

# Art, Power and Protest

## Immigrants' Artistic Production and Political Mobilisation in France

ANGÉLINE ESCAFRÉ-DUBLET  
(National Institute for Demographic Studies (INED), Paris)

---

### Abstract

The mobilisation of second generation immigrants in the early 1980s in France has often been studied from the perspective of social movements and political participation. The presence of various forms of artistic creation as crucial vehicles for the expression of this generation has also been mentioned but rarely linked to the mobilisation itself. Drawing from an investigation on artistic initiatives conducted before and after the March for Equality and Against Racism in France (also referred to as the '*Marche des Beurs*'), this paper examines issues of representation, mobilisation and strategies of appropriation as expressed through artistic creation. It argues that immigrants' artistic production contributes to the expression of minority-related demands by enabling particular interests to be represented and by challenging institutionalised interpretations of culture. It investigates the opportunity for immigrant artists to articulate minority-related demands through artistic creation and analyses the relationship between immigrant artists and cultural institutions.

---

### Introduction

The political mobilisation of first and second generation immigrants has often been studied from the perspective of social movements and political participation (Siméant 1998; Wihtol de Wenden 1988). In the French context, authors have argued that the general distrust of particular interests has forced immigrant groups to articulate their claims alongside labour movements and, as a result, to keep ethnic forms of expression and cultural practices in the private sphere (Rainhorn 2005; Schnapper 1974). However, this approach overlooks the fact that immigrants employ cultural means of expression to voice their specific experience. For instance, in the 1970s, immigrant activists used artistic forms of expression – in particular street theatre – to address the specific issues

they faced, in terms of living conditions but also in terms of identity construction and discrimination (Escafré-Dublet 2008c, 2009). This paper examines the contribution of immigrant artists to the political mobilisation of second generation immigrants in the early 1980s. It takes the example of the 1983 March for Equality and Against Racism and links this political event to an exhibition which took place subsequently in the Centre Georges Pompidou, 'The Children of Immigration' (January to April 1984). It contributes to the discussion on artistic practices as forms of political expression (Martiniello and Lafleur 2008) and shows how artistic production was used to address minority issues in France in the 1980s.

The specific context of the 1980s in France provides an interesting backdrop to explore the

relationship between immigrant artistic production, political mobilisation and government politics. In the autumn of 1983, a group of young people marched across France to claim their right to equal treatment and to protest against an increase in racist crimes. What was announced as the March for Equality and Against Racism was soon to be called the March of the *Beurs*, (*Beur* being the slang word for Arabs adopted by second generation immigrants of North African descent in the early 1980s). The march succeeded in raising awareness of the issues related to second generation immigrants in France, and in attracting political and media attention, and this aspect has been discussed elsewhere (Battegay and Boubeker 1993; Leveau and Wihtol de Wenden 2001). The purpose of this paper is to analyse the role of various forms of artistic expression in supporting the movement and in representing the second generation of immigrants in France. Emerging artists of immigrant descent were driven by the need to express issues pertaining to their generation. At the same time, activists found a medium to voice their demands through artistic production (music, visual arts, cinema, novels or comic strips).

The paper examines the reaction of policy makers and administrative officials to the emergence of an artistic scene in connection with the movement. Elements of a *Beur* culture have often been mentioned in the literature while little attention has been given to its politics and its relationship with state-sponsored culture (Hargreaves 1994; Silverstein 2005). Yet, in the context of 1980s France, politicians and project managers in the Ministry of Culture played an important part in promoting second generation immigrants' artistic production. What were their assessment criteria and to what extent was this a form of acknowledgement of their artistic contribution? Young artists' acceptance by the established group is one crucial element in the analysis of artistic fields (Bourdieu 1992). This paper

contributes to this discussion and explores how being an immigrant artist adds to the challenge of meeting the expectation of the established group.

The documents this article is based on were selected to give different points of view on the events described and to highlight the specificity of the artist's viewpoint. It draws upon working documents of the administration, a video of a meeting between *Beur* artists and project managers at the Ministry of Culture in the wake of the March, and interviews with artists and administrative officials.<sup>1</sup> It explores the point of view on immigrant cultural production from ministers, administrative officials, curators and artists.

Two further points should be clarified in this introduction. First, being a second generation immigrant in the early 1980s meant being born of immigrant parents who had arrived in France during the mass immigration of the post-war period. It meant that those parents were from former colonial countries - mainly Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco, but not exclusively. Portuguese migrants represented a major share of the post-war inflow. In 1974, 16.9 percent of immigrants were Portuguese and 14.3 percent were Algerians.<sup>2</sup> However, the expression 'second generation immigrants' tends to refer mainly to people of non-European descent. This can be explained by the racial construction of the Other in society and the clear divide that has long existed between European and non-European migrants (Blanchard et al. 2005). In the early 1980s, the young people who looked different from the rest of French society were those of North African descent. Ultimately, this leads to a focus on immigrant cultural production in the 1980s from the perspective of the *Beur* generation, while questioning how this

<sup>1</sup> All materials were collected during fieldwork conducted for a PhD dissertation in modern history, Escafré-Dublet 2008a.

<sup>2</sup> National Census of 1974, Source: INSEE (National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies).

particular group of people was brought to the forefront and why.

Second, the demonstration requires that a distinction be made between two meanings of the word culture. On the one hand, the tradition of the Ministry of Culture has established a meaning of culture restricted to its artistic component. When created by Charles De Gaulle in 1959, the Ministry of Culture was headed by French writer André Malraux and, since then, its activities have ranged from maintaining the French artistic heritage to supporting artistic production and performances in music, dance or theatre (Lebovics 1999). On the other hand, when second generation immigrants went on a march to ask for equal treatment and the acknowledgement of the multicultural component of society, their claim was cultural from an anthropological point of view. Their demand covered a broader definition of culture that encompasses the various systems of signs and symbols that give meaning to a group. It implied that they were asking to be acknowledged for their own contribution to the national community. The issue with immigrant cultural production in this paper lies in the tension between these two meanings given to the word culture: when immigrants' cultures are considered for their artistic component, and when the issue concerns their place in the national community.

The paper argues that immigrants' artistic production contributes to the expression of minority-related demands by enabling particular interests to be represented and by challenging institutionalised interpretations of culture. It is divided into three parts. First, it examines the artistic scene surrounding the French "*Beur* movement" in the 1980s and the connection between artists and militants. Second, it investigates the opportunity for immigrant artists to articulate minority-related demands through artistic creation. Third, it addresses issues of representation through artistic creation and relationships between

immigrant art and an institutionalised state-funded type of culture.

### **The Artistic Scene around the March of the Beurs**

It has often been argued that the March for Equality and Against Racism was cultural in the sense that the marchers were asking for recognition of the multicultural character of French society and therefore referring to the anthropological meaning of the word culture. This was pointed out by Secretary of State for Immigrant Workers Georgina Dufoix at the time, and it is still her point of view on the event.<sup>3</sup> However, I argue that the March was also cultural in the artistic sense of the word, because it was associated with a counter culture and it shed light on an emerging artistic scene. After describing the mobilisation itself, I will analyse the marchers' choices in terms of protest culture and the components of the counter culture associated with the event.

#### *The March for Equality and Against Racism*

The mobilisation itself was rooted in the context of insecurity plaguing the life of second generation immigrants at the turn of the 1980s. Numerous racist crimes took place in the summer of 1983 and the event which sparked the March was linked, in particular, to the difficult relationship between the police and young people living in neglected areas of big cities: while the police were patrolling a group of housing projects on the outskirts of Lyon - the 'Les Minguettes' neighbourhood - a young boy was bitten by a police dog. In reaction to this, a young man named Toumi Djaidja confronted the policeman. A 20-year-old son of a *Harki*<sup>4</sup>, Toumi Djaidja was the

<sup>3</sup> *Libération* December 4 1983, and interview by the author with Georgina Dufoix, 12 September 2006.

<sup>4</sup> *Harki* refers to the French Muslims who enrolled in the French army during the Algerian war of independence (Hamoumou 1994).

founder and president of the local association *SOS Minguettes*. During his altercation with the policeman a shot was fired, injuring the young man.<sup>5</sup> Toumi Djaidja was then taken to hospital, where he stayed for a few days and was visited by his fellow association members. On the advice of Father Delorme, a local priest involved in the association *CIMADE*<sup>6</sup>, the group of young people decided to launch a march that would cross the country, from the south of France (Marseille) to Paris.

When the 'marchers' arrived in Paris, thousands of people gathered at the Place de la Bastille. Such a successful mobilisation was by no means guaranteed from the outset, considering how the project started. The marchers had set out as a small group of people, leaving the city of Marseille on 15 October 1983. Even though they could count on the support of local socialist party units in their trek across the country, they could only really rely on the solidarity of local immigrant associations in terms of food and accommodation.<sup>7</sup> However, they managed to arouse the sympathy of the population they encountered on their way, and when they were nearing the capital, a number of senior political officials came to meet them: the Secretary of State for Immigrant workers, Georgina Dufoix, on 20 November in Strasbourg; the Minister of Culture, Jack Lang, on 29 November; and the Minister of Social Affairs, Pierre Bérégovoy, on 1 December. Upon their arrival in Paris, a delegation of marchers was invited to meet the President of the Republic, François Mitterrand. When the marchers walked out of the Presidential Palace, they had received a promise that foreigners would be granted a residence permit of up to 10 years, which had

been a long-standing demand of immigrant associations and was therefore a major political achievement (Weil 2005).

*The Choice of a Specific Protest Culture: the Reference to the Civil Rights Movement*

The young activists adopted a form of protest culture that emphasised their political demands. They chose to organise a march instead of a demonstration and in doing so made explicit reference to the Civil Rights Movement and the March on Washington of 1963.<sup>8</sup> It was a strong break in terms of protest culture, in comparison with the form of mobilisation chosen by immigrant groups during the previous decade. In the 1970s, immigrants who fought for foreign workers' rights mobilised along the same line as the labour movement in France; they organised street demonstrations, following the call of various immigrant workers' associations (Siméant 1998). In addition to this, protest was focused around the rights of non-citizens, whereas the young activists were French citizens and their demands were framed in terms of equal treatment and anti-racism. The Civil Rights Movement in the United States had managed to put an end to a discriminatory regime, the segregation system of the southern states (McAdam 1999). In their attempt to establish a link with the struggle against segregation, the young activists placed the spotlight on the discriminatory regime of which they considered themselves to be victims.

Moreover, it can be argued that such a choice underlines the transition from the popular figure of the immigrant worker, born in a foreign country, to that of the second generations whose skin colour made them *look* different to the rest of the French population.

<sup>5</sup> The description of the events appears as such in Robert Marmoz, 'Tout a commencé aux Minguettes', *Libération*, December 3 1983.

<sup>6</sup> CIMADE (Committee in aid of evacuees) is a charity organisation founded in 1939 supporting foreigners' rights, see: [www.cimade.org](http://www.cimade.org).

<sup>7</sup> Source: media coverage of the event, for instance, *Libération*, 3 December 1983.

<sup>8</sup> The decision is explicitly stated in the flyer announcing the event. Flyer included in a memo by Christian N'Guyen to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 25 November 1983 (Archives of Patrick Weil, box number 51).

The use of a different protest culture highlights both the change in demands and in the activists themselves. However, it is important to note that the break with the previous generation of immigrants was presented as such by the media but not necessarily intended this way by the young activists. It is true that the second generation was less concerned with workers' rights (some of them were actually unemployed) and also less organised along national lines (the immigrants workers' movement comprised a loosely linked group of associations: the Moroccan Association, the Algerian Committee, the General Union of Senegalese Workers, etc). Yet, the young activist Saliha Amara was reported stating: 'It is precisely because our parents fought during the Algerian War that we are what we are' (Polac 1991; see also Mara 2006). It can even be argued that the media downplayed the link with the anti-colonial struggle that still embodied the workers' movement of the 1970s and rather emphasised the new framework referring to the Black Movement. The left wing newspaper *Libération* produced headlines such as 'Beur is Beautiful' (2 December 1983). However, in their attempt to denounce discrimination and claim their right to equal treatment, the young activists who started the March were also denouncing their treatment as second-class citizens, which echoed the anti-colonial claim. There was continuity in the struggle. The major change was rather on the focus of the protest, from foreigners' rights to antidiscrimination, and this was highlighted by the change in protest culture.

*A Political and Cultural Movement: Emergence of a Counterculture During and After the Protest*

Elements of a youth counterculture gave a specific tone to the protest. In the description of the marchers, the image of young men or women walking along with their headphones over their ears was a recurrent theme in the newspapers and media, along with the idea

that these young people were part of a larger youth culture, involving portable cassette players and rock music. Accounts of the parties that took place in the public areas where they found refuge always mentioned rock music. Finally, when the marchers reached Paris, a concert featured the Lyon-based rock band, *Carte de Séjour* and its lead singer Rachid Taha.<sup>9</sup> The very name of the band – Residence Permit – appealed to the political aspirations of the marchers and the members of the band were also young people of North African descent.

Moreover, the work of some young artists, writers and filmmakers reached wider attention because it tied in with the March. For example, the newspaper *Libération* published a cartoon by Farid Boudjellal to illustrate the 'identity crisis' that all the *Beurs* were likely to experience, i.e. difficult relationships with their parents and the contrast between traditional family values and the challenge of a post-industrial society. Farid Boudjellal was already working as a cartoonist before the March, but his work drew increasing interest, and in a sense, became more meaningful after the event.

With the March for Equality and Against Racism, a number of second generation immigrant artists came to light. For instance, on 9 December 1983, the Ministry of Culture organised a meeting with *Beur* artists and activists to ask for their reactions to the event. Upon closer investigation of the Ministry of Culture's work, it is not surprising that a number of officials and project managers were familiar with this generation of artists.<sup>10</sup> This

<sup>9</sup> *Carte de Séjour* (Residence Permit) was created in 1983 in Lyon. It became famous with a cover version of Charles Trenet's song *Douce France* in 1986. Rachid Taha later pursued a solo career.

<sup>10</sup> Drawn from the archives of the Ministry of Culture and, more precisely, of the Fund for Cultural Intervention (FIC), a department of the ministry in charge of finding and funding cutting-edge projects in terms of innovation and outreach

should be placed in the specific context of the early 1980s, when Jack Lang was appointed Minister of Culture in the new socialist government, with a larger budget than his predecessors and the mission to increase the scope of its activities from high-brow culture to more popular forms of culture such as rock music, cartoons and street art (Looseley 1999). Yet, the event clearly made the work of these artists politically relevant to the ministry officials.

### **The Power of Art: Connecting the Movement**

The second part of this paper analyses the reaction of second generation immigrant artists to the political mobilisation of the March and evaluates how they aimed to 'represent' the concern of their generation through their work.<sup>11</sup> To this end, I will use the material collected during a meeting organised by the Ministry of Culture on the wake of the March, in its audiovisual and printed versions.<sup>12</sup> I will use the concept of 'generation' to argue that beyond its essential function to give identity to a group, the artistic scene of the early 1980s had political implications: it gave a sense of affinity to the movement and enabled participants to identify with a *cause*.

#### *Searching for commonality: the issue of nationality*

At first glance, it is striking that the artists invited by the Ministry of Culture to meet together six days after the March should have

---

(e.g. projects targeting rural audiences, disabled persons or immigrants).

<sup>11</sup> For an analysis of the content of their work, see Hargreaves 1994 and Silverstein 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Video footage of the debate on 9 December 1983: 'Jeunesse en quête d'une culture, les beurs prennent la parole', directed by Ali Akika, Centre for Contemporary Archives, National Archives, Fontainebleau, Number 1987 0737, article 10. In addition, the staff of the FIC also published an account of the meeting in the *Cahiers FIC* available at the Documentation Centre of the Ministry of Culture.

contrasting attitudes towards their formal membership of a second generation of immigrants.<sup>13</sup> According to Karim Kacel, he only 'discovered' that he was a 'second generation immigrant' when his album was released and journalists interviewed him as such. In contrast, Mehdi Charef recalls striving to reflect accurately the experience of his generation, with the language of the street, using short dialogues and without trying to justify the actions of his characters. In terms of a strategy of identity, these artists did not all share the same feelings either. On the one hand, Hamoud Graïa explains that before he managed to enter Patrice Chéreau's theatre company, he always refused to play the role of the typical Arab person, even though he made a point of applying to the *Conservatoire* with his 'Algerian papers'. On the other hand, Smaïn thinks that talent has no race and he agrees to play the role of a typical Arab person because he thinks that if he is good, people will forget he has 'curly hair'.

The issue of cultural ascription and the normative expectations of the audience are also pervasive in their discourse. Even though only a few of them were able to visit the country their parents left in order to settle in France, in the eyes of the audience they are associated with foreign artists. In the documentary, a journalist asks Mehdi Charef whether he feels torn about writing in French and refers to Kateb Yassin who used to complain that he *had to* write in French to make himself heard. Kateb Yassin was born in Algeria in 1929 and educated in both

---

<sup>13</sup> The guest artists included Mehdi Charef, who had just published a book on the life of two young men, Patrick and Madjid, growing up in the suburbs of Paris (Charef 1983); Smaïn, who had started out as an actor and was touring as a stand-up comedian; Karim Kacel, who had just released the album *Banlieue* with a song about the life in the suburbs (1982); Hamou Graïa, who was a theatre actor; and Rachid Khimoune, a visual artist. All of them pursued a career in their respective field and are acknowledged artists today.

languages. In the late 1950s, he became famous among avant-garde intellectuals in Paris for his works of poetry in French. Kateb Yassin and Mehdi Charef have two very different backgrounds. As Mehdi Charef explains in the documentary, he learned Arabic from his mother and only knows it in its spoken form; French is the only language in which he can write. However, in the eyes of the journalist, the two writers share similar traits. The experience of the visual artist Rachid Khimoune is similar in the sense that he used elements of calligraphy in his work because he felt that, as an artist with an Algerian background, he was expected to do so. And yet, he decided to use them for their aesthetic quality without paying attention to their meaning. According to him, artists, 'should they be English, American Japanese or Senegalese, are primarily concerned with aesthetics'.<sup>14</sup> These successive experiences tend to cause artists to reject their membership in a specific group, apart from that of the artistic community.

However, upon closer examination, the issue of nationality appears central to the thinking of these artists, and we observe the expression of a specific concern and how it translates into the different realms of politics and arts. In the discussion, Hamou Graïa explains that he made a point in applying to the *Conservatoire* with his 'Algerian papers'. And yet, he does also have 'French papers'. As for Smaïn, he mentions being willing to hold both nationalities (French and Algerian). Indeed, nationality was a burning issue at the beginning of the 1980s. Children born in France to Algerian parents born in Algeria when it was a French colony were French by virtue of the double *jus soli* (Weil 2008). And yet, for children of Algerian immigrants, French nationality could be considered as a betrayal of their parents' fight for the independence of

Algeria.<sup>15</sup> This issue is also reflected in the film Mehdi Charef later directed entitled *Le Thé au Harem d'Archimède*. In addition to the story of the book, he included a scene during which the young Majid meets with a counsellor in the unemployment agency (Charef 1985). The latter recommends that he takes French nationality to be able to apply for an apprenticeship. Madjid refuses, and later on in the film his mother runs after him accusing him of being lazy and not working, to which he answers he could very well work if he took French nationality. Hearing these words, Majid's mother becomes angry and shouts at him: 'Never, do you hear me? You will never take French nationality!' This issue was central for the marchers. In an interview for the newspaper *Libération*, one of them, Rachida, elaborates on the issue and explains that she would not take French nationality even if it makes things complicated to find a job because she would consider it a betrayal.<sup>16</sup>

#### *Connecting the Movement*

When looking at the issue of nationality, we observe the successive contributions of activists and artists to the expression of one specific issue pertaining to second generation immigrants. However, more than the mere 'illustration' of a common experience, I argue that activists relied on artists and their work to provide credentials for their mobilisation and give identity to the movement. A discussion between writer Mehdi Charef and activist Magid Benbouriche, shows that the artistic component was part of Benbouriche's political strategy. When Mehdi Charef acknowledges that he did not formally take part in the mobilisation ('I saw the March from the other side, I did not take to the streets') and adds

<sup>14</sup> Interview by the author with Rachid Khimoune, Aubervilliers, 16 June 2003.

<sup>15</sup> On Algerians' difficulties in admitting to having 'French papers', see Abdelmalek Sayad, *The Suffering of the Immigrant*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2004.

<sup>16</sup> 'Rachida ou le féminin de beur', *Libération*, 4 December 1983.

that it is better when activists or community leaders 'show the way', Magid Benbouriche answers: 'The work that [Mehdi Charef] did with his book reflects our experience in French society. It is our task, as community organisers, to interpret his work.'<sup>17</sup> Mehdi Charef and Magid Benbouriche suggest a form of 'task distribution' between the work of the artist and the mobilisation of the activists; although each of them uses different tools, both have the same collective objective to bear witness and change the living conditions of second generation immigrants.

The artistic component was part of the mobilisation because it helped create a feeling among young people that they were facing a 'generational issue'. When social scientists mention 'second generations', they refer to the demographic meaning of the word generation. The 'second generations' are the children of the newcomers. In the study of immigrant processes and adaptation, this term refers specifically to various experiences such as acculturation, ethnic construction and integration (Portes and Rumbaut 2001). However, in the early 1980s, journalists and politicians used the term 'second generation' to refer to a specific group of young people of North African descent, who grew up in neglected areas and who encountered discrimination (particularly on the job market). Arguably, many second generation immigrants felt uncomfortable to be associated with a group of people that they did not necessarily identify with - more specifically second generation Portuguese immigrants who felt their specific experience was not being addressed.

However, in line with Mannheim's theory of generation, which differentiates between *generational sites* and *generational units*, it can be stated that second generation immigrants shared a common *generational site* (being in their early 20s and having immigrant

parents), but the March opened their eyes to their common destiny and to their membership of a *generational unit*. According to Mannheim, *generational units* 'are characterised by the fact that they do not merely involve a loose participation by a number of individuals differently, but an identity of responses, a certain affinity in the way in which all move with and are formed by their common experiences' (Mannheim 1990: 62). It can be argued that art was the element that contributed to the 'affinity' in the way second generation immigrants experienced the early 1980s in France.

A *Beur* movement existed thanks to the combination of a mobilisation for the equal treatment of second generation immigrants, predominantly of North African descent, and the cultural production that echoed the cause. Most likely, the *Beurs* represented the tip of the iceberg; their demands and their profile did not accurately represent the rest of their cohort. However, a combination of factors such as political mobilisation and artistic production connected a generation of young people in a way that gave context to the expression 'Beur movement' or 'Beur generation'.

### **The Art of Power: Strategies of Appropriation**

The paper now turns to the perspective of a cultural institution - the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris - and analyses how it 'represented' the contribution of immigration through the 'Children of Immigration' exhibition (January - April 1984). The initial project was to showcase the cultural contribution of immigrants to society. However, the context of the March gave it a political tone and led to various strategies of appropriation on the part of politicians and activists. The example of this exhibition provides a means to analyse issues of rating and evaluation by an institution of higher culture when it comes to the promotion of

<sup>17</sup> Quotation from video footage of the 9 December 1983 debate: "Jeunesse en quête d'une culture...", *op.cit.*



emerging forms of art. I will argue that the institution subordinated its criteria to the symbolic dimension of immigrant arts and in doing so denied full legitimacy to their artistic contribution. While some of these artists eventually managed to break through, this example demonstrates the difficulty of representing particular experiences in a Universalist context.

### *The Organisation of the "Children of Immigration" Exhibition*

The project was initiated some time before the March, but the exhibition happened to be scheduled to take place right after (January - April 1984). It featured artists with an immigrant background and a large number of cultural associations were invited to come and share their experiences through videos, live performances and music (Baux and Chapelle 1984).

From the outset, the very fact that the Centre for Industrial Creation initiated the project shows that its aim was both symbolic and artistic. The Centre was created in 1969 to provide exhibitions on design, the living environment and urbanism, and aimed to initiate a reflection on people's lives and their relationship with their surroundings. It was meant to 'bring to light the forms that shape our daily life and make sure that the aesthetic and functional value of objects becomes a major preoccupation for manufacturers' (Centre Georges Pompidou 1985). In February 1982, the department's head, Paul Blanquart, was an urban sociologist who wanted to explore not only the aesthetics of the urban environment but also its social component. With this in mind, he decided to launch an exhibition on the cultural contribution of second generation immigrants in French society. His approach was that of a social scientist. He aimed to explore social practices and their impact in terms of cultural transformation. He was also in line with the new approach adopted by the Ministry of

Culture; in search of innovation and looking at the creative power of a new generation.

Josée Chapelle was appointed curator for the exhibition in 1983. With Veronique Baux, assistant curator, they started to scan the field of immigrant initiatives, in search of innovative projects. In an interview, Josée Chapelle placed emphasis on their decision to search for activities outside the usual official paths.<sup>18</sup> Yet, looking at the artists who took part in the exhibition, it is clear that the sculptor Rachid Khimoune or the writer Mehdi Charef were already in contact with the institution, that is, the Ministry of Culture (cf. their participation in the debate described above). However, when discussing this matter with Josée Chapelle, it appeared that she meant the usual official organisations which promoted immigrants' culture of origin. Indeed, the preservation of immigrants' cultural links with their culture of origin was the target of numerous organisations mandated by sending states, such as the *Amicale des Algériens* or the *Amicale des commerçants et travailleurs marocains*. These organisations were not spontaneous initiatives arising from the immigrant community, but rather nationalistic political structures that foreign governments initiated to maintain migrants' loyalty to the national ideology of the new independent countries such as Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia or Senegal. It is not clear whether these kinds of organisations had a real impact on immigrants' cultural life. However, they had been the main contact organisations for French officials in their attempt to act upon immigrants' cultural life in the previous decade (Escafre-Dublet 2008b). In her attempt to collect innovative artistic work, Josée Chapelle clearly sought to move away from the official line of the emigration states.

The organisation of the exhibition encountered obstacles that demonstrate the complexity and the political potential of such

---

<sup>18</sup> Interview by the author with Josée Chapelle, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 20 May 2003.

an event. Although Josée Chappelle and Veronique Baux had been working on the exhibition for a few months, the director of the Centre for Industrial Creation decided to stop the project, arguing that it would cost too much. It was true that the organisation of the exhibition included the funding of costly community projects. However, according to Josée Chappelle, the more likely reason was that the director was afraid of too strong a political mobilisation around this exhibition. Eventually, the curators and artists, who were already involved in the project, lobbied the ministry of Culture and the Social Action Fund (an administrative unit under the supervision of the Secretary of State for Immigrant Workers) and obtained some more funding.<sup>19</sup> The exhibition did open in January 1984, and is an interesting *locus* to examine the strategies of appropriation of both activists and political officials.

#### *The Symbolic Dimension for the Socialist Government*

The Minister of Culture Jack Lang, together with Secretary of State for Immigrant Workers Georgina Dufoix, opened the exhibition on 8 January 1984; a premiere for an exhibition featuring immigrant art, and not something that was usual for the Centre George Pompidou, either. In their speeches, both made the link with the March and announced more funding for immigrant cultural production in the future. From the viewpoint of government politics, it was clear that ministers had to show that they stood side by side with the young 'children of immigration' and not against them. When the marchers reached the Place de la Bastille on December 3 1983, Georgina Dufoix had tried to make a speech announcing new legal sanctions against racist

acts but had faced the whistles of the crowd gathered in front of her. This had been later explained by young activists as a sign that their support should not be taken for granted by the government even though their political positioning was clearly on the left.<sup>20</sup> With her presence at the opening of a show at the Centre Georges Pompidou – a field of activity slightly outside the scope of her responsibility – Georgina Dufoix demonstrated that she was open to the various forms of expression that the second generation of immigrants decided to chose, should it be politics or art.

From the viewpoint of French cultural policies, Jack Lang was there to show that the Ministry of Culture was ready to consider immigrants' art for its artistic value, to recognise its quality, and beyond that, to acknowledge its legitimacy. In this sense, Jack Lang's visit to the marchers, and later on, his presence at the opening of the Pompidou exhibition, indicated that the Ministry of Culture intended to make immigrant cultural production a new area of intervention and expertise.

This has to be placed in the context of the relationship between France and the governments of certain emigration countries. As mentioned above, it was considered that immigrants' cultural life was the exclusive domain of their government of origin. Regarding second generation immigrants, the French government could claim a right to address their cultural needs by virtue of the fact that they would become French nationals at the age of 18. However, in the specific context of Franco-Algerian political relations, this was a highly sensitive matter. In 1983, the French government was in the process of re-negotiating agreements with Algeria, and the Algerian government proved touchy on the topic of second generation Algerian immigrants growing up in France. The Algerian official line was to condemn the 'de-culturation' or the

<sup>19</sup> 360 000 francs from the Ministry of Culture and 150 000 francs from the Social Action Fund, i.e. 52 percent of the total budget for the exhibition. From a document found in the archives of the Centre Georges Pompidou, 1984.

<sup>20</sup> *Libération*, 6 December 1983.

French 'cultural invasion' of their identity.<sup>21</sup> Against this backdrop, the Algerian government looked unfavourably upon Jack Lang's visit to the marchers and the prospect that second generation Algerian immigrants could become the target of French cultural politics.<sup>22</sup> The fact that the Minister of Culture opened the exhibition proved symbolic in the sense that he acknowledged the second generation's artistic contribution but also indicated that he intended to make it an area of intervention, which was a new political approach to second generation immigrants' cultural life.

#### *The Political Potential for Immigrant Political Activists*

The immigrant militant scene was also quick to recognise the political potential of the event. The newly formed IM'média agency took part in the project and seized the opportunity of the exhibition to criticise the institution and government politics. IM'média was created in 1983 out of the 'mobilisation of twenty or so young immigrants living in several French cities with the objective of participating in the production of information about young people living in disadvantaged areas and of combating the general distrust between young people and journalists'.<sup>23</sup> IM'média connected a network of associations in France, from which a number of video montages were selected and featured in the exhibition.

However, upon closer investigation of the funding application of IM'média to the Social Action Fund, it appears that Samir Abdallah, former founder of immigrant newspaper *Sans*

*Frontière*, was part of the project, along with Paulo Moreira, who worked on *Mosaïque* (a TV show about immigrants' life in France). Not just initiated by 'twenty or so young immigrants', it was rather the case that some experienced activists in the field of immigration news decided to connect various emerging associations into a network for the promotion of information on young immigrants. During the exhibition, IM'média issued a magazine describing the event and criticising the content for not sufficiently addressing issues relating to second generation immigrants' life in France.<sup>24</sup> In an article entitled 'Cultural New Deal' ('New Deal culturel') they criticised the institutional 'grip' of the Centre Georges Pompidou on the content of the exhibition. In doing so, IM'média maintained a traditional form of political opposition to the institution when it comes to immigrant cultural production. In the 1970s, the government had also resorted to cultural means to support its return policy (organisation of a theatre festival entitled *Le Printemps des Peuples Présents*, for instance). Even though the change in political orientation was strong between the two periods, the activists demonstrated that they could still exert oppositional pressure.

#### *The Challenge of Representing Immigration*

From the viewpoint of the second generation immigrant artists participating in the show, the issue lies in the tension between the acknowledgement of their work for their immigrant background and not for its artistic value. The primary focus of the exhibition being to *acknowledge* the cultural contribution of second generation immigrants, the artistic quality of the work was not the priority for the curators of the show. According to Josée Chappelle, their aim was to state that second

<sup>21</sup> 'De-culturation' was mentioned in the notes of the first conference on French emigration organised by the Algerian government in Algiers (February 1973); 'cultural invasion' was mentioned in a letter sent from the French ambassador in Algeria to the foreign ministry in France (20 May 1984).

<sup>22</sup> Notes included in the working documents of Secretary of State Georgina Dufoix, 20 May 1984.

<sup>23</sup> Funding application from IM'média found in the Notes from the Administrative Board of the Social Action Fund, 19 January 1984.

<sup>24</sup> M'Média, "Le New Deal culturel à Beaubourg", *Bulletin de l'agence IM'Média*, 18 January to 23 April 1984, Paris: Agence IM'Média. Archives of the Centre national d'art et de culture, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France.

generation self-expression existed, 'here it is'.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, the show featured works from both professional and amateur artists presented side by side. For the show, curators had commissioned works by artists such as the sculptor Mohand Amara, the artist Mehdi Lallaoui, the photographer Joseph Marando and visual artist Rachid Khimoune. Their works were displayed among various projects initiated by community organisations: a video montage from a group of young people from Montbéliard, some pencil drawings and some poems from another group. According to Khimoune, when he came to install his work, he found himself among young people who 'did not know what they were doing'<sup>26</sup> and to him, they contrasted with artists like him; he had studied at the Beaux Arts and was trying to start a professional career (by then, he had had a number of solo and group shows, cf. Khimoune 2001). Khimoune had been involved in the support committee to maintain the exhibition when Paul Blanquart had called for its halt, and before the exhibition opened, he met with Jack Lang and other artists at the Ministry of Culture. There is no denying that having his work on display at the Centre Georges Pompidou was an important stage in his career. However, Khimoune expressed a feeling of frustration by pointing out the difference between his work and some other pieces of the show. That the artist owed his participation in a collective exhibition at one of the country's major artistic institutions to his immigrant origin was problematic. 'I would rather have my work featured in an exhibition at the Centre Georges Pompidou because of its value and not because my parents were immigrants'.<sup>27</sup> Organising an exhibition on the

grounds that immigrant contribution has to be *recognised* may have led the curators to lower their standards of selection, therefore creating frustration among some artists.

The question of artistic quality and the issue of creating a double standard of selection have to be viewed from the perspective of the Ministry of Culture's mandate. When created in 1959, the ministry's role was to make accessible humanity's greatest masterpieces (as stated in the founding decree of 24 July 1959). From the outset, the work of the ministry was to select and promote works of art under certain artistic criteria that made them likely to be considered as masterpieces. Along with the task of managing museums and other artistic institutions, the administrative officials in the Ministry of Culture assumed the role of art critics. The question of artistic quality became a matter of great importance and, in the case of the Children of Immigration exhibition, creating a double standard of selection was a way to deny the fundamental right of each individual to be treated equally. French Universalism leaves few options to artistic institutions other than to apply a form of double standard when it comes to making room for symbolic forms of representation. The system lacks fluidity in accepting representative forms of art, such as minority art or forms of creative expression created by marginal groups. This comes from the original mandate of the Ministry of Culture that was to avoid the promotion of amateur and regional forms of expression in the context of the country's reconstruction after the Second World War. However, this central element to French cultural politics creates a major obstacle to the recognition of immigrants' contribution to the national culture.

Finally, in their attempt to display the cultural contribution of second generation immigrants, the organisers of the show also wanted to create a space for lively debate and

region, with his parents. He now lives and works in Aubervilliers.

<sup>25</sup> Interview by the author with Josée Chapelle, 20 May 2003.

<sup>26</sup> Interview by the author with Rachid Khimoune, Aubervilliers, 16 June 2003.

<sup>27</sup> While his father had arrived from Algeria in 1946, Rachid Khimoune was born in France and grew up in the South West. When he was a teenager, he moved to Aubervilliers, in the Paris

to bring together immigrant cultural productions with different origins (Algerians, Portuguese, Caribbean, etc.). For instance, images of Portuguese rock bands were on display side by side with African jazz dancers; performances in the amphitheatre featured music from the Caribbean on one night, North African theatre the following night and African dancers the day after. Yet, during an interview with a young girl from Montbéliard who worked with artist Antoine de Bary on an art piece about girls of North African descent and their relationship with tradition, it was clear that the time she spent in the exhibition was devoted to making contact with fellow second generation immigrants of North African descent.<sup>28</sup> This could easily be explained by the higher proportion of works produced by artists with a North African background in the exhibition, which reflected their proportion in the French population (in 1982: 14.8 percent of immigrants were Algerians; 9.1 percent were Moroccan, 5 percent were Tunisians and 15,8 percent were Portuguese).

However, transnational studies also demonstrate that the primary focus of immigrants and their children is to negotiate their cultural affiliations with both the host society and their culture of origin. It is therefore questionable that this would allow room for meeting with different cultures in the host society. That strategy is a convenient choice for the advocates of a melting pot in which all cultures come together. The organisation of the exhibition reflects this ideological principle: that all immigrant cultures should meet and demonstrate their integration into the French culture. However, this does not always match the various interests at stake, and primarily conflicts with the fact that identity construction happens at the individual level and that institutions can hardly direct the process.

## Conclusion

That immigrants' protests are cultural *per se* is reflected in the use of cultural production during and after a political mobilisation such as the March for Equality and Against Racism. Moreover, because the March had brought *Beurs* into the spotlight, and even more so, because the expression of immigrant-related diversity was politically challenging in the French context, the exhibition which opened in the Pompidou centre a month later raised a number of issues. It revealed the political symbolism of showcasing immigrant artistic contributions to the nation, but also the difficulty of acknowledging emerging forms of art in such a context: from the point of view of immigrant activists, it is never political enough; from the point of view of immigrant artists, it is never artistic enough.

The example of the *Beur* movement of the early 1980s in France provides insights for understanding issues pertaining to cultural politics and migration-related diversity. It demonstrates how immigrant artistic production can become a tool to voice immigrant demands and to contribute to connecting a movement. It shows that immigrant arts challenge national lines and help us refine our understanding of national models. It allows us to appreciate how French understanding of Universalism is expressed at the level of cultural policies towards second generation immigrants. Moreover, comparing the viewpoints of the institutional representatives, journalists, artists and immigrants, gives an insight into the general process of ethnic construction and categorisation. The picture of the 1980s is relevant for today in the sense that it contributes to our understanding of cultural ascription and ethnic categorisation. While categories inform the practice of policy-making and governance, the rationale surrounding immigrant artistic production give us insight into how they were formed.

---

<sup>28</sup> Participant in the show interviewed by the author, Paris, 12 June 2003.

## References

- BATTEGAY, A. and BOUBEKER, A. 1993. *Les images publiques de l'immigration: médias, actualité, immigration dans la France des années 1980*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- BAUX, V. and CHAPELLE, J. 1984. *Les Enfants de l'Immigration: Catalogue de l'exposition*. Paris: Centre de création industrielle.
- BLANCHARD, P. et al. (dir). 2005. *La Fracture coloniale. La Société française au prisme de l'héritage colonial*. Paris: La Découverte.
- BOURDIEU, P. 1992. *Les Règles de l'Art. Genèse et Structure du Champ Littéraire*. Paris: Seuil.
- CENTRE GEORGES POMPIDOU. 1985. Rapport d'activité. Paris: Centre national d'art et de culture.
- CHAREF, M. 1983. *Le Thé au Harem d'Archimed*. Paris: Le Mercure de France.
- CHAREF, M. dir. 1985. *Le Thé au harem d'Archimède*. Paris: KG Productions.
- ESCAFRE-DUBLET, A. 2009. "Les cultures immigrées sont elles solubles dans les cultures populaires?". *Mouvements* 57 (1): 89-96.
- ESCAFRE-DUBLET, A. 2008a. "Immigration, Culture, and the State: The Cultural Dimension of French Immigration Policies, 1958-1991". PhD diss., Sciences Po Paris.
- ESCAFRE-DUBLET, A. 2008b. "L'Etat et la culture des immigrés", *Histoire@Politique* (4).
- ESCAFRE-DUBLET, A. 2008c. "L'aventure de Mohamed prends ta valise de Kateb Yacine: histoire d'un théâtre de la contestation en milieu immigré, France-Algérie, 1972". In: P. Brasseur and M. Gonzalez, eds., *Théâtre des minorités*. Paris : L'Harmattan.
- HARGREAVES, A. 1994. *Immigration, Race and Ethnicity in Contemporary France*. London and New York: Routledge.
- HAMOUMOU, M. 1994. *Et ils sont devenus harkis*. Paris: Fayard.
- KHIMOUNE, R. 2001. *Les Enfants du Monde*. Paris: Somogy.
- LEBOVICS, H. 1999. *Mona Lisa's Escort, André Malraux and the Reinvention of French Culture*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- LEVEAU, R. and WIHTOL DE WENDEN, C. 2001. *La Bourgeoisie : Les trois âges de la vie associative issue de l'immigration*. Paris: CNRS éditions.
- LOOSELEY, D. 1999. *The Politics of Fun: Cultural Policy and Debate in Contemporary France*. Oxford: Berg.
- MARA, S. 2006. *L'impasse de la République : Récit d'enfance (1954-1962)*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- MANNHEIM, K. 1990. *Le problème des générations*. Translated by G. Mauger and N. Perivolaropoulou. Paris: Nathan.
- MARTINIELLO, M. and LAFLEUR, J.-M. 2008. "Ethnic Minorities' Cultural and Artistic Practices as Forms of Political Expression: A Review of the Literature and a Theoretical Discussion on Music". *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 34 (8): 1191 – 215.
- McADAM, D. 1999. *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- POLAC, C. 1991. "Quand les immigrés prennent la parole: histoire sociale du journal *Sans Frontière*". Master's thesis, Sciences Po, Paris.
- PORTES, A. and RUMBAUT, R. 2001. *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- RAINHORN, J. 2005. *Paris, New York, des migrants italiens, années 1880 -années 1930*. Paris: CNRS histoire.
- SCHNAPPER, D. 1974. "Centralisme et fédéralisme culturels: les immigrés italiens en France et aux Etats-Unis". *Annales ESC* 9: 1141-59.
- SIMEANT, J. 1998. *La Cause des Sans-papiers*. Paris: Presses de Sciences Po.
- SILVERSTEIN, P. 2005. *Algeria in France: Transpolitics, Race and Nation*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- WEIL, P. 2008. *How to Be French: Nationality in the Making since 1789*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- WEIL, P. 2005. *La France et ses étrangers, l'aventure d'une politique de l'immigration de 1938 à nos jours*. Paris: Gallimard.
- WIHTOL DE WENDEN, C. 1988. *Les immigrés et la politique: cent cinquante ans d'évolution*. Paris, Presses de la FNSP.

**About the author**

Angéline Escafré-Dublet holds a PhD in modern history from Sciences Po, Paris. She is currently a research fellow in the research unit on International Migration and Minorities at the National Institute for Demographic Studies (INED), Paris. Her research interests focus on the study of migration, and how this relates to matters of politics and culture, in modern Europe and North America. She teaches immigration history at Sciences Po. For a complete list of her publications, see: [http://www.ined.fr/en/current\\_researchs/researchers/bdd/nom/Escafre-Dublet+Angeline/](http://www.ined.fr/en/current_researchs/researchers/bdd/nom/Escafre-Dublet+Angeline/)