese were classified as “Italians” and the Bavarians as “Germans” even though the corresponding States, and hence the nationalities, were not yet a political reality.

The question's introduction was aimed at producing a census of foreigners living in France, without a genuine interpretation of the results. The census-takers were mainly interested in foreigners' places of settlement by origin: people from Spain lived in south-west France, Belgians in the north, and so on. The census showed that foreigners stayed in regions near the border with their country of origin. Hence the desire (1) to identify the reasons prompting foreigners to settle in France and (2) to determine the country's most attractive regions.

These categories were also sensitive to political stakes, particularly in the sphere of international relations. For instance, the inclusion of Poles in the list of nationalities was not a self-evident choice, given the Russian Empire's tutelage over the kingdom of Poland. But official French support of the Poles in their 1830 insurrection (in the name of cultural and religious values and of a common history dating back to the Napoleonic period) led to the statistical recognition of Polish nationality (Goussef 1997). This shows a determination to assert a political choice through the nationality categories used in the census: military defeat turned the Poles into political refugees welcomed by France in the name of humanist values inherited from the Revolution.

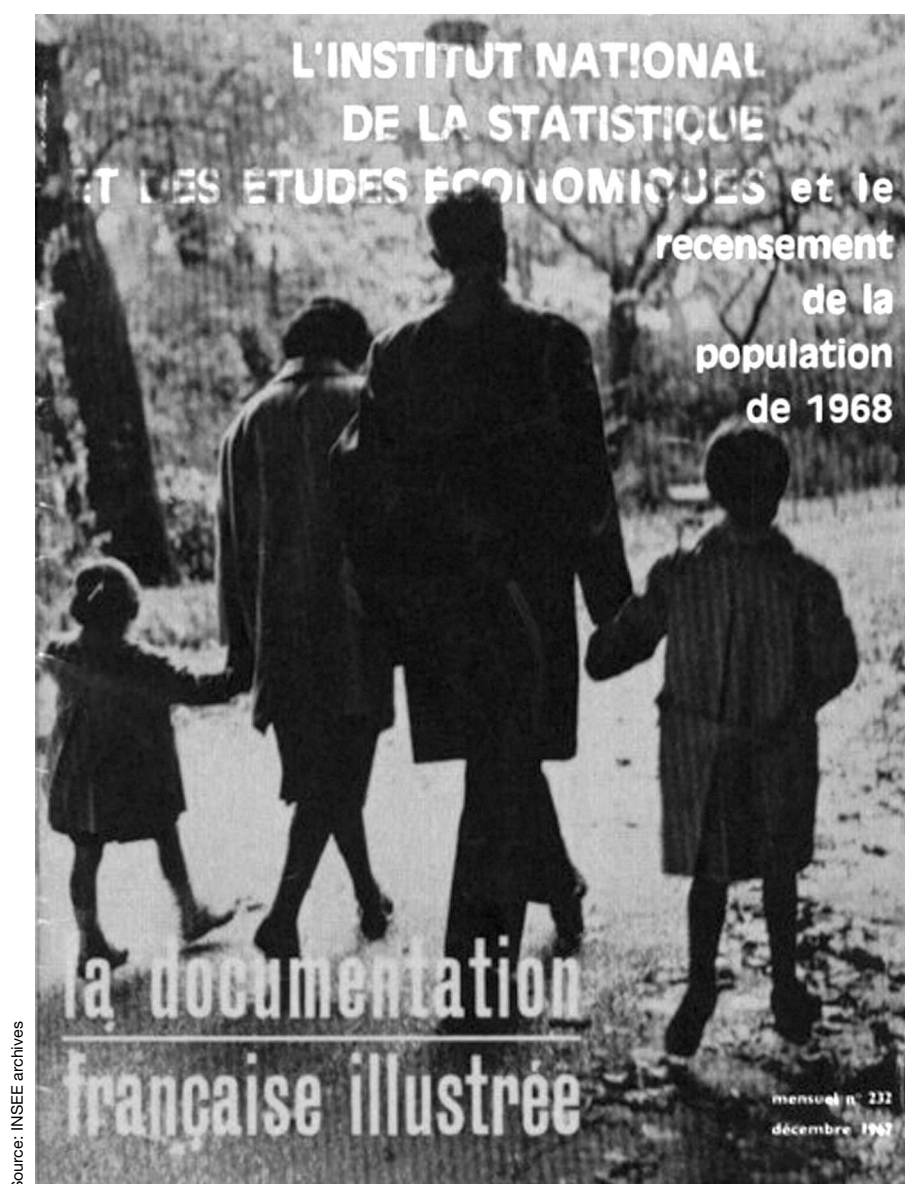
The Second Empire witnessed the political authorities' growing control over official statistics, most notably the general population censuses. This is illustrated by the 1861 census, which added Russians, Romanians, Greeks, and Turks to the existing nationality categories in order to reflect France's geopolitical vision of Europe. The introduction of “Russians” in the list coincides with the end of the Crimean War

3. Right granting French nationality at birth to a child born in France to a foreign parent also born in France.

4. Nominal lists enumerate all inhabitants of a municipality at the census date. The household schedule is filled out for each household, i.e., for all inhabitants in the same dwelling. The individual schedule is filled out for each person.

5. The place of birth was recorded since 1861 for French citizens by birth, initially through the distinction between individuals born in the *département* and those born elsewhere.

6. The distinction between individuals by language spoken was used in Prussian and German censuses throughout the nineteenth century. First the family language then the mother's language were regarded as a nationality criterion. This choice, as well, was informed by a political goal: that of Germanizing the country, coupled with restrictive measures concerning the use of Polish.



Poster for 1968 population census

and the advent of Tsar Alexander II. It also forms part of a broader French-Russian *rapprochement*. The end of tensions in Crimea and the Balkans led to the emergence of nationalities protected from Ottoman and Russian ambitions: Romanians (also designated as Moldo-Valachians) were introduced into the 1861 census, whereas the independence of Romania, previously under Ottoman suzerainty, would not be recognized until 1878. This controlling influence of political factors was compounded by statisticians' resolve to take fuller account of the diversity of foreigners present in France. The same reasons explain the addition of Danes,

Norwegians, Swedes, and Americans to the list in the 1861 census.

The late nineteenth century marked a turning point. The international scene had changed, and statistics needed to keep up with the latest developments. France's defeat by Prussia in 1871 led the authorities to revise nationality categories as well as the overall approach to the census of foreigners that had prevailed until then. The political class and statisticians alike focused on a new urgent concern: the need to clearly designate the enemy. In consequence, the "Germans" category was split up into "Germans," "Austro-Hungarians," and "persons

of Alsace-Lorraine who have not opted for French nationality." Just like the identification of the danger, the search for potential allies took on ever greater importance. In the eyes of political, military, and diplomatic leaders, the Tsar became an essential partner in the struggle against the German empire, after a long period in which the Russian empire had been neglected or, at the very least, ill regarded. For diplomatic reasons, the "Poles" category was eliminated, leaving vast statistical room for "Russian subjects" (Goussef 1997). Through the nationality categories, the very spirit of the census was changing. The removal of categories of hitherto protected population groups essentially meant a break with the humanistic and universalist values of the 1789 Revolution, which had informed the first censuses of foreigners (1851, 1861, and 1866). Revolutionary values and political vision cohabited so long as French ascendancy in Europe persisted. Henceforth, "universalism was blamed for undermining patriotism" (Brubaker 1993), and the revolutionary message gave way to polarization over the destiny of the French State.

Thus France, in the late nineteenth century, shifted away from a vision open to the outside world, marked by a desire to protect oppressed populations. It moved toward a "less generous" approach, amid less favorable political circumstances. As regards the census, a transition occurred between a straightforward approach based on an enumeration of foreigners and a far-reaching interpretation of results, at a time when France was registering a large increase in the number of its foreign residents.

The emergence of the immigrant figure raised the question of nationality acquisition

From the late nineteenth century onward, the perception of the foreigner as a citizen of another State with an "objective" existence (and not a fictive one, as in the case

of Poland discussed above, which survived in the censuses between 1863 and 1876 even though the country was now only a province of the Russian empire) became enshrined in the censuses. Emphasis would now shift from the “foreigner” to the “immigrant,”⁷ i.e., the foreigner who had come to France in order to settle there.

France in the 1850s sought to be a land of asylum for all those who were fleeing conflicts in Europe: emigration of Poles after the November 1830 revolt against the Russians, Spaniards fleeing the Carlist Wars that began in 1833. But the reality of immigration upset this vision, most notably with the 1881 census, which revealed a foreign population of over one million. Beyond this quantitative increase, another fact stood out: the motives that led foreigners to settle in France had changed. Immigration for strictly political reasons had become a minority phenomenon, overtaken by immigration of workers, often driven (particularly Italians) by economic problems in their home countries. The temporary nature of these foreigners’ stays in France was strongly challenged, posing in no uncertain terms the issue of the integration of new arrivals (including whether or not they should be allowed to obtain French nationality).

The integration issue concerned the workplace, where the French often saw foreigners as rivals for access to employment—an access made difficult in periods of deep economic crisis such as France

experienced in the late nineteenth century. In Parliament, members from the regions most concerned by wage-labor immigration (the north and the Mediterranean south) complained of this competition, which was aggravated, in their view, by foreigners’ frequent willingness to work for lower wages. The other focus of discontent was that foreigners were not subject to certain “civic” duties—in particular, military service, compulsory since 1872. This argument worked in favor of the naturalization of children born in France to foreign parents, who could hitherto keep their foreign nationality and so avoid conscription.

The response came in the form of the 1889 Act, which facilitated naturalizations of immigrants’ children by strengthening *jus soli*. A person was now French if he or she was (1) born of a French parent (*jus sanguinis*, effective since the 1804 Civil Code), (2) born in France of a foreign parent also born in France (“double *jus soli*,” in force since 1851), or (3) born in France and residing there when reaching legal majority. The Act allowed an increase in the number of naturalizations.⁸

The growing prominence of foreigners, both in numerical terms and because of the social problems due to immigration, led statisticians to pay greater attention to the alien population. The first-ever publication devoted exclusively to foreigners appeared in 1891. The most significant change in the census questionnaire itself was the introduction, in 1881, of a question on nationality with a choice of three answers: “born of French parents,” “naturalized French person,” and “foreigner? of what nation?.” The novelty was the addition to the individual schedule—even before the 1889 Act—of the “naturalized French person” choice as an answer to the nationality question: this separated persons having acquired French nationality during their lifetime from those who possessed it at birth. The distinction had already been drawn in the nominal lists of 1851 and repeated in the household schedules

of 1861, 1866, and 1872. Now, it became a lasting feature of individual schedules in the censuses of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This is puzzling if we consider the rather commonly accepted image of French nationality based on *jus soli* (although, as noted earlier, France actually practiced a blend of a form of *jus sanguinis* and *jus soli*). The distinction seems even more baffling if we refer to the ideal expressed by Ernest Renan⁹ of a nation founded on a “daily plebiscite.” Why, then, the need to separate the French by nationality of origin?

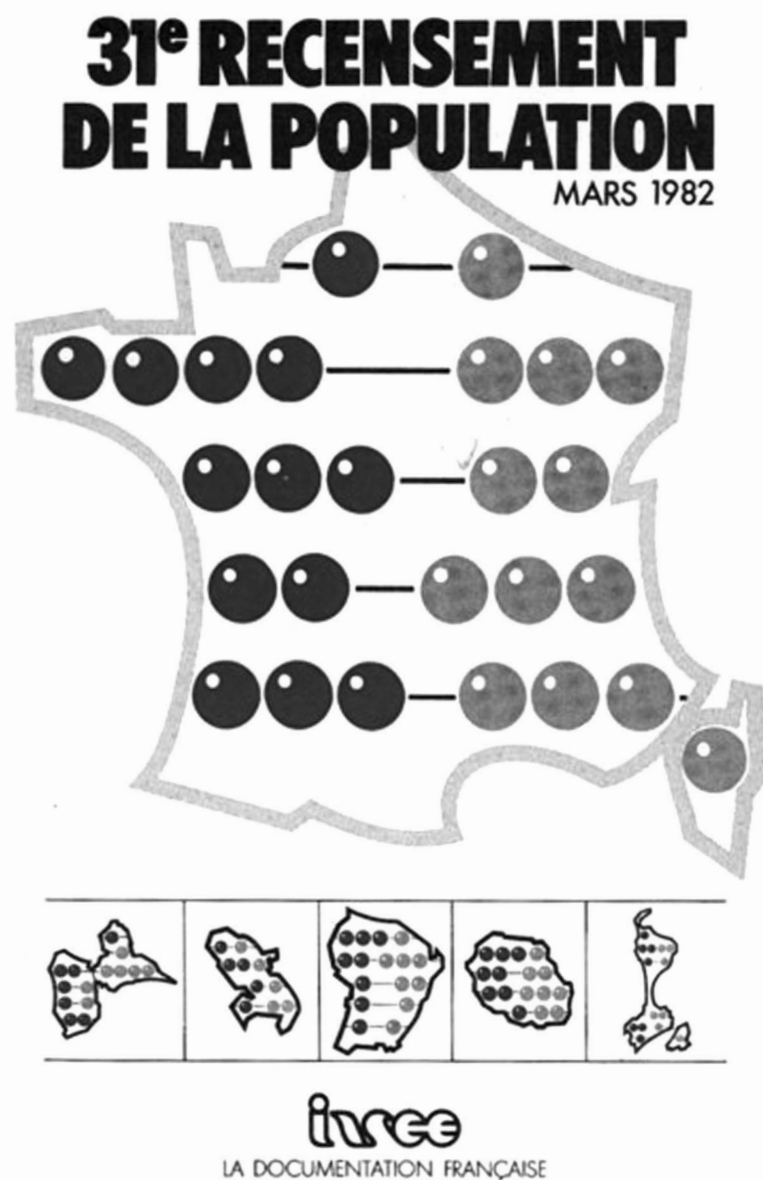
The “naturalized French person” category rested on the series of laws defining access to nationality passed at the end of the nineteenth century and in the twentieth century. It defined the position of the person in *transition* between the status of foreigner and that of a full-fledged citizen endowed with all the rights attached to French nationality. The distinction was primarily legal, as the 1889 Act imposed a ten-year waiting period for recently naturalized French persons before they could hold a seat in Parliament. Other civic-rights restrictions were added in the twentieth century, in particular a five-year ban on voting after naturalization, introduced in 1938 (Weil 2004). In other words, statisticians did not follow the law but anticipated it by the end of the nineteenth century by introducing a distinction between French citizens according to their origins via a question on the means of nationality acquisition.

In the early twentieth century, the nationality question in the census underwent few changes: the “foreigner? from what nation?” choice became “foreigner? from what country?” in 1901. That same year, the “born of French parents” option became “born French,” then “French by birth” in 1921. As Alexis Spire and Dominique Merllié point out (1999), the latter amendments were, no doubt, due to the fact that, before 1927, a French woman would lose her nationality when she married a foreigner (by virtue of the 1803 Civil Code): “The Civil

7. This term, as Noiriel points out (1988), does not appear in any dictionary before the late 1880s. The meaning we give it here is the one commonly accepted today. The contemporary statistical definition was prepared by the Higher Council on Integration (Haut Conseil à l’Intégration) in 1991 and has been used in the official statistical system since. It defines “immigrants” as persons living in France, born abroad, and not possessing French nationality at birth. They can subsequently acquire French nationality: in this respect, the notions of “immigrant” and “foreigner” are not synonymous.

8. The average annual number of naturalizations rose nearly tenfold from 380 between 1871 and 1888 to over 3,300 between 1889 and 1913.

9. In a lecture at the Sorbonne in 1882.



Source: INSEE archives

Poster for 1982 population census

Code stipulated that French women marrying foreigners lost their French nationality; the instructions on the individual schedule asked them to declare themselves both French at birth and of foreign nationality; the three nationality options were therefore not all mutually exclusive.”

Statistically speaking, the problem thus arose from the fact that two women in the same situation—namely, having become foreigners by marriage—could give different answers to the nationality question in the census schedule. This ambiguity

was partly lifted by the 1927 Act, which allowed women marrying foreigners to keep their French nationality. Consequently, only those women who had “expressly” renounced their French nationality were obliged to make the double declaration mentioned above.

Beyond these slight adjustments, the main outcome was the persistence of the nationality question in the census, i.e., the fact that “beyond the form of the question, the principle of a distinction between French citizens based on the means of nationality

acquisition became a permanent feature of the census” (Spire and Merli , *op. cit.*). In practice, therefore, France’s opening to foreigners, promoted by its legislation, was offset by a greater legal separation (1) between French citizens and foreigners (for example, certain jobs, particularly in the civil service, were reserved for French citizens) but also (2) between the French themselves according to whether they were naturalized or French by birth.¹⁰ Both of these separations were enshrined in the population census.

The Vichy regime marked a break in the attitude toward nationality law, as in the use of the census. The Occupation was one of the main moments of what Patrick Weil (2002) calls the “ethnic crises of French nationality.” From 1940 to 1944, the policy enacted by the regime ran counter to the priorities of the Third Republic. Whereas the latter had encouraged naturalizations (cf. the 1889 and 1927 Acts), Marshal P tain’s government severely restricted them and challenged the naturalizations granted since 1927.

During the Vichy years, the term “census” was often associated with anti-Jewish policy, as in September 1940, when the Germans ordered a census of Jews in the “northern zone” (i.e., the part of France under direct German occupation). Two “Jewish statutes” (October 3, 1940, and June 2, 1941) defined a person as Jewish on the basis of the number of his or her Jewish grandparents (the statutes speak of “Jewish race”¹¹).

10. This distinction between French citizens by means of nationality acquisition grew sharper until World War II. In addition to the ten-year ineligibility period (introduced in 1889 and extended to all elected offices in 1927) and the five-year voting ban after naturalization, the authorities introduced restrictions on employment categories open to new citizens. In 1935, lawyers’ and doctors’ lobbies convinced the government to ban recently naturalized French citizens from entering their professions for a “probation” period (ten years for lawyers, five years for doctors) after naturalization (Noiriel, 1988).

11. It should be pointed out that the notion of “Jewish race” was imposed not by the Germans (who, in the September 27 ordinance, referred only to the Jewish *religion*), but by the Vichy government itself.

The second statute added a religious criterion. These criteria paved the way for the census of Jews in the Vichy-administered “southern zone” and the German-occupied northern zone by late 1940. Another consequence was the introduction of a “Jews” category in the “census of occupational activities” conducted in the southern zone in 1941 (Levy 2000). This census is not comparable to the pre-war censuses, particularly as it was confined to the population aged 13-65 and as the introduction of question 11, among others (“do you belong to the Jewish race?”), was motivated by the Vichy regime’s anti-Jewish policy.

Coverage of geographic origins was enhanced by that of individual life histories

The post-war years saw a restoration of the overall *status quo ante* in the field of nationality law, albeit with slight amendments to the very liberal provisions of 1927.¹² The survival of most of the inter-war legislation may explain why the questions on individuals’ origins continued to be addressed in similar terms in the census. The 1946 individual schedule did, however, feature some minor changes: for example, the choice “French by naturalization” was now followed by a list, in parentheses, of specific means of acquiring nationality: “including marriage, declaration, choice.” In other words, statisticians continued to define naturalization in a “broad” sense, comprising both (1) procedures that the 1945 nationality code qualified as naturalization in the strict sense

(nationality granted not *de jure* but by administrative decision), and (2) “automatic” acquisition of nationality, resulting from the application of a right (*jus soli* for acquisition of nationality at majority, or right arising from marriage to a French spouse, etc.). By contrast, starting in 1954, individual census schedules clearly separated naturalization from other means of nationality acquisition. The choice “French by naturalization” was followed by the words in parentheses “or by marriage, declaration, [or] option,” the initial “or” replacing the “including” of the 1946 schedule.

The distinctions between French citizens by means of nationality acquisition therefore persisted in law¹³ and in the census. One of its most striking applications was in colonial administration. The example of Algeria, discussed by Alexis Spire and Dominique Merllié (1999), is particularly enlightening as it shows the value of studying the treatment of geographic origin not only in the individual schedule but also in census-takers’ practices. Back in the 1921 census, “coding instructions” had already recommended that all persons with Muslim last names and first names should be classified among “natives, whether French subjects or persons under French protection, even if they had declared themselves French” (Singer-Kerel 1986). In the postwar years, the 1946 constitution granted the status of “French” to persons from the “French Union” (i.e., French overseas possessions). This provision, followed by the “organic statute for Algeria” (Act of September 20, 1947), led to a situation where “persons with a civil status as French under ordinary law” (*Français de statut civil de droit commun*) lived alongside “persons with a civil status as French under personal law” (*Français de statut civil de droit personnel*), in other words, “Muslim French persons.” The latter were subject to local law (most notably, to the jurisdiction of the “kadi’s court”¹⁴ in localities where such courts existed) but were deprived of most political

rights granted to the French. This “degraded” citizenship was merely the perpetuation of the “native code” (*code de l’indigénat*) instituted in 1887 and abolished in 1946, except in Algeria, where it lasted almost until the country’s independence in 1962. However, the distinction between “persons with a civil status as French under ordinary law” and “Muslim French persons” did not appear as such in the census: again, the statistical administration offices relied on approximation, using a list of “the most common Muslim first names observed in civil registers in Algeria” (Lacroix and Thave 1997). This enabled official statisticians, in the tables published in 1954 and 1962, to divide “French persons by birth” into two categories, “Muslims of Algerian origin” and “Other than Muslims of Algerian origin.”

In the 1960s, decolonization made the distinction between French “citizens” and French “subjects” obsolete. The shift is perceptible via the question on place of birth, worded almost identically from the late nineteenth century to 1946. Since 1901, persons born in the colonial empire had been asked to indicate their “colony” of origin (the 1896 census specified “colony or possession” but the term “possession” was later removed). The term “colony” survived to 1946. The 1954 and 1968 schedules used the expression “overseas country” (*pays d’outre-mer*), whereas the 1962 schedule made no reference to the territories of the former colonial empire. From 1975 onward, only French overseas territories (*territoires d’outre-mer*: TOMs) were distinguished from French *départements* (including the overseas *départements d’outre-mer*: DOMs) and other countries. Questions on persons’ origins were thus closely linked to questions on territorial boundaries.

The legal distinction between French by birth and naturalized French was also challenged, and totally eliminated in the early 1980s: all French citizens were now equal by law regardless of the means by which

12. In particular, the length of residence in France required before applying for naturalization was extended to five years from the three years stipulated in the 1927 Act.

13. In addition to the ten-year ineligibility period after naturalization, the five-year ban on voting—passed into law just before the war—was maintained in 1945.

14. A kadi is a Muslim magistrate exercising civil, judicial, and religious functions. As Weil notes (2004), this submission to local law rested on a nationality criterion and was unrelated to the person’s religion (which, therefore, could be other than Islam).

32^e RECENSEMENT DE LA POPULATION



INSEE

LA DOCUMENTATION FRANÇAISE

Poster for 1990 population census

to indicate the year of their arrival in France (whether they were French or not). This question was eliminated in the following census, then restored in 1999 in a different form: all persons born abroad or in the DOM-TOMs had to give the year of their arrival in metropolitan France.¹⁵ In 2004, the qualifier “metropolitan” was deleted and the question was put only to persons born abroad. The contributions provided by these questions (nationality at birth, date of arrival in France) are largely informed by inputs from demographers and sociologists seeking to learn more about the composition of the French population. A fuller knowledge of the geographic origins of individuals allows a more detailed study, for example, of the integration of immigrants.

The French tradition compared with practices in the English-speaking countries

The American vision of origins is diametrically opposed to the French concept of the nation as an inseparable whole. Unlike their French equivalents, U.S. censuses clearly emphasize the differences in origin that appeared at the nation’s foundation, if only in mythical terms.

The issue of origins should be viewed in the context of the struggle by ethnic

they had acquired their nationality.¹⁵ In particular, restrictions on employment and the five-year ban on voting after naturalization were waived in 1978. The ten-year waiting period before running for elected office was abrogated in 1983 (Weil 2004). True, the census continued to reflect a differentiation of French persons by origin—and to cover it in fuller detail. But given the changes described above, we may assume that the distinction was kept not to perpetuate a legal

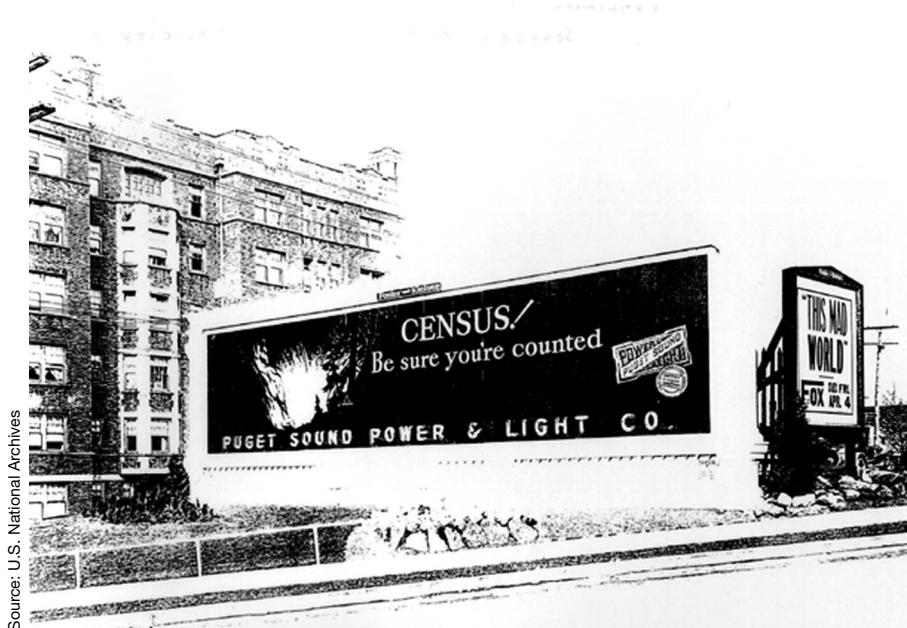
inequality but to undertake deeper research on individual life histories. The distinction was strengthened by adding specific questions for naturalized French citizens. A question on previous nationality was introduced in 1962. It remained until 2004, when it was rephrased to cover “nationality at birth.” In 1954, 1962, and 1968, persons living outside metropolitan France (abroad or in an “overseas country”) at the time of the preceding census were asked

15. At the same time, however, immigration policy was tightened, with wage-labor immigration suspended in 1974. Stricter control of immigration was accompanied by a policy of integration of foreigners already in France (granting of rights such as full freedom of association in 1981) and, for naturalized foreigners, access to the same rights as French citizens by birth.

16. Note that the individual schedules of the overseas *départements* (DOMs), created in 1946, have exhibited only minor differences from the schedules used in metropolitan France since 1990 and are identical in the redesigned census implemented in 2004. “Overseas collectivities” (*Collectivités d’Outre-mer* [COMs], formerly the overseas territories [TOMs]) are in a different situation and would deserve separate analysis, particularly owing to the persistence of a question on the language spoken.

minorities and the assertion of their identity. Minorities unite in pressure groups to demand better statistical coverage—as a major step toward political recognition. The English word *race* is thus used directly in American censuses, and the 2000 census questionnaire [individual schedule] offered a large number of choices: White, Black, American Indian, Alaska Native (respondents were asked to report their tribes), Asian Indian, and so on. The construction principle for these categories reflected the dual meaning of the term *race*, which denotes both (1) a group defined by inherited physical characteristics and (2) an “ethnic group” characterized, instead, by the sharing of a common culture. Hispanic-American lobbies have obtained the right to be listed as a separate entity in the national statistics, even though they do not constitute a “race” but, in effect, a cultural and linguistic community.

British censuses, for their part, reflect strong hesitations on the value and necessity of including respondents’ geographic origins in the national statistics. Unlike in America, British politicians, academics, and community representatives were long skeptical on the issue. In the 1960s, several tests were performed using indirect questions. An initial attempt was made in 1966 for persons from the Commonwealth, on the basis of residents’ places of birth. In 1971, a question on the origin of parents was introduced. Finally, in 1991, the government and the statistical authorities gave up indirect questioning in favor of “self-declaration” from a list of ethnic origins: White, Black African, Black Caribbean, other Black, Pakistani, Indian, Bangladeshi, Chinese, other ethnic groups. In 2001, the division by ethnic category was even more detailed: broad categories distinguished between Whites (among them, “British” and “Irish”), mixed (“White and Black Caribbean,” “White and Black African,” etc.), “Asians or Asian British,” “Blacks or Black British,” and lastly “Chinese or other ethnic group.” Each of these categories is divided into more detailed subcategories.



Poster for 1930 U.S. population census

The Canadian experience shows the difficulty of asking census respondents for their geographic origins. A decade earlier, respondents were asked to provide the father’s ethnic or cultural group at the time of his arrival on the continent. In 1981, this became a question on “you and your ancestors” with a choice of fifteen possible answers. The government wanted to know the ethnic and geographic origins of the population, but part of that population responded in terms of national sentiment: the “Canadian” option was not on the list, yet a significant number of respondents chose it under the heading “other.” In the 2006 census, after a note indicating that “the census has collected information on the ancestral origins of the population for over 100 years to capture the composition of Canada’s diverse population,” the questionnaire asked “what were the ethnic or cultural origins of this person’s ancestors?” In parentheses, it suggested over twenty examples of origins, starting with “Canadian” and followed by “English” and “French.” Further down, the list also included “Inuit (Eskimo)” and “Jewish.” Respondents were free to define their own origins. The question on geographic provenance of ancestors

became a question of opinion, reflecting a sense of attachment to an origin. The question was supplemented by, among other things, information on language, but also by a choice resembling U.S. practice in its blend of “race” and nationality (White, Black, Arab, Filipino, etc.), and by a question on the parent’s country of birth. The latter, last asked in 1971, was reintroduced in 2001.

How can we explain the differences with the questions on geographic origin of individuals asked in French censuses? The first possible answer is specific to the history of France (and to the period of the Vichy regime in particular), and centers on the fear of misuse of ethnic data. The same motive has generated a reluctance to envisage a population register listing changes of residence, as in Belgium and the Nordic countries (Héran 2004). However, our glimpse of the history of population censuses shows that prudence with regard to data on geographic origin was visible in France by the late nineteenth century. This followed a period of hesitation in which statisticians sometimes faced protests, for example on religion and nationality questions in 1851.

The French choice must also be viewed in terms of the intrinsic nature of the census. While the inclusion of certain information items on individuals' geographic origin in French twentieth-century censuses may have been deemed inappropriate, this does not mean that such issues were not of interest to government officials. Several INSEE surveys, for instance, include questions on the language, religion, and geographic origin of respondents' parents.¹⁷ Perhaps the best illustration is the "Study of

Family History" survey: performed concurrently with the 1999 census, it comprised questions on geographic origin (including parents' country of birth), on the language spoken, and on family and social trajectories (Cassan *et al.* 2000). Questions that could not be incorporated into the census itself have been asked "on the side" as part of a sample survey. Thus the attitude of French statisticians should not be seen as reflecting an impossibility for them to use statistics on geographic origin, nor even as a form of self-

ensorship, but as a genuine effort to match these statistics with census goals.¹⁸ ■

17. INSEE's 2003 "Life-History Survey" includes, for example, questions on religion. However, respondents are not asked to name their religion explicitly.

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