

'Positive Discrimination' at an Elite French University:
Progressive Policy and the Challenges of Integration in French Society

In November 2003, a French court upheld the constitutionality of a controversial affirmative action program at the Institute of Political Studies, known as the Sciences Po. The program, implemented in 2000, aims to increase the social diversity of its student population by recruiting high school students from disadvantaged areas of France. The targeted areas are those in which many of the residents are immigrants from North Africa, a population that has grown significantly in France in the past 30 years (Bollag 37). 87 students have been recruited thus far, largely from poor neighborhoods outside of Paris. Critics of the university's program contend that it is a publicity stunt intended to change the image of the university as a homogenous institution open only to elite, white students. However, advocates of the program underline the university's social responsibility to the public. Given the fact that leaders like France's current President and Prime Minister were educated at the Sciences Po, the institution recognizes the influence it has in forming the upper ranks of the French society. As stated by the Sciences Po director, Richard Descoings, "Here at Sciences Po is where we form our elite for both business and government. When you have that responsibility, it is impossible not to ask yourself who is coming here" (Daley 4). A study of this unique French program of "positive discrimination" can be illuminating for understanding how the policy is affected by changing social conditions, particularly the rise in the immigrant Muslim population. The controversy is not limited to the university: in January 2004, President Jacques Chirac faced violent opposition after his appointment of Algerian-born immigrant Aissa Dermouche to position of prefect of the Jura region of France (Sciolino 9).

Because the Sciences Po plays such a direct role in educating France's most influential leaders, its affirmative action program provides opportunities to immigrants in France that never existed before. My goal is to research French policies on immigration and how they have changed in the past fifty years in response to France's changing demographics. Specifically, I plan to focus on the case at the Sciences Po as a model of progressive action taken by an institution to integrate immigrants into mainstream French society. The question I will address is how the program is challenging the French republican tradition of Liberty, Equality, Fraternity and redefining the meaning of equal opportunity for all. While France prides itself on being a country free of ethnic distinctions, the influx of immigrants in recent years has posed a challenge to its national identity. The young people from the North African immigrant families-- known as the *beur* generation-- are becoming a powerful group both politically and socially. "Generation M", as the young, successful Muslims are called, are asserting their rights as European citizens and integrating themselves in all aspects of French society. Negative reactions to Muslim immigrants, as seen in the support of the extreme-right political party, Le Front Nationale, has increased the need to confront racial discrimination and analyze the impact of immigration policies.

The backbone of my research will be France's immigration laws from post-World War II to the present. These laws have become increasingly restricted, partly because the French government realized that North African immigrants were not merely going to return to their country of origin after working in France. I will access documents on French immigration laws from the Sciences Po and Paris university libraries and from National archives. Another important part of my research will be interviews with students, professors and administrators at the Sciences Po. I plan to interview students, including those from the *zones d'éducation prioritaire*, or ZEP (educational priority zones). I will attend immigration seminars at the Sciences Po and talk to scholars working on these issues. Finally, I will work as an intern through the Internships in Francophone Europe program at a non-governmental organization whose mission it is to reach out to immigrant populations. This work will increase my awareness of the obstacles facing non-governmental institutions in light of restricting immigration policies.

I feel prepared for this project after working as a volunteer at a refugee center in Luxembourg last summer. Along with 10 other international volunteers, I worked closely with recently displaced families from the former Yugoslavia and parts of Africa. Additionally, I participated in educational workshops concerning issues of immigration and refugees in Europe. At Northwestern, my courses have prepared me for this research. These courses include Introduction to International Relations, Comparative Racial and Ethnic Relations Seminar, Introduction to French Studies, Introduction to French Cultural Studies, Statistics for Political Science, and Higher Education and Political Advocacy.

The faculty members I have been in contact with are Michael Loriaux, professor of Political Science and Co-director for the French Interdisciplinary Group, Beth Hurd, associate professor of Political Science, and Devah Pager, Faculty Fellow at the Institute for Policy Research. Michael Loriaux specializes in French politics and has connections to scholars at the Sciences Po. Beth Hurd suggested I focus on a narrow topic and analyze its implications for changes in immigration policy. Devah Pager spent 2002-2003 in Paris researching the relationship between the criminal justice system and increasing immigration and ethnic conflict. She recommended I attend weekly seminars by immigration scholars at the Sciences Po while in France. Next year I will contact Monica Prasad, a professor in Sociology who will be joining the Northwestern faculty in the fall of 2004. Her area of expertise is in immigrant populations in France and Germany.

This summer I am working at Zonta International, a non-profit organization in Chicago whose mission it is to advance the status of women in the world through the support of executives in business and the professions. Zonta relies on the networks of women all over the world to fund its projects. Because Zonta works closely with the United Nations, I am learning how these international projects are organized and executed. In addition to my internship, I plan to continue research on the French government and laws this summer. I will familiarize myself with various organizations and institutes working on issues of immigration in Paris, as suggested by Devah Pager.

This research will be an independent project during my first semester in Paris. In my second semester, I plan to participate in the Internships in Francophone Europe program, which requires students to complete a research project related to their internship. I will work closely with a tutor to organize and execute my research. When I return, this project will be the basis for my senior honors thesis in Political Science. In my senior year, I will take two Honors Tutorials in which I will work with a faculty adviser to review and expand on my research from France.

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