

ETHNIC MINORITIES : WHICH PLACE AND WHICH IMAGE ON FRENCH TELEVISION ?

Televisual representation of people of extra European origin

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Introduction

This piece of research stems from a simple notice : French television rarely shows people of extra European origin (Blacks, Arabs, Asians). In fact, this is not difficult to notice that TV journalists or TV hosts of non European origin are an exception. Let alone speaking of their rare presence in the different programs : news, news magazines, shows, films, commercials etc. It might seem that television shows them only in small doses in stereotyped and negative situations.

Why does French television, a kind of reflection on our society and also a self-reflective media, give a 'white' image of our social body ? How to explain such a representation of our society when one knows that immigration is part of our history ?

Concerning immigration, France is indeed a special case in Europe. It is the only country to have become a land of welcome as of the middle of the 19th century. Immigration became necessary for France because of an early decrease in the birth rate. The other countries of western Europe resorted to immigration only at the end of the 50's . For a long time, France has been and still is a mozaic of people and cultures which merged into the state frame.

Until the second world war, immigration was mostly European and latin. After this period, the French state organized a large recruitment of immigrants to solve its needs of labour (Portuguese, Spanish, Algerian, Moroccan, Tunisian, people from Black Africa). Since 1975, France has organized the right for immigrants to bring their family with them : population influx from the 'Third World' will mark the 70's, 80's and 90's. From the middle of the 70's, a population immigration took the place of a traditional labour immigration and thus, the composition of foreigners changed completely. The immigration population flows slowed down and those of 'Third Wolrd' immigrants increased like it never occured before.

In the middle of 70's, France counted as immigrants 1.5 million Europeans, 1.4 million North-Africans and 400 000 Asians against a French population of about 52 million. From that period on, the number of Algerian people living in France still increased a lot until 1982, to attain the number of 800 000 people and to become the most important group of foreign nationality in France. At the same time, Moroccan people regularly continued to come to France, reaching the number of 570 000 people, according to the national census of 1990.

Furthermore, the number of Tunisians and people from Black Africa continues to increase in a regular way, respectively representing about 200 000 and 240 000 people in 1990¹. Thus, the number of non European

¹ Yvan Gastaut, « Des trente glorieuses à la crise des banlieues », *L'Histoire*, n° 229, fev. 99, p. 49

permanent workers continued to increase : it grew from 3.7 million, in 1982, to 4.2 million, in 1990, which is a little bit more than 7% of the national population.

Among these 4.2 million of 'immigrants' - including people who took on the French nationality – 55% come from a European country, 8% are Asian and 34% are African (including people from the Maghreb who represent almost a third of the immigrant population)².

Today, immigration is thus part of the French history. It provoked an incontestable demographic disruption. France of the 90's became a multicultural country since a part of its members came from immigration.

In fact, thanks to the research of INED³ in 1991, directed by Michèle Tribalat, one can assess that about 20% of the French population has at least one ascendant of a foreign origin⁴. This is quite significant and makes France the European country with the most important migratory flow and one of the states on earth, with the 'New World', whose current population is the most strongly dependent on this phenomenon.

The lack of representation of people of extra European origin on television deserves a special interrogation. If television is in a way the mirror of life why does it ignore the multiethnic France of today ? Why does it constantly reflect the image of a 'white' France, without differences ? Nevertheless, according to Jérôme Bourdon, television is a national mass media because – like the press – it grew up in a national context that it contributed to build. Television reaches very diverse audiences but unceasingly builds an image of that same public. Each day, television draws a 'we', a collective identity with changing boundaries⁵. It seems that today the 'nation of television' is late of several decades by ignoring a part of the French population because all the viewers don't seem to be represented in an equal way.

Thus, the initial object of this study is to try to understand why people of extra European origin who are an entire part of our society and history, take up so little space on one of the most influential media today.

This lack of representation wouldn't deserve a particular attention if it didn't bring about ill consequences on a part of the national population. By looking at television today, one can wonder how this phenomenon affects people of extra European origin who are among the most loyal viewers. One can imagine the feelings of exclusion, anger or even the problems of identification that occur.

This aspect of the question constitutes the real object of the reflection : to understand the mechanisms of this lack of representation but also to demonstrate that this phenomenon may be another factor of social exclusion for the populations of foreign origin living in France. Everybody knows the difficult life of these populations : they are for the most part living at the periphery of cities and remain the victims of unemployment and of racism. The way French television reflects society may contribute to exclude these populations even more.

This article will be organized in two parts. A first part will present the research on the content of television programs concerning the question of representation of people of extra European origin. The second part will be dedicated to the question of the public and especially to the consequences of this representation on viewers by trying to explain the object of my current research.

² Pierre Milza, « Les mécanismes de l'intégration », *L'Histoire*, n° 193, nov. 95, p. 25

³ INED = Institut National des Etudes Démographiques (National Institute of Demographic Studies)

⁴ M. Tribalat, *Cents Ans d'immigration. Étrangers d'hier, Français d'aujourd'hui*, Paris, PRU/INED, 1991, p. 13

⁵ Jérôme Bourdon, *Les étrangers au prime time ou la télévision est-elle xénophobe ?*, in Claire Frachon et Marion Vargaftig (dir.), *Télévisions d'Europe et immigration*, INA et ADEC, 1993, p. 32

Studies on the subject

In France, the question of representation of people of extra European origin on television is completely new, and even taboo, which is why very few books, papers and research treat this subject.

In 1991, for the first time, a research center organized a study on this question : the 'CIEMI' (Center for Information and Research on International Migrations)⁶. The aim of this research was to look at French television and especially its relation to immigration. This study wanted to obtain a clear and true knowledge of the place and the image of 'immigrants' and 'ethnic minorities' on television. It wanted to give an answer to the following questions : which image and which discourse does television give of immigration ? Do private and public channels contribute to integrate or exclude people of extra European origin ? Does television contribute to create, reinforce or destroy prejudices ? This research wanted to make a kind of inventory so as to draw useful conclusions for audiovisual political decision-makers.

This study analysed 15 days of programs on the six French hertzian channels to see which place and which image was dedicated to foreigners living in France, to French people of the Maghreb, of African and of Asian origins, and to people from French overseas islands.

This research drew several conclusions :

- Very few professionals (hosts, journalists, news casters, presenters) of foreign origin are visible on television.
- Ethnic minorities are visible in programs about news and general information. They thus seem to belong to French social reality. Nevertheless, their presence on television is limited to a simple visibility on screen because very few of them express themselves. Furthermore, a lot of image confusions contribute to give a negative representation of ethnic minorities : their presence is often related to subjects concerning unemployment, delinquency, poverty, racism.
- Ethnic minorities (especially Black people) take up an important place in musical programs (particularly in music videos) and also in sport programs and fashion parades.
- Commercials leave quite a small place to ethnic minorities reducing them to roles linked to exoticism and gastronomy.
- French fictions principally give a 'white' representation of its society and the minorities usually have roles of extras or of delinquents. However, American films and series show a lot of ethnic minorities.

Let us point to the fact that this innovative study which points out very important problems about French television went unnoticed by academia and by the media, at the time of publication in 1991.

In 1999, the CSA⁷, through the impetus given by an association of artists and intellectuals (the 'Collectif Egalité'), decided to organize a similar study, that I was in charge of⁸.

This association, created in 1998, by the Franco-Camerounian writer Calyxthe Beyala got remarked by the press and denounced the lack of 'visible minorities'⁹ - especially black people – on French television.

⁶ Antonio Perotti, *Présence et représentation de l'immigration et des minorités ethniques à la télévision française*, Migrations Société, vol n°3, n°18, nov-déc 1991, pp. 39-55.

⁷ CSA = Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel (Audiovisual Supreme Council)

⁸ - « *Présence et représentation des « minorités visibles » à la télévision française* », publication du Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel, coll. « les études du CSA », (to be published)

The fact that the CSA decided to be interested in that question was very significant. For the first time in France, an institution decided to engage a reflection on that question and publicly recognized its political, social and cultural stakes. The study, granted by the radio and television control authority (CSA) wanted to make a kind of inventory of French television in order to evaluate the place and the image of the minorities called 'visible', meaning people whose ethnic origins are 'visible' and whose physical aspects make them different from the French white majority. Thus, this study wanted to spot on screen any Black, Arabic and Asian person, of French or foreign nationality. This study analysed one week of programs on the six French hertzian channels between 5 P.M. and midnight. It chose a quantitative approach (by evaluating the proportion of 'visible minorities' in each type of programs) and a qualitative one (by investigating the forms of portrayal of minorities)¹⁰. For this work, seven types of programs were distinguished, shared out in two big types : 'programs on sets' (news, television games, shows, news magazines, sport programs) and 'scripted programs' (music videos, commercials, fictions).

This study led to the main following results :

- Minority journalists, hosts, presenters represent a small portion of TV professionals.
- Blacks are the most visible minority compared to Maghrebian and Asian people who are nearly nonexistent on screen. Thus, the study on « visible minorities' » representation on television principally concerns Blacks.
- It is difficult and not relevant to try to demonstrate that 'visible minorities' are under-represented on French television for several reasons.

First, our national census system doesn't allow us to know their real number and also estimations are not reliable. In France, only the number of foreigners is known ; French people of foreign origin are not counted as such. They are just listed as 'French'. In our egalitarian and universalist system based on an equal treatment for citizens without distinction of origin, race and religion, it would be ideologically incorrect to make a census of people according to their ethnic origins. Because of our vision of the Nation, the term of 'minority' is completely rejected. This situation can be understood from an ideological point of view but it constitutes a very important methodological problem for researchers (historian, demographers, sociologists...) who study these populations. Because of the vagueness of the statistics, it is difficult to know if 'visible minorities' are too or not represented enough on television compared to reality since we have no referential statistic.

Secondly, the question of « visible minorities' » representation on French television is more a qualitative problem than a quantitative one. Indeed, the way minorities (especially Blacks) are shown on screen constitutes a real problem which is interesting to look into, the question not reducing itself to arithmetical problems. In this perspective, the question concerning the number of 'visible minorities' on screen is extremely simplistic and reducing.

- The way French television represents 'visible minorities' (especially Blacks) brings about several critical remarks :

- *'Visible minorities' are invisible people :*

The CSA's study showed that minorities visible on screen were most of the time in the background (extras in a film and commercials, passers-by in a report...). These people are rarely *actors* in the picture, playing only a transparent role, passing furtively, as if they were mere parts of the scenery. 'Visible minorities' are indeed shown on television but viewers rarely see them express themselves, which is why the majority of them escape the

⁹ This term, of canadian origin, was employed for the first time in France by the 'Collectif Egalité'. The CSA's study took it up because it was appropriate for a study working on *image* and because it included any notion of nationality but insisted on 'visibility' or 'difference' of the concerned people. In this paper, this term will always be in brackets because its meaning is not evident at all in our republican conception of the Nation.

¹⁰ The qualitative analysis of the programs couldn't be achieved because of a lack of time and means.

viewers' attention. This invisible and furtive place taken up by minorities might explain the viewers' sensation of not seeing any minority at all on French television.

- *Three-quarters of 'visible minorities' come from foreign programs :*

According to the CSA's study, the minorities that are visible on screen (the protagonists) were often foreigners, especially american (for example on fictions, commercials, music videos) which means to say that French viewers see 'foreign' minorities most of the time. For example, without the American fictions that are a part of our television history (*Different strokes*, *The Cosby Show*, *The Prince of Bel Air*, *Miami vice*, *Mission impossible...*), black actors would nearly be nonexistent for the French public.

- *Minorities are very rarely shown as ordinary members of French society :*

'Visible minorities' on screen are rarely integrated in French social reality. Their ethnic origins and their cultural specificities are systematically mentioned : they automatically come from 'elsewhere'. It is very rare to see them in a program shown as 'real' French, melted into the citizen mass. These people, because of their *difference* (which for many is mostly physical) seem to be considered as 'permanent foreigners'. Even Blacks from overseas regions of France are constantly assimilated to their far-off islands.

- *Minorities are all the same :*

Each minority group (Maghrebians, Asians, Blacks) is always considered as a homogeneous entity in which each member is identical. Television always give them the same features, often very stereotyped ones. For example, television reduces Blacks to their own colour. In the television logic, there are no 'Blacks' but 'the' Black with always the same features : happy, athletic, sensual, a coffee and chocolate consumer, noisy...). The result is a partial, stereotyped, rough image of these people, a portray which takes its origin in the Black people's representation during slavery and colonisation.

Let us say that this caricatured image can also be explained by the media itself, one of its principle being to simplify things and even to make them coarse so as to be easily understood by a large part of the nation. Television (especially films and commercials) doesn't diversify the image attributed to minorities.

- *Minorities are often associated with negative phenomena or situations :*

Television often characterises 'visible minorities' with negative features (especially in films and news) : these people are often shown as a disruptive component of the social body or people 'with problems' (drugs, dealers, criminals, poor people...).

The question of the public

My previous research was about television content, particularly the « visible minorities' » representation. My current research moves towards the public. It sheds another light on the subject as it does not focus on 'visible minorities' in general but only on one ethnic group : Blacks. This choice can be explained by one of the big conclusions of the CSA's study which showed that Maghrebians and Asians were almost nonexistent on screen. Thus, my Ph. D's purpose, presently at its beginning, which is interested in television's public at large is to try to understand how viewers (particularly Black ones) perceive and decript 'the black image' on television.

To look into the matter of a black public brings about several questionings :

- Television is a media which take an important space in our life because it is part of our social, cultural and domestic environment. Thus, one can wonder if models conveyed by television create identification problems, especially for Black viewers because they don't see models that resemble them.
- Considering that Black viewers feel poorly represented by the 'televisual nation', it is possible that television reinforces a kind of sentiment of exclusion. Television might not play its role of social cohesion for all citizens. Black viewers might interiorize the image reflected by television, which conditions their feeling of social incompetence.
- It is also interesting to try to understand the media consumption of Black viewers. The fact that they are poorly represented on French television might incite them to consume community or ethnic media more often, which could be translated as a visible community withdrawal within French society today.
- Finally, it is interesting to know if Black viewers who identify themselves with Afro-American models americanize themselves by choosing a community-oriented approach in their behaviour.

To sum up, my current research tries to find out if Black people's representation on television (partial, stereotypical, negative, American) contributes to reinforce the feeling of exclusion experienced by a part of them and to indirectly bring about a community withdrawal, visible in a part of their media consumption, Black people searching for other types of media.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is interesting to add that the question of « visible minorities » representation is a new and extremely controversial subject in France.

Indeed, one can notice that this research field is completely unexploited as can be seen by the few books, articles and studies on this theme.

This subject is very polemical, not to say taboo, in our country. Indeed, the study organized by the CSA on the subject provoked many controversies and violent criticisms in media and in the intellectual and political world. The CSA was accused of wanting to install quotas in French media and to adopt a community-oriented approach in a republican country. Some media and intellectual were offended by the study's methods which consisted to spotting out people according to their ethnic origins : CSA was even accused of racial discrimination and some journalists reminded that it was very dangerous to stigmatize people's ethnic origins because it recalled the dark period of Vichy, during world war II.

Another side of the study provoked criticisms : the use of the term 'visible minority'. The use of 'minority' as a term is completely rejected in France because it is considered to be discriminating. Qualifying people of foreign origin this way signifies that they are not considered as 'real' French citizens as a difference is introduced *a priori*. Heated reactions concerning this questions are passionate enough to prove that France is not ready to question itself by recognizing the weaknesses of its integration system, the racial discrimination that 'visible minorities' undergo everyday and the problem of the suburbs' ghettoization.

Studying television media is very interesting in that it gives indicators on the way French society represents itself in its collective imagination. Television shows us that France sees itself as 'white' and not as multicultural : here is the core of the problem. If France keeps on rejecting its differences, it will itself provoke a community withdrawal from a part of it's population (withdrawal which translate itself in its media consumption) which goes against the very notion of the egalitarian and universalist ideal it claims.

The representation problem that 'visible minorities' suffer on French television has never been recognized by the channels directors. The problem remains completely taboo and it is impossible to openly debate on the question. The 'Collectif Egalité' s action and the CSA's study have brought about a debate in the public sphere and some evolutions. Indeed, viewers have noticed some timid changes on television programs for the last two years : minority journalists and anchormen have been recruited and films have had been produced illustrating more actors of extra European origin.

Despite these few exceptions, one notices that the portrayal of 'visible minorities' has not radically evolved since « visible minorities' » representation largely remains stereotypical, rough and partial today.