

Foreigners

By Nirou Eftekhari

I was born and grew up in Iran. After getting my high school certificate, I left my native country for France in 1973, speaking no French. Suddenly, I was away from my home, my family, my parents, my friends, and my country. In Paris, I was called everywhere a foreign student or more often a foreigner (un étranger). I kept that label for the next 17 years that I lived in France. I had to learn the French language fast before starting my studies in Economics at Paris University.

Since I was only a foreign student, I didn't have the privilege to work lawfully in that country. Naturally, I experimented with a few illegal jobs; however, they inflicted physical pain or harm and, in any event, did not fit into a student's way of life. So, I relied on the small amount of money that I received from my family back in Iran.

In my first year of university, a classmate approached me and offered a position as an assistant to the general supervisor, or Pion, which means soldier in French, in a public high school. I was very surprised and immediately asked him if a foreigner like me could work in a Parisian high school. He said that I wouldn't get paid for that job. I would have only a room and receive three meals per day. He wasn't himself interested in that position because he was living with his parents. The following text is one of my memories from my life in that high school where I discovered little by little the French culture and society.

Prior to moving to this public high school, in a prosperous Paris neighbourhood, 16th arrondissement, I was living in a small room under the roof of a six floor old building, in an attic. I had to go up all the six floors to access my room through a dark corridor. My room lacked both a sink and tap water. Other tenants of the same attics or mansards also used the only washroom and a small sink in the corridor. This old building was in Quartier Latin, a famous area in Paris, often visited by tourists, and well known for being considered as an intellectual or cultural neighborhood and a business center at the same time.

My job as associate to the general supervisor, or Pion, brought some big changes to my student life in Paris. Unlike the attic, my new room in this big old high

school was brighter with a large window. There was also a sink with hot and cold water. The room was furnished. Other Pions shared a common shower in the hallway.

General supervisors had other assistants who, like me, were also students. They were primarily either French citizens or coming from ex-French colonies like Mansour from Tunisia, Pathé from Senegal, and Joseph, who had moved from Morocco to France at a very young age. French was their mother tongue, or they had learned it very early in their childhood. They didn't have any trouble communicating in French. I was the only Pion who was "truly" a foreigner speaking French with a distinct accent and who sometimes struggled to express himself.

When I started my job as Pion in this high school, I was quite happy to find new friends. I felt less isolated than when I was living alone in my attic. Pathé, Mansour and I had often similar stories to share, such as the challenge of facing the general xenophobia in our daily life in that high school or in Paris in general. We couldn't share these confidential discussions with other Pions, who were primarily French citizens. From the start, I sensed an invisible barrier between Pions with foreign backgrounds and those who identified as French nationals born and raised in France. Most Pions with French citizenship had well-compensated positions besides other privileges. They were doing the same job as unpaid Pions. Like Mansour and Pathé, I received only room and board, no money. We couldn't even dream of securing a paid position later because these positions were exclusively reserved for French nationals.

We were taking our meals in a big room that they called Le Refectoire (the refectory). The refectory boasted three lengthy rows of sizable dining tables. The school staff members, including administrative personnel, teachers and Pions were having their meals here. They had in common to do intellectual jobs, either teaching or working in the offices. The workers, les Agents, as we used to call them, were in charge of doing manual tasks such as cleaning, cooking, repairing, gardening, painting, and so on. They didn't mix up with teachers or office employees in the same refectory. They had their own world.

At meal times, we had all kinds of conversations in the refectory when we were six at a table. In the beginning, when I started my job as a Pion in that high school, I wasn't sure about the type of conversations that I had to start with my colleagues. Since

I was still trying to perfect my French, I was unsure about the words to use during a conversation. I was afraid to make funny or embarrassing mistakes that could trigger laughing at the table. For example, I used one time the word handkerchief (mouchoir) to ask Joseph to pass a napkin (serviette) at the other end of the table. Joseph tried to mock me by putting his hand in his pocket to take out his handkerchief before correcting my mistake.

Once they knew I didn't belong to the Francophone community, my colleagues or sometimes teachers asked me why I had come to France. I disliked answering personal questions about my reasons for coming to Paris, particularly when asked condescendingly by colleagues or teachers who exploited my imperfect French language to inquire about various topics, including my personal life. French people are well known for not liking to answer personal questions, and I didn't understand why they shouldn't treat immigrants or foreigners the same way.

If Mansour, Pathé, or other foreigners asked me this type of questions, I wouldn't feel frustrated or offended. Among ourselves, we had an intimate bond and shared a strong sense of identity that we couldn't experience with non-foreigners. In France, foreigners are coming from everywhere. Soon, I considered myself a member of a huge diversified social group made of foreign nationals. I kept this sense of belonging until the end of my stay in that country.

Since I was studying Economics at Paris University, I liked to talk about economic or political problems at the table. Sometimes, our discussions were very controversial and polarizing. I passionately defended my leftist points of view on different topics. Other Pions, with more liberal or conservative philosophy, were often critical of what I was saying. These heated discussions caused the Pions to slowly split into ideologically opposite groups. My newfound ability to effortlessly discuss complex issues surprised me a lot. I couldn't even imagine such fast progress in communicating in French a few months ago. I was trying hard to use everything that I knew in French to inspire my followers or to convince my opponents.

One day, Mansour told me: "Nirou, you talk too openly about your political opinions at the table. Most people in this region of Paris are voting for the right political parties. They do not appreciate necessarily what you are saying. Your ideas might get

you into trouble one day.” I was surprised and said: “What kind of trouble? Here in France, we are not like in Iran or Tunisia! Almost 10% of the French vote for the communist party. Did you hear what Georges Marchais, the leader of the France communist party, was saying on TV the other day?” Mansour laughed and then added: “Yes, they will not put us in jail for our political opinions, but one day they might work against you (mettre des bâtons dans les roues) in other situations. Don’t forget that the principal is a rightist guy.

Believe it or not, he knows much more about you than you think, because his spies report everything you say to him. He has his spies everywhere in this high school.” Some Pions, like Joseph, didn’t like the abstract discussions in the refectory. They preferred jokes and funny stories with slang words that didn’t make always sense to me.

For all these reasons, I transferred my discussions with the Pions, with whom I felt comfortable, to my room. A foldable table from my attic was in my possession. I bought a machine for making coffee and brought also additional armchairs for group conversations in the intimacy of my room around a small table while drinking coffee. Our discussions were not only about politics. They included a variety of other topics.

One Sunday afternoon, after our lunch in the refectory, I invited Mansour, Pathé, Joseph, and Dominique to my room for a coffee. Dominique was a French Pion with nationalistic ideas about his country. He considered the immigrants as a burden for France when the unemployment rate was already high and the French themselves had difficulties finding jobs. According to him, the immigrants should be happy living in France in such troubled times. He was, however, open to other opinions and liked the challenges of a debatable or controversial discussion.

Since we were often talking about foreigners, that day I asked Dominique what he knew about immigrants in France. He said: “Immigrants are coming to this country to take advantage of what is offered to them. Their economic contribution to the host country is less than what they take away. That is why they keep coming here, by all means.” I said: “We are both students in Economics. According to the Marxian concept of value, we can also believe that the immigrants’ contribution is much higher than what

they cost to the French economy. That is why the French government formally brought them into this country in the 60s and up to 1973.

The immigrants are often doing low-paid and unhealthy jobs that the French themselves are unwilling to do. The immigrants are a source of cheap labor helping the French to enjoy a higher standard of living. I didn't want to have this discussion on economic grounds. I knew already your opinion about it. What else do you know about the immigrants? I mean, how do you characterize them?"

Dominique thought a little and then said: "Well, the immigrants are not always behaving as they should. After all, do you think it is acceptable to spit on the sidewalk or in the subway, throw garbage out of your window, talk loudly in a public place, hustle accidentally someone without saying sorry, force your daughters and wives to wear Islamic veils as if you were not living in France where the secularism is one pillar of its culture? As you know, the crime rate is also higher among the immigrants. In short, I would say that what characterizes immigrants the most is their lack of civilized behavior and their no change to French reality. Second-generation immigrants behave better because they were raised here."

Mansour who was following this discussion impatiently, told Dominique: "Of course, the kind of behaviors that you mentioned is unacceptable, but why are you expecting that the immigrants always fully grasp your culture, your codes of conduct and traditions? In their countries, they received no or very little formal education. Most of them were farmers, urban unemployed or low-income workers having trouble feeding themselves or their families. French gladly brought them here when they needed them, or they willingly came because they had no other option. For them, the choice was between leaving or starving. In their countries, like you here in France, they have their own culture, customs, and traditions.

In France, people consider them as only cheap and disposable labor, often reducing them to the sole function of exploiting their workforce. They ignore all other aspects of their life. You are often justifying your lack of understanding of the immigrants' situation by saying that they are a minority who should accept the rule of the majority in the host country. But you forget a very basic fact: human psychology doesn't recognize the line separating the majority and the minority. We can't expect

people who were forced to leave their land and culture to immediately become good French citizens and forget everything about their past. This country does nothing to help immigrants find a new sense of identity for a smooth integration into French society.

From the day first, they go through all kinds of trouble, hostility, and discrimination for their survival. Six million immigrants live in France and yet they lack representation at any level, as if they don't exist here." Pathé who had followed this discussion closely said: "I don't think that there can ever be something called integration in France. There is only what we call assimilation. Integration means society accepts immigrants for their cultural differences. They do not face discrimination because of these differences. They should still abide by the same rules and laws as the rest of society.

Assimilation is when the immigrants forcefully relinquish their cultural differences or their values to be melted into the rest of society. I think that the assimilation is a kind of self-denial and self-humiliation. I think also that for the immigrants in this country, assimilation is the only path to follow to be more or less accepted. Even assimilation is not a guarantee because the immigrants could change up their names, but what about the color of their skin, their accent, their looks, and so on?"

Joseph who hadn't said something so far made a suggestion: "Maybe the first step for immigrants to enjoy their rights in France is to apply for French citizenship as my parents did a long time ago when we moved from Morocco to France." Pathé reacted to Joseph's idea for saying: "Contrary to countries like the U.S., Canada, and some other European countries, the citizenship right is not guaranteed in France after a few years of the residency requirement. Many other factors could deny or delay the granting of French citizenship, such as your income, your job stability, your assets to support yourself and your family when you are not working, and so on. I am not even talking about the humiliating process of applying for French citizenship when you go to a police center and have to face rude and disrespectful officers."

I tried to wrap up what was said that day: "My conclusion from today's discussion is that the immigrants are people with a double life. Their physical body is here in France but their mind has stayed back in their countries. It is always possible to

take a flight in Tehran, Dakar, Tunis, or Marrakesh and be a few hours later in Paris, but your mind can't travel so fast and will remain in your native country. The immigrants struggle between these two realities. This dichotomy between body and mind is the chief characteristic of an immigrant's life.”

Dominique asked a question: “What do you mean by mind? Is this again another big word that you are using?” I provided an answer to his question by explaining: “I think the mind encompasses all the representations that a person has of the world. It includes his moral values, his beliefs, his dreams, his hopes, his devotion, his commitments, and his loyalty towards his family, his people, and his country where he was born and grew up.”

Dominique interrupted me: “So if what you are saying is true, then a man can't have more than one country. Can he?” I responded: “On paper he can. In his mind, it is more questionable. That is why most immigrants who come to France, especially at an advanced age, have always nostalgia for their homelands and dream of returning there one day. This is exactly what I mean by the divorce between body and mind. The immigrant is a torn person between here and there. His life in France is not a continuation of his past. His present is disconnected from his past. And because of this disconnection, he cannot communicate fully with his new environment as if he has always been living here.”

Mansour wanted to ask a question: “I think what you are saying is true. Should we also conclude that because of this dichotomy, the immigrants' adaptation to the unfamiliar country is always a failed process?” I said: “I don't think so. This adaptation is not a one-way road. It depends as much on the effort to adjust themselves to their new realities as on the host country's readiness to accommodate immigrants in their new lives. This is the complete difference between the integration and the assimilation that Pathé tried to explain earlier.”

Pathé jumped into the discussion again by adding: “Yes, the integration involves accepting and tolerating cultural differences while the assimilation doesn't recognize them. It is rather synonymous with violence, coercion, and racism. The trauma felt by the French after losing their colonies in Africa and elsewhere could partly explain their inclination in favor of assimilation. Today, they consider the immigrants

who come to their country, especially those coming from the French ex-colonies, as profiteers who are here only for material conveniences with no commitment toward the ex-colonial power.”

Dominique suddenly stood up and told me, Monsour, and Pathé, angrily: “You guys, you seem very unhappy by your life experience in France. You are often complaining about foreigners’ situation in this country. If this is the case, why are you still here? Have you ever considered leaving France for the US or Canada, where they treat immigrants differently?”

I smiled and said: “Who knows? Maybe one day I will!”