

Immigration, knowledge and power.

An interview with Gérard Noiriel

by [Nicolas DELALANDE](#) & Ivan JABLONKA

At a time when immigration and national identity have been publicly bundled together as partaking of the same conundrum, historian Gérard Noiriel revisits for [lavedesidees.fr](#) the scientific and political issues at stake behind both concepts. Interview.

An internationally renowned historian and an academic steeped in polity debates, Gérard Noiriel has been working since 1970 on a history of workers, foreigners and immigrants, reflecting all the while on the connections between social sciences and public space.

Born to an Eastern France working class family, an active member of the *Union des étudiants Communistes* in the seventies, he sustained his thesis on the Longwy steel workforce in 1982. Later, he was among the prime movers of the history of immigration in France, at a time when the national narrative left no room for the role of successive migration waves in the construction of French society. Alongside sociologists and political scientists brought together by the Review *Genèses*, he contributed to a fresh understanding of the nature of the Nation-State through the development of a “socio-historical” approach to power relations, as understood in particular by Max Weber and Norbert Elias.

Gérard Noiriel is also one of the rare historians to have undertaken a critical analysis of the state and evolution of History as a branch of learning at a time when the trend is for knowledge to fragment and for academics to drift into hyper-specialisation. The recent opening of the *Cité Nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration*

came as a public accolade to a scholar who had consistently stood against “national supremacy”. However, in May 2007, Noiriel, along with seven colleagues, resigned from the *Cité*’s Scientific Committee in protest against the creation of a “Ministry for Immigration and National Identity”.

Even as the State fights with equal energy antisocial behaviour and “suffered immigration”, Gérard Noiriel inventories for lavedesidees.fr the means available to scholars to join forces in an intellectual collective capable of wading into the public debate.

***La Vie des idées* : In the postscript to your book *Penser avec, penser contre*¹, you speak of your childhood in a *HLM*, a council estate in the Vosges, and later in a small town in Alsace, of your violent father, of the help your family received at the hands of local do-gooders. Your family – peasant-workers on one side, and an NCO grandfather supporter of Field marshal Pétain² on the other – incarnated “two ways of being defeated by History”. How did you handle your admission to major Paris institutions?**

Gérard Noiriel: I joined the staff of the *École Normale Supérieure* as a lecturer and saw this as a chance. I had gained my PhD in 1982 and was teaching in secondary education; I was looking for a post every which way I could and had applied about everywhere. I was appointed to run the master’s course in social sciences shared by *ENS* and *EHESS*³ alongside Jean-Claude Chamboredon. This was not a traumatic experience; I did not suffer the “defector” syndrome diagnosed by Pierre Bourdieu among *grandes écoles* students hailing from the lower classes. Maybe I was spared because I was older (nearly thirty-five) and I had already published several books. The way the *ENS* Social Sciences research team accepted me in its small, rough and ready unit was instrumental to this. It was lead by Jean-Claude Chamboredon with whom I became firm friends and who was like an “elder brother” to me.

My problems came later. Because, given my social background, I had no idea of academia’s social ethos; I owed my understanding of Science entirely to books. I

¹ Thinking with, Thinking against (“working title”, the book has not been published in English)

² Instrumental to holding Verdun in WWI, disgraced by his Vichy government’s collaboration with the Nazis.

³ School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences, one of France’s “*grandes écoles*” destined to educate the nation’s elites and among which the ENS rates very high indeed. Their prestige compares with Oxbridge and the Ivy league

had read all the people I invited to debates or seminars. So their territory was well known to me on paper; but I met real people not just “paper authors”. That is when I discovered aspects of Academe of which I was blissfully unaware, such as rivalries between institutions, competitive struggles, career strategies etc... This was a formative experience for me – on which I drew for my research. All the analyses I developed thereafter on the issue of “long distance relationships” are derived from this life experience.

My scientific ideal, namely critical freedom collided head on with the social – nay anthropological – dimension of the microcosm. Whereas I found it easy to criticise authors I did not know, I found it increasingly difficult to uphold that critical ideal – what I came to call after Jurgen Habermas “discourse ethics” – towards people I was in direct contact with. I understood better then why there were so few genuine debates in France. I blame the Parisian concentration of major institutions for this paralysis. There is no feasible arena for a dispassionate critique: debates turn into family quarrels in no time. It is at that level that my crash landing on the Parisian scene caused problem.

I have long puzzled over ways to remain faithful to one’s social origins whilst rising socially (and I still do). This question frequently arises in the context of immigration. But it is actually a lot broader even if its implications are amplified by migration factors. That is the whole issue of social defectors. If evolving in a social context where all the siblings progress similarly, the experience can be less painful. But in my case, I am the eldest of seven children, two of whom still work on the shop floor. It is clearly not something I can overlook, if only because, at family gatherings, I am met with the typical working class view that academics are “paid to do nothing”. This accounts for the urge I felt to question the usefulness of science. I did have to justify in my own eyes such advantages as I feel endowed with, as compared to the background I have come from.

***La Vie des idées* – Your books exude a degree of empathy for workers crushed by capitalism, for immigrants exploited and despised. In *Vivre et lutter à Longwy*⁴ (1980), you interview a young Longwy steelworker who is “reduced to unemployment with no hope of escape”. Would you today draw a parallel with**

⁴ Lives and Struggles in Longwy. (“working title”: the book has not been translated).

inner city youths such as those Younès Amrani refers to in Pays de malheur!⁵, co-written with Stéphane Beaud?

Gérard Noiriel: There are indeed some common threads. *Vivre et lutter* was my first book, I wrote it with Benaceur Azzaoui, an operative with a Moroccan background active in the local *CGT* union branch. But this book was not a scientific document. It belongs to my militant output. This distinction matters to me. I think academics may intervene in all spheres of public life but they must always be clear about the nature of their production so as not to legitimise their political options in the name of science. It is not right to hijack the mantle of scholarship when in militant mode. *Vivre et lutter à Longwy* is a militant act, an early work (almost a closure since I left the French Communist Party immediately after the book was published). This social conflict was highly significant for me for it was instrumental to the course I followed.

Longwy epitomised at the time the disastrous consequences of globalisation and capitalism. Bourdieu visited the region in order to write the opening chapter of *Weight of the World*⁶, he met up with the people I had lived with. The site he describes, in a language perhaps a little miserabilist for my taste is the estate at Mont-Saint-Martin where I lived when I was a secondary school teacher. These regions, like the North or some parts of greater Paris are “woeful places”, with people struggling against endless economics and social odds and unemployment conditions sometimes stretching across several generations.

I think that one of the civic roles of social sciences is to bring such social suffering into full view. This must be done without going “over the top” as this could lead to the censure of the people one had intended to speak for. We must strive to devise tools that will enable History’s losers to stand up for themselves and ward off the exclusions they suffer. I wholly deplore current victimisation trends. Victim status has never helped anyone. It is precisely because I have never perceived myself as a victim that I could find the energy and the confidence I needed to overcome the obstacles the Republic constantly casts in the way of those seeking escape from their social condition. As ever before, it is essentially about giving people the chance to

⁵ Country of Misfortune (title given by the publisher in an IPAM file)

⁶ Weight of the World. Social Suffering in Contemporary Society, Polity

fulfil their potential one way or another. I gave everything I had to historical research, to science; but there are other ways to be fulfilled. Unfortunately, we are at a juncture when, as compared to my days, expectations have been considerably reduced by the world crisis. I am heir to the *trente glorieuses*, the thirty years of post-war economic expansion during which there were real social shifts. Today, over and above the range of difficulties blocking social mobility, the idea that they will never make a better life for themselves weighs mind-numbingly on many young people.

***La Vie des idées* : Twenty years after *The French Melting Pot*, which brought you to the attention of the general public, immigration has become not only historical material but also a matter for remembrance. Are you pleased with the developments in this field? Or do you rather consider that the effort is hardly a match for the fad towards colonial and post-colonial studies?**

Gérard Noiriel: I played a part in the emergence of Immigration History as a separate field of study but it must be clear in all minds that this trend was also a collective approach. The collective element to both action and critical analysis is very important to me. It is part of the worldview I absorbed from earliest childhood for I and my brothers and sisters had to face up to the diverse threats that confronted us. But I realised with time that this predisposition for collective action partly ran contrary to another deep-rooted disposition: the critical stance, the concern for the truth – also understood as sincerity.

When I started my research on immigration, first in Lorraine, then broadening it to the rest of France, it was a subject matter which had no academic legitimacy. At the time people said to me: “A thesis on immigration is no way to start a career.” For me, like for Nancy Green who researched her thesis at the same time, it is very gratifying to see that the history of immigration has today become an field of research in its own right, thriving on the arrival of a new, dynamic generation of researchers. I am hardly close to retirement and yet I can say: “Good, I can go with an easy mind.” It’s important in the profession. I see many eminent colleagues, who have an impressive record but are left in isolation.

From the outset, I sought to differentiate the history of immigration from colonial history for, at the time, the social scientists interested in immigration mostly

hailed from the far left and, as far as they were concerned, it had all started with the Algerian war. Today, there are meeting-points between the two fields but they are clearly distinct. One thing that gives me great satisfaction is my part in setting up a small scientific community with a capacity for collective action. Ours is a much more serene environment than that of colonial history. This accounts for our collective resignation from the Scientific Council of the *Cité de l'immigration*. Even though we have diverse (indeed sometimes diverging) sensitivities and approaches, we remain in agreement on what matters most. I would like us to be emulated by other intellectuals. The tragedy of the previous generation was that they never were able to form an intellectual collective as ego clashes always took precedent. Colonial History is also undermined by these internal splits – intensified by a media focused on those I call the “*faiseurs*”, pundits who make a lot of noise, a lot of fuss when they have nothing to contribute but undermining genuine scholars. It is a sphere where collective memory disputes (and what Marc Bloch called the “mania of judgment”) impinge quite negatively on scientific research.

***La Vie des idées* : The construction of the Nation-State is at the heart of your “socio-historical” approach. For a few years now, several historiographic trends (World History, Subaltern Studies, etc...) have questioned the way research is hooked on the national factor. They see this as some sort of reliance by historians on 19th century intellectual and political constructs. Do you agree with this analysis or do you think the national space as the organ of political sovereignty and the basis of power practices remains an object worthy of social sciences’ attention leading to fresh insights?**

Gérard Noiriel: This criticism of the focalisation on the national constituent is not new. In fact, I have come across it ever since the seventies. These arguments were formulated by the far left after May 68 and have become ingrained. For all that I admire him, I cannot agree with sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad when he insists that all studies on immigration unavoidably have an ethnocentrist dimension. I see there the confusion between reality and the analysis of reality. It is possible to have a nationalist approach to globalisation and a universalist approach to the national factor. It is important, therefore to make a clear distinction between the two: the object studied and the way the studied object is being grasped. But in that kind of debate, the

polemical pressure is so great that it overrides the possibility of real discussion. The same goes for those who write off “social history (as) a thing of the past”. In my book *Sur la “crise” de l’histoire*⁷, I analysed the arguments the actors, academics included, put forward to justify what they are doing and I have shown that the fascination historians have, since the seventies, developed for philosophy had to do with the fact that it gave them the weapons to shoot their opponents down in flame.

I don’t think it is possible to demonstrate rationally or scientifically the theory that the “Nation-State” object is today “a thing of the past” or that its study would be “reactionary”, “nationalist” or what have you. This is just petty controversy. At first I thought it important to answer these claims. Then I realised it was useless. You can put forward all the arguments in the world, you will not persuade people who have nothing to gain from being persuaded. I have become increasingly convinced – and that was instrumental to my shift towards pragmatism at an epistemological level – that the space allowed for genuine discussion is very restricted, even in our profession. You have to be in agreement on many things before you can engage in a genuine debate. Otherwise time is wasted in sterile polemics not unlike a mechanic and a surgeon arguing over the comparative merits of the wrench and the scalpel. Depending on the object being studied, you have, you can call on different tools.

Meanwhile, another much more far-reaching debate is going on: We need to know whether it is possible to study the history of the Nation-State or of immigration without taking into account the internationalisation of social relations. I don’t think it is. I have shown in several books that the emergence of the national entity in the 19th Century had not preceded the internationalisation of social relations but rather that it should be read as resulting from it (it is the 1880s protectionist shift which accounts for the advent of current nationality laws, etc...) - as already born out by Norbert Elias’ work.

⁷ On the “Crisis” of History. (“working title”: the book has not been translated)

***La Vie des idées* :** In your socio-historical approach, you posit that “concepts must be handled with care”. You distanced yourself very early from the notion of “identity” and chose to take a closer look at the processes and mechanisms of “identification”. What does this distinction cover and what is at stake?

Gérard Noiriel: Here too, I embraced a global trend. In the introduction of the collection *L'Identification*, I went back over the development of this problematic. There was a time, coinciding with the Structuralist era, when the dominant analysis revolved around identity, viz. Lévi-Strauss. It was criticised by Foucault, Derrida and, more significantly perhaps for us social scientists, by anthropologist Jack Goody. Meanwhile the notion of identity was becoming a political football. That is the time when the *Front National* launched its national identity gambit. For all that Fernand Braudel cannot of course be blamed for endorsing this new line, his book *The Identity of France* deeply troubled me. He took neither colonisation nor immigration into account. It was a highly debatable and rather outdated vision of contemporary French history. I wrote *The French Melting Pot* specifically in reaction to *The Identity of France*.

The shift from identity to identification unlocked a full range of research possibilities. For me, a good concept is one that advances sound empirical research. The identification concept sets the socio-historian at the heart of social relations and the domination models they imply. It also permits a new approach to the State, taken as statization process. Working on immigration, I came across these identification issues very early, in particular via identity documents, at a time when dominant thinking ran on culturalist lines (I am thinking of scenarios about immigrants losing their identity as they crossed borders). Addressing national identity from an identification starting point makes it possible to bring out borrowing, exchanging, modification processes and to stress the fact that each individual today combines a great many identities; but those are latent identities, identity features people carry but which remain dormant until they are activated by those who are in the business of public speech, “*les professionnels de la parole publique*”.

***La Vie des idées* :** You have always insisted that historians have both a scientific function and a civic role and that one of their missions consists in

making sense of current problems. In *The French Melting Pot*, you deplored the fact that immigration was a “remembrance no go area”. You took part in the creation of the *Cité nationale de l’histoire de l’immigration* (CNHI), then, in 2007, you resigned with seven colleagues in protest against Nicolas Sarkozy’s first measures. What is your view of the CNHI episode?

Gérard Noiriel: Well, I have always tried to show consistency between what I say and what I do. All the issues concerning the *Cité de l’immigration* are thus bound in with my civic involvement. Once again, I strive to differentiate clearly between my activities. For me, historical science has no political use. And to ensure its civic use, an effort of translation and intervention in the public arena is required. Many of our colleagues do not believe in this function, do not shoulder this responsibility and remain in their “ivory tower”. It is entirely legitimate for, in this respect, there are no universal rules to which all should bend. For the reasons I have just mentioned, I have always felt the need to take a public stand, thus answering the intellectual’s calling, in the full meaning of the term. In the book I wrote on this subject, I stressed the fact that there were different ways to answer the call and that they were all legitimate in democracy, even though each has limits and inconsistencies.

For my part I have always hovered towards the critical end of the spectrum, even if I have from time to time acted as an expert, notably when I took part in National Education missions to determine the place to grant immigration in the teaching of history. My commitment to the creation of a commemorative space dedicated to immigration began in 1988-1989, at a time when people’s major preoccupation was with the celebration of the bicentenary of the French Revolution. My motivation when embarking on this crusade was typical of the “specific intellectual”. The object was to find a place where to make available the knowledge accumulated on the history of immigration, in a way that would enable the citizens who do not read history books to own their content and to arrive at their own judgment on the subject in full knowledge of the facts. I recorded many life histories for my thesis. Many workers said to me that on no account did they wish to bring out their immigrant background. I think this choice must be shown the same respect as its opposite. It does not fall to us historians to make these decisions: We are to provide the tools for people to use as they see fit. For me the object of the *Cité de l’immigration* is not to celebrate “our ancestors the immigrants” but to offer all the

citizens in our country a better knowledge of a question the media never cease to misrepresent.

The other dimension, enshrined in the constitution of the *Cité*, lies with changing the way immigration is perceived. It so happens that France is one of the countries where immigration has the worst image in world. Now, the object of this space has come to clash with the electoral pitch of the man who became President of the Republic. We could not accept his decision to create a “Ministry for Immigration and National Identity”. In the French context, the association between immigration and national identity has always been connoted with a negative representation of foreigners. We had to hold our ground: accordingly, we chose to resign. However we continue to work with *CNHI* personnel in order to advance the projects we had initiated. We do not have any major objections to the place or the way it operates but, had we remained part of its scientific establishment, assuming responsibilities within the institution, we would have endorsed the setting up of this ministry.

***La Vie des idées* : Since the end of the seventies, your research has gone into tracing the history of issues which are bang in the middle of the public arena (the decline of the working classes, immigration, xenophobia etc...) Today, laws are passed which bear out the “LePenisation” of the minds, when immigration is seen at the highest echelons of government as a serious problem. Is this situation another nail in the coffin of intellectual activism?**

Gérard Noiriel: I think we must have the courage to answer this by yes. I became involved in the fight against racism and xenophobia as the *Front National* scored less than 1% of the vote. I can hardly claim that our efforts have been an unqualified success.

I think a true intellectual must be able to re-address his own analyses and his own engagements without foregoing his ideal. That is what my latest work on racism has made me do. But I am convinced that we have not yet devised the tools that should enable us to understand conservative political strategies in the media age. That was conspicuous in Nicolas Sarkozy’s recent speech in Algeria. It is the same man who, having, in the run-up to the elections, lambasted colonisation’s detractors as bad French citizens with no love for their country, went on to denounce in Algiers

colonisation's "horrific crimes". How can he get away with such double-talk without being discredited? This, I think, can be explained by the fact that we live in a time when official thinking is narrowed down to the moment, always adjusted to a specific audience, with specific targets and immediate aims. The immediate aims of the elections campaign were to take votes away from the *Front National*. The immediate aims at the present juncture are to make up with Algeria for economic purposes. This is pragmatism pushed to the extreme.

These mutations in the media-political field are disastrous for intellectuals like us who still believe in proper argumentation and in reason. This places us in a very difficult situation. With a view to encourage collective resistance in the face of these abuses and to fight against the instrumentalisation of History, I set up with a group of colleagues a watchdog on the public use of History (*CVUH*⁸), but we also need to fine-tune our tools in order to understand how this media-political world operates. I try to contribute to this collective effort by taking a closer interest in the history of nationalist rhetoric since the turn of the 20th Century, that is in the art of persuasion. In my book *Immigration, anti-sémitisme et racisme en France*, I showed that Édouard Drumont had developed a modern anti-Semitic discourse by constantly keeping it topical, that is by ensuring it stood to political reason. Drumont has been made out to be a theoretician of anti-Semitism, a populariser of racial anthropology, and such like. But on closer reading *La France juive*⁹ comes across essentially as current affairs journalism.

Still, I believe that we have reached today an extreme in the use of rhetoric to political ends. The *Front National* must not be seen as an extremist party similar to those thriving in the thirties. It proposes what I call "soft nationalism", a nationalism which is no threat to the institutions and which is well understood by the media. That is what makes fighting what has become known as the "LePenisation" of the minds even harder. Similar trends are incidentally observable in Switzerland, Belgium or the Netherlands.

⁸ Comité de vigilance face aux usages publics de l'histoire,

⁹ in which Drumont argued that the "semites" had been seizing power in France since the Revolution and where e.g. wealthy Jews' opulent lifestyle is said to crucify the working class.

***La Vie des idées* : This is a woefully pessimistic verdict. So, the truth seekers have failed and the manipulators have won. Should not socio-historians and social scientists look to themselves? They know how to seek and find the truth but they have not achieved the politicians' mastery of persuasion. You have studied the question of the "linguistic turn" and the rhetoric strategies historians implement, sometimes unknowingly. How do you understand persuasion in History?**

Gérard Noiriel: There are not many periods when scientists managed to make their views prevail. At the same time, it would be wrong to assert that the results of our enquiries are never taken into account by those in control of the State or by public opinion. If we take the history of racism as an example, it is undeniable that many struggles fought by our forerunners were won. It is equally unquestionable that between the eighties and today, there has been a regression.

With regards to our own rhetoric, I think historians must become able to diversify their language. Marc Bloch held that we must speak in the same voice to the scholar and the ordinary citizen. I believe on the contrary that we must invent new ways to "translate". For the purpose of scientific research, we must use the language of science. But if we wish for the results of our research to reach a broader audience – among politicians, associations, the public at large –, we must develop a more accessible language. It is this belief that induced me to get involved with the *Cité de l'immigration*, in a project that brought together historians and life performance artists. Historians must not lay down their arms or lower their professional standards, but that's not incompatible with working with other groups.

That kind of approach can reassert historians' critical function. Otherwise, people will end up thinking that the only way they can be of use to society is through expertise. I am not dismissing expertise as such. But I have written on several occasions that it was taking too great a place in public debate, I do think that democracy needs experts. But expertise must be met with a thriving critical activity, which is the other social function academics can contribute to society. However, for the critical discourse to preach beyond the converted, those who practice it must be able to use other languages than that of academic research.

Gérard Noiriel in discussion with Nicolas Delalande and Ivan Jablonka with the collaboration of Florence Brigant.

Translated from french by Françoise Pinteaux-Jones

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