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Review of Immigration, Labor, and the Politics of Belonging in France by Elaine Thomas

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Book Review
**Immigration, Labor, and the Politics of Belonging
in France**
By
Elaine Thomas

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University of Pennsylvania Press

Immigration, Labor, and the Politics of Belonging in France discusses the politics of belonging/membership as it relates to receiving the right to vote as an immigrant, political citizenship, and naturalization in the French and British states within the context of a rapidly globalizing world. Elaine Thomas uses the foundations of the national traditions perspective and the post-national perspective to create a five-fold ordinary language-based schema to understand how countries are discussing the politics and cultural debates that have emerged in light of increased immigration.

In order to build a viable typology with which to study the complexities of membership, Thomas examines editorials, parliamentary debates, newspaper articles, and radio and television transcripts that discuss two major controversies: the *affaire du furland* in France and the *Rushdie affaire* in Britain. Thus, the crux of this book focuses on providing a new way to examine political membership cross-nationally. The need for this new language-based typology is two fold. The literature examining citizenship and membership is either rooted in political theory or a comparative framework, but fails to bridge these areas. Her new typology combines these two approaches and creates an interdisciplinary technique. Thomas also suggests that this approach needs to be rooted in language to create an analysis that is culturally self-reflective and free from over simplification of membership related discussions. Theoretically, she argues that the typically dichotomous approach of categorizing countries' membership policies as either civic or ethnic falls short of capturing

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the nuances of membership debates. The result is a theoretically refined framework based in political and comparative elements.

To create the five models of political membership, Thomas categorizes the verbs used to describe membership in a group. Basically, depending on the type of group, membership is depicted by language in different ways. The verb used to describe exit from a group forms the data for the language analysis. For example, memberships can be canceled (professional associations) or quit (sports teams). One can also leave a group (like a social movement) or change membership (political orientation). Lastly, some groups cannot be exited (generation, race, maternal language). Thomas translates these types of exit to then identify five types of political membership: Belief, Contract, Culture, Decent, and Monetized Contract. Using this typology, Thomas' main finding is that, "... immigration-related changes in citizenship laws nor France's politics of belonging have confirmed multiculturalists' hopes or post-nationalists' expectations" (261). Instead, countries, namely France and Britain, have championed the Culture, Belief, and Contract perspectives of political membership.

Chapters three through eight describe how people framed and discussed membership in France from the 1980s to the 2000s. Specifically, Thomas follows the Nationality Commission, which was appointed by Jacques Chirac in the 1980s. This commission functioned to minimize work of the New Citizenship Campaign, which was in favor of a "multicultural" nation, and the Monetized Contract model of citizenship (57). The Nationality Commission laid out a new "republican" compromise, which focused on Belief, Culture, and Contract types of membership. Broken down, the Commission favored applications as part of the nationalization process and the role of institutions for integrating immigrants and young foreigners into French society. The Commission's work resulted in the passage of the *Méhaignerie* law in 1993.

The *Affaire du foulard* (head scarf affair) took place during the Commission's tenure. Three Muslim girls were expelled from school for wearing headscarves in 1989. This divided political elites based on their understanding of citizenship and political membership. After much debate, in February 2004 the French National Assembly approved a law prohibiting the "wearing of signs or dress by which

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students ostensibly express a religious belonging” in public schools. After this, 100 more female students were expelled for wearing the Islamic hijab to school. Some Muslims in France came out strongly against the ban, while others were sympathetic to the government’s intentions of creating solidarity.

The author compares the political and racial climate in France to that of Britain during the Rushdie affair in chapter nine. The Rushdie affair occurred when an Iranian man named Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini issued a “*fatwa* sentencing Salman Rushdie, author of the satiric postmodern novel *The Satanic Verses*, to death along with his publishers and translators” (204). Both the Rushdie affair and the *Affaire du foulard* occurred during the same time, but the British government was much more responsive to the concerns of Muslims than the French government.

In her comparison between the French and the English response to Muslim discrimination the author uses ordinary language analysis to assert both similarities and differences between the countries. In both countries, the left wing evoked the Belief model of membership as the ideal choice for the country. Right leaning groups, however, differed in their ideology in the two countries. In France, the right was likely to use both the Culture and Descent model of membership. In Britain, the right did not use Culture, and only referred to the Descent model sparingly. They instead used the Contract model of membership as their primary focus. Thomas attributes this difference to British law limiting free speech in a few different ways that could affect the dissemination of *Satanic Verses*, where in France the issue was framed in a way that focused on conforming to cultural norms, not laws.

This project does an exceptional job at providing a detailed and current understanding of political membership debates in France. As the author herself states, “...the text will prove of particular interest to scholars and others interested in contemporary French politics” (viii). The comparative aspects of the book, however, seem less developed particularly because of the absence of an explanation of how these countries are politically different in the first place. France and England have a tradition of approaching social policy differently. Therefore, it is not groundbreaking to conclude that there are differences in how they approach membership politics. With that said,

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using a language-based typology highlights the different nuances in governmental approaches to address immigration and membership issues is a valuable addition to cross-national research.

“Our understandings of membership, political and otherwise are multiple and often inconsistent” (251). Along with her empirical conclusions, Thomas makes a valuable contribution by combining comparative and political membership literature as it relates to increasing racial and ethnic diversity as a result of globalization. More research needs to compare how countries deal with political and social dynamics in light of increasing ethnic diversity, and ordinary language analysis is one way to approach this topic.