

Preface

In 1928, my grandfather inscribed a copy of *America, Nation or Confusion*—his defense of racial quotas on individuals migrating to the United States—to my father, then a mere six years old: “To Freddy, who already knows that the flag must never touch the ground.”¹ It was a fitting metaphor for his argument: America, like its flag, should not be “sullied.” For him, our very democracy depended on it.

However distasteful I find my grandfather’s reasoning, it exemplifies a problem inherent to democracies. All democracies face a “liberal paradox”—that fragile balance between their promotion of free movement and their constituencies’ desires to limit who can move freely.² If no democracy is immune from the liberal paradox, none confronts it in exactly the same way. Unlike the United States, France never passed immigration quotas. To this day, French leaders suggest that discriminating between immigrants is anathema to the values of the one and indivisible republic. And yet, France faced some of the same tensions that rent American society at the time my grandfather wrote his book. As in the United States, these questions cut straight to the heart of France’s political culture.

This book is about how French citizens and migrants dealt with those conflicts as they negotiated the latter’s rights—and the limits to those rights—in the country that, in the 1930s, surpassed the United States in its rate of immigration. Because I am interested in the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in democracies, this book focuses on the Third Republic, not on the authoritarian regime that followed it. If the republic’s migration policies did in some ways lay the groundwork for exclusionary laws under the Vichy regime, this book insists on the historical contingency, rather than the inevitability, of these developments. This unpredictability should not give us less pause. Indeed, understanding the fragility of liberalism seems, today, to be an ever-more important task.

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