

French citizenship campaigners may find acceptance depends on far more than official papers

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Liberté, égalité, fraternité: Eugene Delacroix's Liberty Leading the People – the female symbol of the French republic, and one of its three founding principles. The Louvre/Wikipedia

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Fashioning themselves in the same vein as the *gilets jaunes*, France's populist economic justice movement, the *gilets noirs* activists are highlighting the latest chapter in the country's ongoing debate around immigration.

A collective of undocumented migrants protesting injustices against their number, the *gilet noirs* have staged three high-profile occupations this year. The most recent took place at the Panthéon – the resting place of many distinguished French citizens – where protesters railed against big business exploiting undocumented migrants and demanded the legal right to residency in France.

While their demands for identity papers and housing for all have been met with support from French intellectuals and artists, on social media the responses have been less enthusiastic.

At first glance, the absence of hospitality and, in cases, outright hostility towards the immigrants, stems from the fact that they fail to meet the criteria for French citizenship.

'Gilets Noirs' protesters occupy Pantheon in Paris over migrant r...



Citizenship is the nation's membership card. For many, to be born with it is to be French. To become eligible only at a certain point (such as children born in France to foreign parents, who become French citizens at 18), is considered to be less than a full citizen of the nation. This deference to legal status is at the heart of the policies of “Fortress Europe” – the hostile environment created by governments across the continent that leads to the “othering” of migrants and refugees.

But France's history tells us that this fetishisation of citizenship is a red herring. It serves to distract from the reality that identity papers are not always sufficient for social acceptance. Skin colour, ethnicity, linguistic skill and accent all play into expectations of what a French citizen should be. These expectations are inconsistent and often more imagined than legal.

France and colonial Algeria

Nearly 60 years ago in the summer of 1962, the French press was filled with similar expressions of hostility directed towards the French settler population returning to France in the wake of the Algerian war of independence.

Europeans had settled in Algeria shortly after the French conquest in 1830. Algeria soon made up the largest settler colony in the French empire, and was incorporated as an integral part of the French national territory in 1848. When the Algerian War broke out in 1954, French settlers in Algeria numbered around **one million**, making up 10% of the population.

Initially, the French public largely supported the efforts to keep Algeria French, but as the conflict dragged on, enthusiasm waned. When Charles de Gaulle came to power in 1958 and then introduced his policy of self-determination for Algerians, the sheer numbers of the Muslim population meant that the outcome was only a matter of time.

The closing months of the war saw the situation worsen for the settlers. After the signing of the Evian Accords marked the official end of the war with a ceasefire on March 19, 1962, the pro-colonial Secret

Army Organisation (OAS), launched a new campaign of violence aimed at destabilising the moves towards peace.

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The OAS's targets were disparate: the French army, the Algerian nationalists, and any settlers suspected of supporting independence. As civilian kidnappings and deaths increased, many of the settlers quietly began to quietly pack and board ships bound for France. The trickle quickly became a flood: by independence in July 1962, around 700,000 settlers had made the journey to France, most setting foot on the mainland for the first time.

Almost the entire French settler population would abandon Algeria. These settlers, referred to after independence as “pieds-noirs” – black feet – held French citizenship and had full rights to live in France. But despite being of white European origin, they were met with hostility and resentment from the residents of mainland France. Many regarded the settlers as foreign.

Some, foreshadowing the so-called migrant crisis of Syrian refugees in the last decade, feared that the flood of arrivals concealed fleeing OAS terrorists and regarded all pieds-noirs as suspect.

Many on the left, including the philosopher **Jean-Paul Sartre**, saw them as imperialists who embodied the system of colonial privilege and oppression of the natives. And others held them responsible for the deaths of thousands of young French conscripts who had been sent to fight in Algeria. Opinion polls conducted in 1962 show that the majority of the French felt no obligation towards the settlers, despite their shared nationality.

Arriving en masse with few possessions, exhausted and overwhelmed, the repatriates had the appearance of bedraggled refugees as they queued to seek modest benefits, accommodation and jobs.

The hostile treatment they experienced has made its way into pied-noir folklore: landlords refusing to rent to repatriates; taxi-drivers imposing exorbitant fares; Communist dockworkers dropping crates of belongings into the docks at Marseilles; widespread bullying of repatriate children. Citizenship

granted them the right to live in France, but it was no protection against the discrimination and bullying endured by many.



The unofficial flag of the 'pieds noirs'. Wikipedia

Citizenship and acceptance

From one perspective, the integration of the pieds-noirs was a success story. Their arrival coincided with the economic boom of the “Trente Glorieuses” – the 30-year period of post-war economic growth which transformed the everyday lives of French people – and within a decade most were assimilated into French society.

Yet these repatriates were slow to forget the hostile atmosphere which greeted them in 1962. They gained a reputation for colonial nostalgia and a tendency to vote for the far right Front National/Rassemblement National, which supported the cause of French Algeria.

Their experience reminds us that citizenship is neither a guarantee of acceptance, nor a defence against the lasting traumas of exile. If the gilets noirs are successful in their demands for French identity papers, they may find that their struggle for acceptance continues.



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