

# Trading on Origins: Signs and Windows of Foreign Shopkeepers in Interwar Paris

by *Claire Zalc*

In spring 1933 the young sociologist Norbert Elias, only son of a Jewish middle-class family and assistant professor at the University of Frankfurt, decided to escape from Nazi Germany. His life in England, which took him from London to Leicester, is familiar, but it is less well known that his exile began on the continent. After an unsuccessful attempt to find a position in Switzerland, he headed for Paris. Traces of Elias's stay in France are scarce. In a few pages of his autobiography he tells of a number of failures to find work in the capital. But the prestigious title of German professor meant little, and the doors of French universities remained closed. He drifted alone into Paris cafés, often gnawed by hunger as his money rapidly ran out.<sup>1</sup> A document at the Archives de Paris bears witness to this. On 20 April 1934 an establishment specializing in wooden models, toys and gift articles, located in the fifteenth arrondissement of Paris, was entered on the *Registre du Commerce* of the Seine department by an individual of German nationality, born in Breslau in 1897, and answering to the name of Norbert Elias.<sup>2</sup> And the name of this toyshop was 'Les Ateliers Norbert'. Elias gave his embryonic business his own first name, preferring to hide a foreign surname with Jewish overtones. But this little story invites further questions: why hide one's origin in the world of Paris shop-keeping of the 1930s? And more generally, what was the role played by shop names in the way that foreigners marked the urban space?

Immigration and commerce both raise, in different but key ways, the question of the relationship between people and space. On the one hand, since research conducted in the 1920s by sociologists of the University of Chicago, studies of immigrants have focused on the distribution of foreigners in the city, seeking to display the criteria that determine zones of settlement and urban trajectories.<sup>3</sup> On the other, the commercial infrastructure is part of how territories of immigration are constructed.<sup>4</sup> It was the German bakeries, bars and 'beer gardens' of the late nineteenth century that helped to create a 'Little Germany' in the lower East Side of New York.<sup>5</sup> In Chicago in the 1920s grocery shops were genuine community institutions for ethnic communities, despite being established in zones where immigrants were under-represented.<sup>6</sup> The construction of ethnicity involves modes of consumption.<sup>7</sup> Above all, the foreign presence in a neighbourhood is most often measured in terms of its visibility. The appropriation of space by signs

that denote foreignness enables a particular neighbourhood to become known as a site of immigration. It is by being impressed by many flashing neon signs and the number of restaurants and groceries selling Asian products that passers-by conclude, when they emerge from the Belleville métro station in Paris, or walk down Gerrard Street in London, that they are at the heart of a Chinese quarter. Representations of origin vary from one city to another and from one age to another. But they are inscribed first of all by the shops that fashion the images of a neighbourhood.<sup>8</sup> Historians of consumption have done a great deal of work on the transformations of modes of commercial transaction, and the growing importance of shop windows in both department stores and smaller retailers.<sup>9</sup> The question of gender construction in modes of shopping has also been addressed.<sup>10</sup> But what can we say about the role of shops and businesses in the representation of ethnicity? The case of interwar Paris is particularly revealing in this regard.

From the start of the twentieth century, Paris stood out in Europe as a favoured destination for immigrants: by 1911 the French capital counted a figure of 6.8% foreigners, more than twice as many as London (3%) or Berlin (2.6%). This movement accelerated after the First World War: more than 400,000 foreigners were enumerated in Paris and its immediate suburbs (the Seine department) in 1926, some 8.9% of the population, and nearly 450,000 in 1931, 9.3% of the total.<sup>11</sup> The size and diversity of these foreign communities often led to the city being compared to a new Babel.<sup>12</sup> As the metropolis of a colonial empire, a national and a European capital, Paris was also a city full of foreign shopkeepers: whereas in France as a whole only 9.7% of economically active foreigners had their own business in 1931, in Paris at that time they made up 25.4% of that total.<sup>13</sup> But were these shopkeepers visible on the streets of the French capital? This question, the guiding thread of the present article, above all raises an epistemological problem about the materials and methods employed by the historian working on urban representations of alterity. To avoid the pitfalls of a method confined simply to the play of representations, we can seek for an under-examined neighbourhood institution: the shop and its visible exterior.

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Anthropologists and sociologists set out on the quest for marks of alterity in urban landscapes by way of ethnographic observation, which enables them to note a series of elements – shop windows, labels, clientele – suggesting the role played by shops in the construction of ethnicity and ‘the other’.<sup>14</sup> But historians cannot base their analysis on the direct observation of these representations in the urban landscape. They can either depend on the traces left over the years, or else must try to reconstruct what was visible at the time. This is a difficult choice.<sup>15</sup> The two sources most frequently recruited are the accounts of contemporaries and the images of the time. But these sources are not without pitfalls of their own.

Let us start with contemporary accounts. It is clear that the various signs of 'foreign' Paris in terms of commerce do not necessarily correspond to the statistical realities of immigrant distribution. In certain cases, such accounts focus on the foreign presence embodied in shops. To evoke the Italian presence in La Villette (in the north-east of Paris) in the late 1920s, August Rouquet, an attentive observer of this quarter, commented on the commercial signs of Italians in the neighbourhood:

The Italians decorate Rue Curial with pyramids of red, yellow and green pimentos, with delicious charcuterie topped by salamis and mortadellas, sausages and Parma hams. The dark and swollen bellies of Chianti, Pomino and Corimagno bottles surround the proud bottles of Asti Spumante. On hot Sunday afternoons the voluptuous girls of the peninsula skip in the street to the sound of accordion, guitar, or barrel organ. Knives are flashed in the evening – for a smile, for Mussolini, for a trifle.<sup>16</sup>

Love of music and good cheer, the voluptuousness of Southern women, the violence of hot-blooded men – a familiar range of clichés inform this description; yet at the same time it testifies to the substantial transformation of the urban landscape by the Italian presence and by the shops they opened.<sup>17</sup> In the constitution of an 'Italian territory' in La Villette, shops played a significant symbolic role.

At Belleville in the east of Paris, on the other hand, foreigners seem not to have been very visible. In the 1920s and '30s this quarter experienced a substantial and growing influx of immigrants, and by 1936 foreigners made up nearly eighteen per cent of its population.<sup>18</sup> Yet it is still presented in publications of the time as a 'typically Parisian' area. In 1928 the journalist Marcel Espiau could write: 'Belleville is Paris. No *métèques*<sup>19</sup> here, not even provincials. You're born in Belleville, you breed there, and that's where you die. And you're proud to be a *bellevillois*'.<sup>20</sup> 'In Belleville, all your roots are Parisian', the popular novelist Eugène Dabit insisted in 1933.<sup>21</sup> In the years before the Second World War, foreigners had not yet marked the streets of Belleville with their signs.

The particular phases of immigration each had differing histories. In La Villette it had a relatively long duration, stretching back to the 1880s, with people at the time speaking of it as a 'Little Italy'. In Belleville immigration was more mixed and more recent. We immediately encounter here the problems bound up with any social history based on representations of space. If we try to grasp the visibility of foreigners in interwar Paris through contemporary discourse we necessarily have to engage with a range of subjective perspectives. What are we to make of the varied competing perceptions of ethnic visibility?

A second possibility is to read these contemporary subjective accounts alongside our own interpretation of the visual sources themselves. Who

doesn't remember one or other of those old photographs showing a Paris shop run by a foreigner, adorned with inscriptions in Cyrillic or Hebrew characters, the photo often accompanied by the usual refrain about the 'cosmopolitanism' of this or that quarter? But here again, alterity is reduced to what is seen in visual terms as 'foreign', and consequently reflects as much the intention of the photographer as any 'reality' of an urban marking. Pictures of shop signs marked a classical genre of photography in the first third of the twentieth century; yet it is clear that these pictures were frequently taken in order racially to stigmatize the new migrants. We can see something of this from Figure 1, a picture of a restaurant façade in the central Hôtel de Ville quarter which illustrates the book by the geographer Georges Mauco, *Les Étrangers en France*, published in 1932.

Mauco was born in Paris in 1899, and came from a modest background. He was trained as a teacher, and worked first in a school and then as a professor at the École Normale de la Seine.<sup>22</sup> After specializing in geography, he presented his doctoral thesis in 1932, championing the idea of a necessary recourse to foreign labour in the sectors of agriculture and large-scale industry. But Mauco, a future member of the under-secretariat of state for immigration (established in 1938), was more hostile to the presence of foreigners in the world of professional occupations, where 'they provoke, if not unemployment, at least a serious competition'. 'Very often we find shady deals, fraudulent bankruptcies, swindles in which these *météques* are involved, often recently naturalized.'<sup>23</sup> He went on in the same book to undermine the credibility of foreign traders by denouncing their 'cosmopolitanism'.<sup>24</sup> This idea is echoed in the photograph, particularly in its focus on the inscription on the shop wall: 'French, Russian, Polish, Romanian, Turkish, Greek, Serb, Bulgarian, Albanian spoken'. But above all, the caption claiming that 'this quarter swarms with a large population of Jews and Levantines' offers the reader a distinctly anti-Semitic perspective from which to interpret the illustration.

The photographic sources for interwar France are poorly catalogued and often silent as to the national origin of the persons pictured. The Hungarian photographer François Kollar traversed France in the early 1930s on behalf of the publisher Horizons de France, in order to carry out a photographic inventory of the country at work. As Marianne Amar reminds us,

... he constantly met and photographed foreign workers who had come from Europe and the French empire. But the published images and their captions never mention these origins, as if work united people but effaced their nationalities. The immigrants are omnipresent in the frame, but absent from the photographic intention, and thus invisible.<sup>25</sup>

In Figure 2, which dates from around 1910, one can see the shop of Adolphe Karaimsky, a tailor born in the Russian empire in 1882. He arrived in France in December 1903, and set up his own business two years later,

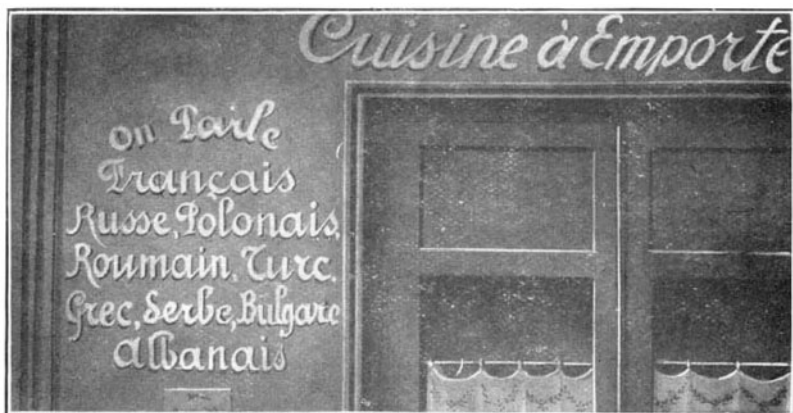


Fig. 1. The front of a restaurant in the Hotel de Ville neighbourhood of Paris, in 1932, with a claim that French, Russian, Polish, Roumanian, Turkish, Greek, Serbian, Bulgarian and Albanian were spoken within. From Georges Mauco, *Les Étrangers en France*, Paris: Colin, 1932. According to his caption the quarter 'swarmed' with significant numbers of Jews and Levantines.



Fig. 2. Adolphe Karaimsky and family in front of his tailoring business on the Rue Daguerre (around 1910).

opening a shop on Rue Daguerre in the south of Paris.<sup>26</sup> The shop was successful, and he appears from 1910 onwards in the *Bottin du commerce*, an almanac of Paris shops, in the section headed ‘tailors’.<sup>27</sup>

Adolphe’s posture, his proud if perhaps also self-deprecating smile, the arrangement of his family with wife and son framed by the shop doorway, all display the importance of access to independent status for the migrants of this period, as well as emphasizing the ties between family and business. The shop is impressive, and plays on its foreignness as a commercial asset. In this period fashion in clothes was oriented across the Channel. It had been an Englishman, Charles Frederick Worth, who introduced haute couture to France in the mid nineteenth century. Karaimsky’s shop has a signboard in English, ‘MODERN TAILOR’, and the window explains for the benefit of customers: ‘ENGLISH SPOKEN, MAN SPRICHT DEUTSCH’.

The urban presence of foreign shopkeepers has not always left such traces. Seventeen per cent of the registered traders in the Seine department (Paris and its suburbs) between 1922 and 1939 did not have fixed premises, and of these twenty per cent were foreigners. Flower-sellers, peddlers of humbugs and candy-floss, accordionists, house-painters, whistlers, dealers in second-hand furniture and seasonal goods, were all frequently still trading in the streets in the interwar years, part of the common sound and colour of urban life.

Itinerant traders did not have to concern themselves with any commercial establishment. With no fixed address, they simply walked from one quarter to another, occupying the city streets. Their impact was above all an aural one. Singers, barrel-organists and knife-sharpeners, glaziers and chair-seat repairers, newspaper hawkers and old-clothes men made their ‘Paris street cries’ a hallmark of their trades.<sup>28</sup> These cries were not always free from accent. On the market of the Carreau du Temple, a covered market in the third arrondissement which specialized in second-hand clothes, the cries of Russian and Polish traders – mostly Jewish – were a familiar sound:

This is the realm of the second-hand dealer... But it is no longer the domain of the French. Despite a decree by the police that when sites are allocated by lot, priority should be given to twelve Frenchmen for each foreigner, all we hear around us is the tongue so dear to the Rue des Rosiers! It’s extremely odd.<sup>29</sup>

What they spoke was Yiddish, the ‘tongue of the Rue des Rosiers’ in the words of this writer for *Le Petit Journal* in 1925, referring to the central street of the Paris ‘Pletzl’, the main quarter for the arrival of East European Jews since the 1880s.<sup>30</sup> Others were more direct. ‘The Marché du Temple has become a genuine fiefdom for the worst *mètèques*’ was one headline in the far-right paper *L’Ami du peuple* on 8 January 1929.

The urban presence of these street traders also had a strictly material dimension: markets were held on the city squares several days a week.

Barrows cluttered the pavements and roadways, leading to frequent conflict with 'settled' traders who accused the street-sellers not only of unfairly competing with their own shops, but also of blocking the circulation of pedestrians and shoppers, while some traders also wanted the pavements to display their goods or put out tables.

Urban visibility does not necessarily have a fixed inscription in space. We need to keep this in mind. But we can also learn much, surprisingly perhaps, from shop names themselves. Why should this be so? First of all, the shop name features in an archival source. As of 16 July 1920, all traders active in France were required to declare themselves to the *Registre du Commerce*, an official record of everyone practising a commercial activity that was kept by the district *Tribunal du Commerce*. This 'census' held information on both the shops and the traders themselves.<sup>31</sup> At the same time under a law of 18 March 1919 the name of the establishment, as distinct from that of the proprietor, was required whenever a business was registered with this administration.

Moreover, signs which indicated the origin of traders became the cause of much debate during the first half of the century. During the First World War, the mobilization of French shopkeepers in the armed forces fuelled fears of the competition of foreigners, who were commonly accused of profiting from the war by increasing their custom. Fears of economic espionage gained a new resonance. Traders whose origins lay in enemy territory aroused suspicions which very often were provoked by letters of denunciation from neighbours. Indeed, this touched not just those from 'enemy' countries, but foreigners more generally. This nationalist fervour was underwritten by xenophobia and by anti-Semitism.<sup>32</sup> In an anonymous letter to the Paris prefect of police, Adolphe Karaimsky was accused in March 1918 of being 'debauched, Francophobe and Germanophile and making defeatist statements on many occasions'.<sup>33</sup> Following this denunciation he was sent to an internment camp at Précigné, then expelled to Russia. According to his own account, 'As soon as the war was finished, despite my irreproachable conduct, they came one morning and took me from my home to send me as a hostage to Russia without asking me if I agreed to go there or not, and this nearly ruined me and broke my situation, as I left my family with effects that had to be sold at a loss in order to buy food'.<sup>34</sup>

A number of suggestions for making the national origin of shopkeepers visible were also put forward. In 1915 the Paris *Chambre du Commerce* proposed the establishment of a 'nationality plaque' to be displayed within each shop, as well as on the premises of manufacturers, doctors and even journalists.

Of specified dimensions, (35–40 by 25–30 cms), this plaque would be required of any shopkeeper, industrialist, official, lawyer, doctor, journalist, etc. who dealt with the public in the practice of their profession or function, and would have to be placed in a visible way in the office, shop,

workshop, etc., in the section where they generally receive the public. . . Letters of one or two centimetres high, of an appropriate character, would make it easy to read the name of the place, the country of origin and the nationality, as well as, in the case of the naturalized French, the date and the place where their naturalization took place.<sup>35</sup>

This 1915 scheme for a 'nationality plaque' was never put into practice, but the proposal itself testifies to an obsession with publicizing the national origins of Parisian shopkeepers in these years.<sup>36</sup>

The economic crisis of the 1930s, which triggered a resurgence of strong xenophobic and anti-Semitic feelings in French society, brought such measures back on the agenda. As unemployment grew foreigners were suspected of 'stealing French people's jobs', in a rhetoric already evident during the Great Depression of the 1880s and 90s, and again during the economic crisis of 1926-7.<sup>37</sup> But the xenophobic demands made in the 1930s were in some aspects new. The targets were specific to the interwar conjuncture: as well as 'foreign workers' – employees, in other words – artisans, shopkeepers and the liberal professions were now more conspicuously included. Doctors and lawyers, especially, mobilized to demand restrictive measures against foreigners and against those who had recently become naturalized.<sup>38</sup>

The independent middle classes, artisans and shopkeepers were not unaffected. Caught in the economic and social crisis, they took foreigners as their target. Threatened with loss of economic and social status (*déclassement*), small artisans and shopkeepers found unity in the battle against the 'invasion' of foreigners. From the start of the 1930s calls to 'protect honest trade' combined with denunciations of foreign 'pseudo-shopkeepers'.<sup>39</sup> Networks active around the shops and workshops of immigrants were suspected of promoting illegal immigration. Foreigners were accused of infringing the labour legislation, of manufacturing inferior-quality products that damaged the 'image of France', and of failing to respect the putative 'traditions' of production and sale. Commercial innovation was denounced as 'unfair competition', and regarded with the greatest suspicion. Foreign nationality among business people gradually came to be seen as a stigma, a sign of a bad 'commercial mentality'. As these criticisms multiplied, national origin alone came of itself to demonstrate fraudulent behaviour.

To protect 'honest trade' it became necessary to 'unmask the foreigner'. The attempt to conceal one's origin – in the eyes of the *Chambre du Commerce* of Châteauroux and the department of Indre – showed the 'lamentable mentality' of foreigner shopkeepers:

It is common to find these undesirables under the cover of their imaginary names, shady companies, masking their real origin and undertaking commercial operations whose result is deliberate bankruptcy almost always followed remarkably swiftly by a standard agreement with



conditions that, nine times out of ten, are not kept. It is time to put an end to this injury.<sup>40</sup>

Misrepresentation was presented as a key issue. 'We are struggling desperately against the constant invasion of BOGUS FOREIGN ARTISANS in our profession', declared the Association Parisienne des Fabricants de Chapeaux pour Dames (Paris Association of Ladies' Hatmakers) on 13 June 1935, in a letter addressed to Pierre Laval, the prime minister.<sup>41</sup>

Demands for national origins to be publicized also arose in connection with the names of businesses and shopkeepers. Several chambers of commerce renewed the call for foreign shopkeepers and artisans to operate under their own native surnames. The arguments adduced always referred to the commercial logic of 'unfair competition'. Names were perceived as the distinctive sign that made it possible to identify the origin of the shopkeepers. As Marcel Bagnaud, head of the Confédération Nationale des Coiffeurs de France (National Confederation of French Hairdressers) and member of the Paris Chambre du Commerce, explained in presenting his report on 'the situation of foreigners in 1938' at the general meeting of this Chambre, customers needed this knowledge:

Let us take an example . . . Here are the premises of 'Antoine' (I take this name at random, with no particular person in mind). This trader's shop is not distinguished from one of our own, despite his being Argentinian or Romanian. A female client, deceived by appearance, entered the premises and only discovered her mistake when it was already too late.<sup>42</sup>

Bagnaud called on the Paris Chambre to enforce display of the 'exact name' of shopkeepers 'on a clearly visible plaque positioned at the entrance and outside the premises where they practise their business', so that customers could observe (and by implication avoid) '*métèque*' names.<sup>43</sup>

Camille Hoquard, president of the Fédération des Groupements Commerçants (Federation of Traders' Associations) of the Moselle department, denounced procedures adopted by foreigners in order to deceive customers with 'highly imaginative and fancy signboards, occupying premises formerly run by Frenchmen whom they have ruined, and leaving on the shop-window the name of their predecessor, which they have omitted to remove'.<sup>44</sup> The arguments developed by organizations championing the independent middle classes to legitimize their struggle against the 'unfair competition' of foreigners produced a series of practical recommendations.

The same argument was also brought up several times before the Paris municipal council, where deputies with shop-keeping backgrounds virulently protested against the practice of foreign shopkeepers taking 'French' names. So it was in the name of the right of consumers that several municipal councillors took the problem to the Hôtel de Ville: 'A French consumer has the right, after all, to go to a foreign shopkeeper, but he should

know that he is dealing with a foreigner. He should not enter the shop in the belief that he has in front of him a Frenchman, if this is not the truth,' maintained Pierre Dailly, with support from Georges Contenot who insisted that 'business must be done with an open face'.<sup>45</sup>

On 14 March 1939 the issue entered the Chamber of Deputies, when a proposed law required that the full, original surname should appear on the signs and commercial documents of a business, and that the use of a false or incomplete surname should incur 'the penalties provided for forgery'.<sup>46</sup> Scarcely three months later, there was a further attempt to make naturalized shopkeepers wait ten years to change their surname, proposed once again in the name of consumer protection: 'It is unacceptable that individuals with no attachment to the country that has generously granted them French nationality should have as well as this the right to assume an essentially French name.'<sup>47</sup>

These remained proposals only. Yet the fact that they reached this far into public life gives us a sense of the racial climate of the period. The debates in the Paris *Chambre du Commerce*, in the municipal council and in the Chamber of Deputies in 1938 and 1939 demonstrate the power of racial thinking in these years, and more particularly the degree to which anti-Semitism was an undercurrent in French national life.<sup>48</sup>

But where do these naming practices lead us? In the majority of cases (nearly 70%), the trading names declared to the *Registre du Commerce* were identical with the surnames of the traders. Even so, naming practices can reveal some important aspects of immigrant life in this period. Is it possible to detect national differences in the practice of naming establishments? Does the adoption of a different trading name correspond to a desire by foreigners to avoid stigmatization? Can we establish a 'Frenchification' of the names that small businesspeople of foreign origin gave to their establishments? It is on the basis of these questions that I undertook a study of the trading names given to workshops and retail outlets in the Seine Department.

A preliminary look at these commercial naming practices by business people enrolled on the *Registre du Commerce* for the Seine Department, between 1922 and 1939, is immediately surprising (Table 1).

Fewer foreigners than native French opened a shop under a different name (32% as against 39%). The fears about concealed origins, as articulated by the spokesmen for the native artisans and shopkeepers – and by some politicians, did not match the observable reality, since the practice of assuming an invented trading name was more common among French business people. The first explanation for this difference could depend on the kind of commercial establishment concerned. In fact, commercial naming strategies varied significantly according to the sectors of activity (Table 2).

Hostelry, manufacture, dealing of various kinds, and arts and entertainment showed a higher proportion of invented names than the overall average. Businesses in the building and furniture trades, on the other hand, were most commonly called after their proprietor's surname; in these sectors, the

**Table 1. Trading name by proprietor's nationality (1922–39)**

	Foreigners	French	Total
Owner's surname	68%	61%	64%
Invented trading name	32%	39%	36%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Source: Samples of 1,249 and 691 entries in the *Registre du Commerce de la Seine* for French nationals and foreigners respectively between 1922 and 1939: Archives de Paris (ADP), D33U3.

**Table 2. Trading name by sector of activity (1922–39)**

	Surname	Adopted name	Total
Arts and entertainment	35%	65%	100%
Hostelry	37%	63%	100%
Paramedical	48%	52%	100%
Manufacture	49%	51%	100%
Bars and cafés	54%	46%	100%
Buying and selling	57%	43%	100%
Transport	59%	41%	100%
Laundry	61%	39%	100%
Clothing	62%	38%	100%
Ironmongery	63%	37%	100%
Leather and skins	64%	36%	100%
Foodstuffs	67%	33%	100%
Hairdressing	72%	28%	100%
Fancy goods	73%	27%	100%
Various	74%	26%	100%
Furniture	75%	25%	100%
Building	83%	17%	100%
Total	62%	38%	100%

Source: Sample of 1,523 entries in the *Registre du Commerce de la Seine* between 1922 and 1939: ADP, D33U3.

value of the business seems to have been closely attached to the individual artisan, to his knowledge and consequently to his name. In some other sectors, business names meant little since there was no shop window or sign: this was particularly the case with fancy goods, where the traders were very often street-sellers. One explanation for the less common use of surnames as trading names by businessmen of French nationality would thus be their over-representation in activities where this kind of trading practice was less common: the hotel sector, manufacture and paramedicals were all privileged spaces for the establishment of French traders in the interwar years.<sup>49</sup> But this is not sufficient to explain the differences noted.

If we restrict the study of trading names to particular sectors of activity, foreigners still seem to have been more reluctant than native French to adopt a trading name for their establishment different from their own: thus in leather and skins, 26% of foreigners adopted an 'invented' trading

name as against 46% of the French, while in clothing these percentages were 32% for foreigners and 41% for French. Only two sectors break this rule: building (where national difference had no bearing on trading-name practice), and hairdressing, where over 40% of foreigners chose an ‘invented’ trading name as against only 17.5% of the French. In this case, the personal trading name was a sign of quality in the eyes of the clientele, symbolizing the link between the shop and its proprietor, the practice of a trade and the person of the artisan. Perceptions of foreignness could have been unwelcome in this situation. Besides, the xenophobic campaign was particularly virulent among hairdressers in the 1930s, these being represented in the Paris Chamber of Commerce by Marcel Bagnaud, close to La Roque’s Parti Social Français.<sup>50</sup> In the world of Parisian hairdressing, immigrants felt the stigma of their origin especially keenly. But with this exception, nationality did not play the anticipated role in trading-name practice.

Can development be noted in the course of the interwar years? Did practices change in such a way as to signal a greater propensity among immigrants, in the years immediately before the Second World War, to choose new trading names? Quite the contrary. The rate of adoption of a trading name different from the proprietor’s surname declined among foreign businessmen in the years 1932–9, whereas it increased among the native French (Table 3).

But it was the trading-name practices of naturalized business people which underwent the most marked change: 43% of these chose a different name for their establishment between 1932 and 1939, as against only 30% between 1922 and 1926 and 29% between 1927 and 1931, even if the relatively small sample suggests the need for caution. The difference could be interpreted as an indication of naturalized traders claiming their Frenchness, but it could alternatively signal a desire to escape the stigma of their foreign origin. In order to think further on this, it is possible to conduct a more fine-grained analysis of the trading names chosen for the windows of retailers and workshops in the Seine department.

Choosing a new name for a shop does not mean, *a priori*, that the principal intention was to conceal a foreign name; it could also function as a commercial strategy for attracting a particular clientele. If we examine all

**Table 3. Changing rates of adoption of a trading name different from surname, by proprietor’s nationality**

	Foreigners	French	Naturalized French
1922–26	32%	34%	30%
1927–31	34%	37%	29%
1932–39	30%	46%	43%

Source: Sample of 1,940 entries in the *Registre du Commerce de la Seine* between 1922 and 1939, including 691 foreigners and 97 naturalized French. ADP, D33U3.

the invented trading names which figure in the sample of individual businesses on the Seine *Registre du Commerce*, we can construct a typology which helps to explain these naming practices. The first category includes all the business names which played on the name of the proprietor (either first name or surname). Thus we have Barouyz Andreassian, who shortened his surname when he called his dressmaking business ‘Maison André’; those who preferred to use their first name (‘Boucherie Charles’); the many proprietors of liquor outlets who played on the familiarity associated with the first name (‘Chez Jean’, ‘Bar Louis’), as well as Moïse Roisman who chose ‘Maurice’ rather than ‘Moïse’.

The second category is made up of ‘regional’ trading names, that is, names which referred to the trader’s origin: ‘Au Régal Milanais’ (The Milanese Feast) for a grocery run by an Italian, or ‘Au Rendez-vous des Suisses’ for the restaurant of an owner born in Geneva. It also includes establishments bearing the names of the region of origin of small businesses such as the milliner’s ‘À la Petite Normande’ and the ‘Photo Lorraine’ shop, whose proprietors were born respectively in Le Havre and Nancy.

A third category is that of trading names focusing on the activity practised: ‘Salon École de Coiffure’, ‘Charcuterie Nouvelle’, ‘Alimentation Générale’, or again ‘À la Bonbonnière’, ‘Cinéma Moderne’ – businesses which proclaimed their nature on their signs are grouped together here. But the location of their premises also figures among the markers selected by businesspeople in choosing a trading name. Thus we have the ‘Librairie de la Poste’ (Post-Office Bookshop), the ‘Pharmacie de l’Élysée’, the *brasserie* ‘La Chope d’Amsterdam’ (The Amsterdam Mug) located in the street of that name, or again the ‘Barbès-Bar’ on Boulevard Barbès.

A certain number of names appear to work primarily as advertising: ‘Aux Véritables Occasions’ (Real Bargains), or ‘Au Sans Rival’ (The Unbeatable). Sometimes these names also come under the ‘nature of business’ category: ‘Caves Renommées’ (The Famous Cellar), ‘Tout pour le Doublage’ (Everything for Linings), or alternatively the category of ‘place’: ‘Au Bon Coin’ (The Right Spot). Our choice here, however, has been to group them together as instances of advertising strategies. Finally, such names may also display personal connections on which the business is based, presenting family continuity, as in the piano showroom ‘H. et J. Lary fils et cie’ (H. and J. Lary Sons & Co.), or the monumental masons ‘Veuve Legout et ses fils’ (Widow Legout and her Sons), or again the presence of partners: ‘Heuze et cie’.

This categorization provides the statistical basis for a quantified study of national origins of French and foreign-run businesses. If the effects of the stigmatizing of foreignness in the 1930s scarcely play any role in the tendency to choose the name for a business, they show up more clearly in the distribution of the types of name chosen. The category of trading names which play on the proprietor’s name is clearly over-represented among foreigners. Among the invented names given to their establishments, 28% are

constructed by a play of this kind on the name, whereas this category only makes up 16% for the native French (Table 4).

In some cases, it was enough to modify the surname in order to acquire a more acceptable colour. Marmatakis was shortened to 'Marmat', Stzainfeld was Frenchified into 'Steinfeld', Kumerman's shop became 'Comarain'.<sup>51</sup> In others, the first name of the foreign proprietor was used, as in the case of Basile Stavinaki who opened his dressmaking workshop in the second arrondissement under the name of 'Basile Brodeur', or the Polish hairdresser who gave her salon in the Rue Amelot her own first name 'Hélène', or again Marie Ghilardini who chose to call her wood and coal business 'Jean Marie', conveying two attributes that an Italian small businesswoman lacked.<sup>52</sup> Most commonly, these naming practices denote among immigrants the desire to escape their foreign past. The adoption of new names increased in the years 1932–9, particularly among foreigners, where it rose from 23% in 1927–31 to 34% in 1932–9 (Table 5).

It would be over-hasty to deduce any definitive conclusion from these data, even though the chronological perspective attests to a shift in the 1930s. In fact, the proportion of individuals who seem to have tried to conceal their origin behind new trading names which played on their first name, or which Frenchified their surname, remains low in relation to the foreign proprietors as a whole, since they never make up more than 10% of

**Table 4. Trading name different from personal name. Distribution by proprietor's nationality (1922–39)**

	Foreigners	French	Total
Play on name	28%	16%	18%
Regional names	10%	6%	7%
Nature of business	17%	29%	27%
Indication of place	8%	12%	11%
Advertising names	15%	22%	21%
Personal connections	22%	15%	16%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Source: Sample of 620 entries on the Registre du Commerce de la Seine, including 220 by foreigners, between 1922 and 1939. ADP D33U3.

**Table 5. 'Play on name' in invented trading names: changes by proprietor's nationality**

	Foreigners	French	Total
1922–26	25%	12%	14%
1927–31	23%	15%	17%
1932–39	34%	20%	22%

Source: Sample of 573 entries in the Registre du Commerce de la Seine, including 210 by foreigners, between 1922 and 1939. ADP, D33U3.

the total (9.7% between 1932 and 1939). Thus the militant racial rhetoric of the trade associations seems far removed from the realities of immigrant artisans and traders, who above all sought to give their workshop or retail premises better commercial attributes.

Does this explain why foreigners were also over-represented in the category of regional names (10% as against 6% for native French)? This relative over-representation illustrates the existence of a naming strategy in which foreignness was embraced as a commercial asset. Ethnic businesses, concentrated in the sectors of food shops and restaurants, had every interest in emphasizing their specificity. This was the case with Italian groceries boasting evocative names such as 'L'Étoile d'Italie', 'Au Lion de Venise' or 'Au Jardin d'Italie du Sud'.<sup>53</sup> Cafés and restaurants likewise heralded their regional specialities, such as the 'Café-Restaurant Oriental' run by an Algerian, the 'Restaurant Vienna' belonging to an Austrian or the establishment 'Au Phare d'Odessa' (The Odessa Lighthouse), registered by a Russian in the fifth arrondissement.<sup>54</sup> In the same way, some import-export businesses could readily proclaim their national or regional origins: 'Agence Franco-Bulgare', 'Nordpol'. The travel agency which Hercule Joannides, a Greek from Marmara, founded in 1935 in the first arrondissement still bears a signboard full of promise: 'Le Voyage en Grèce. Escales d'Ulysse' (Travel to Greece: the Ports of Ulysses), while the small publishing company registered by a German refugee under the name 'Éditions Cosmopolites' proclaimed the internationalist commitment of its proprietor.<sup>55</sup>

We can thus see the relative importance of the issues involved in the choice of a trading name by foreigners: the first two categories ('play on name' and 'regional name') came to 38% for foreigners as against 22% for French. Trading names seem to have been chosen by the native French as a function of the characteristics of the business – object and place – whereas foreigners preferred to emphasize a relationship to the proprietor in person – surname, first name, origin. Here again, part of these differences in practice can be explained by the sectoral and geographical establishment of these small businesses. French traders, who were more frequently situated on avenues and boulevards, drew upon their location in 12% of the cases, as against only 8% of foreigners. The greater number of names referring to the nature of business was also due in part to the over-representation of the French in retail and hostelry, where these designations often predominate ('Crémèrie', 'Modern Hôtel', etc.). But it also indicates the different issues in play in the naming practice. If for French proprietors the quality of the business, its object and its location mattered most, foreigners preferred to emphasize the quality of the trader and his or her assets. Families and partners appear on 22% of the invented trading names selected by foreigners, as against only 15% for French, testifying both to the frequency of business partnership and to a greater propensity to make family or community membership a commercial asset.

A choice that essentially reflects a commercial strategy also appears as the product of a logic of affiliation.<sup>56</sup> The trading name became particularly important in the interwar years as one of the elements in the advertising strategies of small businesses, as attested by the growing percentage in this period of trading names which we have categorized as having principally an advertising function.<sup>57</sup> For foreign businesspeople, it was not so much xenophobia, directly, that influenced their choice of name as its legislative and regulatory expressions.

The self-employed sector, spared for a while from the measures for ‘protecting national labour’ which from 1932 served to close off the market in wage-labour, eventually was also closed to individuals who did not have French nationality. From 1935 there occurred a hardening of legislation aimed at foreign businesspeople. First foreign artisans were required to possess a special identity card. Then in 1938 this measure was extended (by the decree-law of 12 November) to any foreigner involved in commercial or industrial activity on French territory. On the eve of the Second World War, foreigners were required to obtain administrative authorization to open a retail outlet or workshop, and show five years of residence in France in order to practise any itinerant trade. Even a minor infraction could result in their being deprived of their authorization and having their identity card withdrawn. The front page of *Le Jour* for 24 January 1939 is symptomatic. ‘A card for foreign businesspeople is perfect’, it proclaimed; yet it then expressed an old anxiety in asking the rhetorical question: ‘But will it unmask the illegals?’

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Marc Bloch once suggested that ‘the good historian is like the giant of the fairy tale. He knows that wherever he catches the scent of human flesh, there his quarry lies’.<sup>58</sup> Since historians cannot work immediately on the basis of the words of historical individuals, or observations of them, they have to interpret the signs and traces that people leave in their wake. Examination of trading names makes it possible to assess the different ways of dealing with origins deployed by migrants, and this can lead the historian to catch xenophobia and anti-semitism in a new light. As a rhetorical phenomenon, the trading name does not always mark the streets, even when it takes material form as a sign. But it confers on the business a ‘mark’, and makes clear the extent to which alterity, in the interwar years, entered the commercial life of Paris.

If we look again at the photograph of Adolphe Karaimsky standing in front of his tailor’s shop (Fig. 2), it differs from the most common depictions of foreigners’ workshops and retail premises: no Cyrillic inscriptions or Hebrew letters, no reference to Russian or Jewish origin. And yet his shop is not free from all reference to foreignness, for Adolphe Karaimsky invented for himself an English origin. A few years later, he went into housing, buying land and bungalows before he launched himself successfully into the



construction of housing estates in the Paris suburbs.<sup>59</sup> He began by shortening his name: in the late 1920s his business was called 'Kara', a trading name by which the proprietor himself came to be known.<sup>60</sup> Later, by virtue of his integration into Parisian life, his children Frenchified this, in the late 1930s adopting the name 'Carat'.

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