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**Comment on Yvan Gastaut's paper
'L'émergence du 'souci' de l'immigration en France
à travers les sondages (années 80)',**

*communication at the workshop 'History – migration – anthropology',
Erfurt, November 7-9, 2002.*

The paper investigates of the importance of the 'immigration' issue in French opinion polls during the last four decades. It briefly discusses the relevance of opinion polls as a tool to analyse historical processes. While they usefully indicate the beliefs and thoughts of the whole population (and not only of its elite), they are nevertheless strongly influenced by the way the public opinion is shaped. Indeed, the very existence of opinion polls and their organisation determine, to a certain extent, the answers, and so do the media or the political discourses. As a matter of fact, opinion polls themselves are a socially revealing facts since their existence and influence are relatively recent. The issue is therefore whether or not opinion polls represent 'true' opinions or, rather, socially, culturally and politically 'constructed' opinions.

After these methodological considerations, the paper provides a close analysis of opinion polls. This analysis reveals that issues linked to immigration were almost totally absent from opinion polls in the sixties and the seventies. In those years, crucial issues were mostly personal (standard of living, health, children's education, and so on) and did not concern major social or political matters (except for the war in Algeria). The absence of immigration is not surprising given the neat separation between natives and immigrant workers in the early times of labour immigration to Western Europe and the dominant belief according to which immigrants were to eventually leave the country.

Immigration became a political issue at the beginning of the eighties, reaching a first peak in the 1983-1985 years. Accordingly, opinion polls started to show that people were concerned by the number of immigrants living in the country. Racism and the fight against it also became a hot topic in 1990. However, the first preoccupation in the French public opinion remained by far (un)employment. Immigration came behind, along with topic such as social inequalities and the health of the economy.

This analysis thus shows that, to a large extent, employment issues were seen as connected to immigration issues. Solutions to the unemployment crisis were thought to solve immigration problems as well. It also shows that opinion polls are influenced by major political events. Those were notably, in the mid-eighties, the simultaneous emergence of North African immigrants' political claims and the National Front racist political campaigns and, in the early nineties, the headscarf affairs as well as the Gulf War.

One of the questions one might be tempted to ask to opinion polls is 'how right are they?'. The connection that is systematically made between employment and immigration issues is for example quite accurate: research has indeed often stressed that the sensitivity to immigrants' presence is fostered by economic insecurity. In this respect, it would seem that the French population is right in assuming that the two 'problems' are interrelated. Whereas it is frequently argued that common people's opinions are social constructions and 'wrong' interpretations of reality, this analysis may, on the contrary, show that common sense is partly right.

Another striking fact in this analysis is the total absence of 'culture'. It has indeed become obvious that immigrants' presence is disturbing not only for economic reasons but also because they represent a threat to social cohesion and to the cultural homogeneity of Western societies. Islam in particular is seen as jeopardising the very foundations of 'Western civilisation'. This concern does not appear: does it mean that it does not exist or that polls did not enable it to be expressed? Similarly, concerns about 'security' (that have become unpleasantly overwhelming in contemporary France) do not seem to emerge in the analysis.

It thus seems that, while the connection between immigration and employment is grounded, immigration is almost exclusively perceived as an economic matter. This

is somewhat logical since nearly all policy-makers have had the same economic look at immigrants, who were understood mostly as a source of labour. But it remains strange to see that other connections – immigration and culture, or immigration and security – were not made. This would indicate that opinion polls replicate the dominant political vision, and do not allow other perceptions to emerge.