

Building the memory of immigration in France: The case of the Museum of the History of Immigration

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Abstract

Aware of the risks of unfinished integration of immigrant populations in the French Republic, associations and public actors started to suggest in the 1990's the creation of a French Immigration museum on the model of the large national museums. It was developed as the way to build a collective identity able to reinforce the Nation's multicultural identity. In 2001, the Prime Minister, Lionel Jospin, proposes the project of a National Center of the History and Cultures of Immigration. In 2004, the new Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin decides to include it within the previous Musée des Colonies for the Colonial Exhibition (1931). President François Hollande inaugurates this Museum of the History of the Immigration in 2014.

This place of heritage is charged with a number of tasks: At the same time, it should gather, safeguard, and make accessible elements relative to the immigration in France; contribute to the acknowledgement of the different paths of integration of immigrant populations and induce an evolution of mentalities on immigration in France. In this paper, I highlight the ways in which the Museum of the History of Immigration has offered to fulfill these tasks and participated in the construction of a new referential narrative of immigration in France. How can such a reconstruction help realizing the tasks of the Museum in the French current context of identity claims and of raising mistrust towards the migrants arriving from the other bank of the Mediterranean Sea? My analysis will mainly rely on a discourse analysis of the permanent exhibition Repères and of the "gallery of the donations," a collection of donations by immigrant populations since 2005.