SETTING THE CONTEXT

This text brings together a selection of my blogs published online in the Montreal METRO newspaper between September 2017 and February 2019.[1]

For the most part, the comments made in my blog are still relevant today. That said, a few have been updated where appropriate (see text boxes).

As a genre, blogs impose word limits. They are a far cry from the scientific research and academic articles with all their required references. That said, I have set myself the goal of drawing on systematic analysis and quoting figures wherever possible (I am a demographer by training).

The first two texts clearly outline my objectives: to dispel certain myths about immigration whether in Quebec or elsewhere in the world. The last election campaign in Québec (October 2018) was particularly revealing of the misconceptions that have been circulating and drove home the need to move beyond myths and address the issue of immigration in a factual way. The remaining texts are divided into four parts:

- myths about the economic impact of immigration;
- identity myths;
- the impact of surveys; and
- the global migration crisis.

I would like to thank the team at the METRO newspaper who opened their door to me and guided me through a métier that was, until then, unknown to me. I would also like to thank my colleagues and friends who followed me on this adventure: their comments and suggestions enabled me to explore some points in greater depth and to nuance others.

My special thanks go to the following people: Cris Bauchemin, Danièle Bélanger, Gérard Bouchard, François Crépeau, François Héran, Lama Kabbanji, Jack Jedwab, Richard Marcoux, Jean Poirier and Patrick Simon. Thanks also to the demographers of Statistics Canada and the Ministère de l'Immigration du Québec who diligently responded to my sometimes urgent requests for statistical information. A special thank you to Jack Jedwab for his support throughout my adventure and especially for opening the doors of the Canadian Diversity magazine to me.

I must also highlight the significant contribution of my demographer wife Louise Normandeau. She read each of my blogs and gave me the benefit of her implacable logic at times when strong feelings made me deviate from the point I was trying to make.

I am not the only demographer to attempt to deconstruct migratory myths. Here are some references from French demographers that will deepen certain themes discussed here:

- Cris Beauchemin et Mathieu Ichou (dir.) (2016), *Au-delà de la crise des migrants: décentrer le regard*, Karthala.
- François Héran (2016), *Parlons immigration en 30 questions*, La Documentation française.
- Hélène Thiolet (éds) (2016), *Migrants, migrations: 50 questions pour vous faire votre opinion*, Armand Colin.

On Quebec, see the section on language in Michel C. Auger (2018), *25 mythes à déboulonner en politique québécoise*, les éditions La Presse.

On the history of immigration in Quebec, see:

- Guy Berthiaume, Claude Corbo et Sophie Montreuil

1 They are available on the following website: https://dynamiques-migratoires.chaire.ulaval.ca/parlons-dimmigration-2/parlons-dimmigration)

(dir.) (2014), *Histoires d'immigrations au Québec*, Québec, Presses de l'Université du Québec et Bibliothèque et Archives nationales.

- Victor Piché (2019), "L'histoire de l'immigration au Québec: au-delà de l'idée de menace?", dans la revue *Enjeux de l'univers social*, vol. 15, no1, pp. 6-9.

Finally, our last book addresses a series of issues related to immigration, religion and ethnic relations in Quebec: Deirdre Meintel, Annick Germain, Danielle Juteau, Victor Piché et Jean Renaud (2018), *L'immigration et l'ethnicité dans le Québec contemporain*, Presses de l'Université de Montréal.

WHY A SERIES ON IMMIGRATION?

I have been interested in migratory issues for over thirty years as a professor and researcher. My work has focused on integration issues in Quebec and Africa, and on migration policies in Canada and Europe.

In recent years, immigration has become a hotly debated topic around the world. The recent arrival in Quebec of Haitians from the United States who have become refugee claimants is a good example of an issue mired in confusion. For instance, these claimants were commonly referred to as "illegal migrants" while international law provides them with a legal process for seeking asylum. Demonstrations of far-right supporters and the slippages of a number of politicians have not helped to promote level-headed and constructive debates on the topic.

I have found that all too often ideas and perceptions about immigration are far from reality. Social media carries many myths despite the existence of scientific research that says the opposite. Several factors come to mind in explaining the gap between research and public opinion: the limited accessibility of informed publications, misconceptions, misinformation, lack of literacy (according to the report of the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies in December 2015, one in five adults in Quebec had very poor reading or writing skills, with almost half of the population having difficulty understanding a newspaper article).

It is discouraging to realize that even when confronted with the real facts, opinions do not change. Certainly, there is a section of the population that will always be impervious to the facts. On the other hand, recent studies, which have tried to classify the population according to their opinions and attitudes towards immigration, have proposed a typology ranging from a very open attitude (eg. "convinced multiculturalists" or "cosmopolitans") to the opposite extreme (hostile people and radical opponents). The population is therefore far from homogeneous with respect to views on migration. But, what is most important, is the conclusion of a study according to which the position of the majority of the public would be ambiguous, thus between the two extreme positions.

It is to this segment of the population that these articles are mainly addressed. The objective of the series is thus to draw a portrait of immigration which frees it from its false association with threat. Because it is fear that feeds negative ideas and opinions about immigration, a fear that is all too often used and fed by certain politicians and far-right anti-immigration groups.

In the following columns, we will expose a number of prevalent myths about immigration and attempt to challenge these by presenting what the research says. Admittedly, in some cases, there is no unanimity among the researchers, but I will show that in these cases the debates are not so much about the facts as about the choice of facts and their interpretation.

THE NEED TO DISPEL MYTHS

"Much of the conventional wisdom about migration is based on myths rather than facts. Migration policies often remain ineffective because they are based on these same myths". Peter Sutherland, the UN General Secretariat's Special Representative for International Migration (see Project Syndicate, 10 September 2014), expressed it this way. Despite the abundance of statistics and scientific studies, myths and misperceptions about migration are flooding the media and social networks. Why is this the case?

The first explanation that comes to mind is lack of knowledge. Indeed, surveys show that respondents' perceptions of immigration are far from reality. A few examples: in France, respondents think that immigrants make up 28% of their population, while the real figure is 10%. In Italy, the gap is even more pronounced: 30% (perceived level) vs. 7% (actual level). There are also significant differences in Belgium, Great Britain, the United States and Canada. This is also the case when people are asked about the proportion of Muslims in their country. To the question, "How many Muslims are there in your country"? The gaps between perception and reality are even greater. People commonly estimate that there are 4 to 5 times more Muslims than there really are, including in Canada. (Source: Nardelli & Arnett, 2014, "Today's key fact") According to an article in the Journal Metro of December 14, 2016 (citing the Pew Research Center), perceptions of the future are even more surreal: in 2020, Canadians believe that Muslims will represent 27% of the population while projections predict 2.8%.

Another finding: numerous studies around the world show that negative attitudes towards immigration are more prevalent in regions where there are very few, if any, immigrants

(for a very recent study, see the article by De Jong, Graefe, Calvan and Hasanali in N-IUSSP, October 2, 2017). In short, when contacts with immigrants are superficial or limited, individuals develop feelings of hostility that translate into anti-immigration opinions.

Of course, this does not explain everything, because misunderstanding is too often fuelled by misinformation from extremist groups and far-right political parties whose alarmist immigration rhetoric aims to provoke and sustain mistrust and fear on the basis of unfounded, even outright false claims.

It is this lack of knowledge and misinformation that has led many researchers and migrant advocacy groups to believe that conducting information campaigns would be sufficient to set the record straight and debunk myths. Unfortunately, there is a tendency in some quarters to see us as having entered a new era of "post-truth" where facts can be ignored. Indeed, even when faced with real figures, some people refuse to deviate from their positions. An article in *Le Monde* (5 May 2017) presented a study carried out among supporters of the National Front in France, which showed that "fact checking" contradicting the FN's speech had no effect on opinions or voting intentions. Ignorance, even refusal, of the facts is enough to sow doubt and defeatism about the real effect of interventions on public opinion.

For my part, I think that this "defeatist" reaction underestimates the impact of scientific analyses and the presentation of real facts, however complex they may be. While a small number of people will always remain impervious to rational arguments, there is a large segment of the population that, while remaining ambiguous about immigration, has no fixed ideas about it. It is for this category of the population that we must continue to seriously study the migration phenomenon and dispel myths.