

Comment vous appelez-vous?:
Why the French Change Their Names

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We examine the history, processes, and motivations which explain in part why and how the French change their names. Studying a small but representative sample of official name changes mandatorily published in the *Journal Officiel de la République Française* at certain moments of post-World War II history (1946, 1963, and 1992-1995), we identify the four most important reasons for changing names: because they are obscene or pejorative; ridiculous; perceived as too foreign, especially too Arab or too Jewish; or to add the patent of nobility. While we express surprise that names of these kinds still exist in contemporary France, we also recognize that the decision to request a name change at this late date is the last refuge for families who have long suffered indignities and humiliations because of their names.

The name I bear is not only a “gift” from my father
or my mother; it is an integral part of myself; it
has defined me...since my childhood.
François Cros

[T]he name is a family possession;
it is the cement of the family.
Marianne Mulon

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With the Ordonnance de Villers-Cotterets in 1539, which, according to Albert Dauzat (1949, 40), codified a long-established custom of assigning and preserving family names, the French monarchy sought to further integrate the diversity of its realm. Among its elements was a decree requiring the keeping of parish registers that would formally record the names by which the monarch's subjects and their children were known. What this legislation sought to do was to bring uniformity to a practice dating back to Carolingian times by which the surname of the father began to pass down to succeeding generations, constituting the family's surname (Ruffié 1991). Ruffié further reports in the same article that in some regions of France the use of given names and surnames was noted on official documents beginning as early as the tenth century. Thus, by the late sixteenth century, one effect of the Ordonnance de Villers-Cotterets was to freeze in time the evolution of many such French family names, and so pass unchanged to later generations family names that formerly had been based on a physical attribute, the place of residence, or the occupation of their distant ancestors. Families often took the name of their villages, and in other, rarer, cases, the villages took the name of their dominant families (Torrihlon 1976). Most common, though, were those names based on a baptismal name, one's residence, physical attributes, or occupation, and these names survive today as messengers of an earlier age. As Ruffié points out (1991), in a closed population the number of original family names begins to shrink, and the richness of those diverse cultural origins is lost.

On the sixth of Fructidor of the second year of the French Republic (23 August 1794), the National Assembly decreed that "No citizen may carry either [family] name or given name other than those expressed in their birth certificate: those who have abandoned them are required to retake them" (Loi 240, *Bulletin des Lois de la République Française* [An II/1794]). By 11 Germinal, XI (1 April 1803), the government had passed new legislation concerning the process of naming children and for changing names (Loi 2614, *Bulletin des Lois de la République Française* [An XI/1803]). Where the changing of names was concerned, the law of 1803 recognized existing practice, which permitted, in rare instances, the changing of certain names. For instance, seventeen people named *Cocu* 'cuckold'¹ were permitted to change their name in 1789 (Dauzat 1994, 138). The limitations the law of 1803 placed on the

sources of French given names, however, remained intact (despite challenges) until the mid-1980s. In fact, the process it mandated for the changing of names was in effect from 1803 to December, 1993 (Besnard 1994).

The fact that a name like *Cocu* was being changed as early as 1789 demonstrates the early pressure which some families felt to change their names as a result of (sometimes new and) often derogatory meanings. On the other hand, many ridiculous names have always meant exactly what they appear to mean today. Many of the older French surnames which have been passed down over generations to the present fairly teem with a sense of peasant humor (e.g., *Couillault* 'having large balls'); invective, village gossip or humor (e.g., *Lagarce* 'the bitch'). Others, like *Cochon*, which Dauzat (1994, 138) traces back to 1389, once reflected a common French occupation—the raising of pigs—along with the physical and mental attributes generally connected with pigs. The problem is that from the time of the Ordonnance de Villers-Cotterets onward, these names became fixed by administrative decree. Thus begins the historical saga of the humiliation of whole families doomed to carry certain names whose meanings evolved over centuries while the names themselves did not (*Le Monde* 1975, 8).

Here we examine the reasons why the French change their names. Our commentary is based on an analysis of the lists of name changes published mandatorily in the administrative record of France, the *Journal Officiel de la République Française (J.O.)*, at certain periods of postwar French history. We chose to consider the name changes recorded in 1946 following World War II; in 1963 following the Algerian War and the crisis of decolonization; and from 1992 through 1995, when many African, Vietnamese, and North African immigrants wished to integrate themselves into French society.

An analysis of the names involved suggests a number of primary reasons why the French change their names. We have identified four of the most common: because the names were obscene or pejorative; because they were ridiculous; because they were "foreign" sounding (particularly Arab or Jewish); or because people wanted to ennoble themselves. Of these reasons, according to Nicole Lapiere (1993, 207), more than half of each year's requests are to change foreign-sounding names, and another third are to change names which we call obscene/pejorative or ridiculous. In addition to these primary reasons, there are other, less common, reasons which we have discovered but do not

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discuss here. Among these are: the adoption of a minor child; name change as a result of divorce; name change in order to carry on the name of a relative who died for France; name change to include a pseudonym used in the Resistance or during wartime, as in the case of former Prime Minister Jacques Chaban-Delmas or Marshal Leclerc de Hauteclocque (Bertrand Le Gendre 1979b); name change to legalize the name under which one has been traditionally known (especially as a celebrity, artist, author, or performer); name change from a name with negative historical overtones (e.g., a Louvel who carried the same name as the assassin of the Duc de Berry, or those Hit[t]lers who changed their names after World War II); and name change for other, more puzzling, reasons; for instance, why Jean *Blanc* decided to become Jean *Noir*). At the same time, the courts have refused to permit people to change names for “frivolous” reasons; for instance, to appropriate the fame or trademark of another (naming a child *Chanel*, or using the name *Rothschild* [de Caevél 1990]); to change a name because it may sound ridiculous in another language, especially in English; or to allow transsexuals to change the gender of their first name following a sex change operation (Nau 1989).

We note that one name for children has traditionally been unacceptable to French authorities, and that is the name of the mother. French insistence on naming the child after the father goes back in the modern era to Napoleonic times. Napoleon himself is quoted as siding with naming the child after the father, saying, “To whom belongs the fruit, to the gardener or to the earth?” (quoted in *Le Monde* 1975, 5). Yves Emmanuelli (1982) points out, however, that by the terms of both the laws of 6 Fructidor, II and 11 Germinal, XI mentioned above, requiring all citizens to carry the names which appear on their birth certificates, women in the strictest interpretation of the laws should not be able to change their names upon marriage to that of their husbands, as marriage was not then recognized by the Revolutionary Assembly as a valid reason to change one’s name. We can only imagine the complication this interpretation would have created in the naming of children, had the state in successive generations not ignored this obvious legal problem.

As mentioned above, French practice in the choice of first names is also closely controlled by the state. To prevent the dilution of French cultural traditions by the introduction of foreign words or neologisms alien to French custom, the Revolutionary Assembly insisted in its law of 11 Germinal, XI that the only acceptable names for children were

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those taken from calendars (either republican or religious) or from the names of historical figures (from Title I, Article I of Law 2614, *Bulletin des Lois de la République Française* An XI/1803). The question of what constitutes a suitable historical figure has necessarily led to some flexibility by the courts, which have tended to refuse historical names with “too heavy a historical meaning,” such as *Cassandre*. However, one judge curiously cited the fictional *Obélix*, the amiable figure in *Astérix*, the children’s book series, as an acceptable example (*Le Monde* 1986a, 9). Yet, as one Madame Néron put it, “even so it’s more agreeable than being called Cocu or Trompette” (cited in Brunet [Mulon 1989], 135). The irony of using official calendars to select children’s given names is that it led to the naming of one young child in the overseas department of Guadeloupe, “Fêt. Nat.,” an abbreviation frequently found on official calendars on July 14th, France’s “fête nationale,” or “Fêt. Nat.” (*Le Gendre* 1979a, 4). In the same spirit, a girl today can be named *Cerise* ‘cherry’ based on the revolutionary calendar (*Le Monde* 1983, 4), but not *Vanille* ‘vanilla’, because the court felt it would expose her to “teasing and mockery” (*Le Monde* 1984, 5).

Thus, while it is perfectly legal today to give a child such names from the Revolutionary calendar as *Bazalote*, *Palatiante*, or *Babolein* (according to Bertrand Le Gendre [1979a]), one family had to wait eighteen months to name their daughter *Vanessa*. This policy has provoked particular conflict within the Basque and Breton minority groups, who have been prevented from giving their children traditional Basque and Breton names. By 1976, one Breton family had been at odds with the French state since 1956 over the right to give their children Breton names; the resulting impasse left the children without civil status, including the right to marry or inherit (Colombani 1976). By 1982, the Ministry of Justice announced the state’s decision to liberalize guidelines for the naming of children to partly take into account local and family traditions (*Le Monde* 1982, 6). Rulings by the *Cour de Cassation* (the highest judicial court) in both 1981 and 1984 liberalized guidelines for first names to include family, local, French, national, or even foreign traditions (*Le Monde* 1991, 6). As a result, the number of acceptable first names in use in France today is far in excess of the number found in the 1930s. In 1991, the Ministry of Justice proposed two additional laws permitting parents the free choice of names for their children (Giraudot 1991).²

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Historically, the problem with family names is the cumbersome process by which petitioners had to show cause to the state in order to change their names. We contend that several of these causes—and especially those designed to change obscene/pejorative, ridiculous, and foreign-sounding names—represent an important window into the sociology of modern France. In the case of obscene/pejorative and ridiculous names in particular, what we witness in the pages of the *J.O.* is the final recourse of families who, perhaps for centuries, felt unjustly humiliated because of the name they carried. What makes these names so interesting is not that they have been changed today, but that names of so stunning an obscenity had persisted so long into the modern era, and that it took in some cases five hundred years of shame before these families were finally moved to act.

The Process of Name Changing in France

According to French administrative practice, all French citizens seeking permission to change their names must follow the procedures first set forth in the law of 11 Germinal, XI (as mentioned above) and clarified by the decree of 8 January 1859 (Lapierre 1993, 207). Petitioners were first required to publish a notice (at their own expense) in the *J.O.* as well as in two other newspapers of legal announcements, one in their place of birth and the other in their place of residence (Le Gendre 1979b, 11). The purpose of these announcements was to permit third parties to object to the impending change of name. Along with proof of citizenship and an explanation of the motivation for the name change, the request was then forwarded by the local state attorney (*procureur*) to the state chancellery. The Ministry of Justice then made its recommendation and transmitted the dossier to the *Conseil d'Etat* 'Council of State'. The *Conseil d'Etat* rendered an opinion on the requested name change, which the government then chose to follow or not. According to Le Gendre (1979b), the chancellery follows the recommendation of the *Conseil d'Etat* in ninety-five percent of the cases submitted to it, but shows even more liberalism in regard to "les noms ridicules." In those cases where the state agrees to the change, under the process in effect between 1803 and 1993 the applicant was required to wait a full year from the date of the publication of the name change in the *J.O.* to see if any objections were raised. Only then could the applicant pay one thousand francs for the "droits de sceau" (seal rights)

which make the change official. Combined with the five to six hundred francs required to publish the notice in the three newspapers, the process of name change costs approximately three hundred dollars, not including attorney's fees.

One of the surprising facts concerning this process is its relative rarity. Lapierre (1993, 210) reports that since 1945 there have been about five hundred individual requests for name changes each year. When minor children are included, the number grows to about one thousand people annually, out of a total French population today of some fifty-five million. This number can be compared to the five thousand people who change their names *each year* in the United States in one city (Seattle) alone (*New York Times* 1994, A5, 14).

It is important to note the legal status of name change requests in French administrative custom. As Daniel Pepy, himself a jurist and a member of the *Conseil d'Etat*, stated, "The changing of a name is a favor from the public authority and not a right" (quoted in Le Gendre, 1979b, 11). It fell to the *Conseil d'Etat* to specify the conditions under which a change of name was considered legitimate, and administrative practice, according to Lapierre (1993, 207), has identified four such bases: the recovery (*relèvement*) or consecration of an illustrious name, or the consecration of a pseudonym; demands based on legal status (*possessions d'état*); demands based on an affective motive, such as the adoption of minor children; and "unpleasing" (*déplaisant*) or "inconvenient" (*incommode*) names. "Unpleasing" names would include "odious, dishonorable" or "ridiculous" names, and "inconvenient" names would include foreign names. Another member of the *Conseil d'Etat*, François Bernard, described the situations where the *Conseil* has shown itself most sympathetic: in addition to ridiculous names, the *Conseil* has demonstrated its willingness to change names which are seen as too foreign-sounding (fully a third of the requests) and especially those which are Jewish-sounding (nearly ten percent). In many cases, it simply suffices for individuals or families to alter their own names and to use them publicly for two or three generations. As *Conseiller* Bernard put it, "[E]very pretension, vanity, and trickery [*tromperie*] may be legalized, but on the condition of being offset [*compensée*] by a sole virtue: patience" (quoted in Le Gendre, 1979b, 11).

In 1993, the government modified the law of 1803 to simplify the process of changing one's name. The new law reduced the waiting

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period to two months but now required the consent of any minor having attained the age of thirteen. More importantly, this legislation, taking effect in March 1994, now recognized “any person who can justify a legitimate interest” in changing his or her name. However, in acknowledging the value of stability in the matter of family names, the *Conseil d’Etat* still insisted that “[n]ame changes cannot be permitted for emotional [*affective*] reasons which, in each generation or depending on the periods of life, could be contradictory” (*Le Monde* 1994, 10).

Methodology

What emerges from the relatively short lists, published at regular intervals, are a number of striking names which reveal the clear motivation behind the requested change. We studied a sample of issues of the *J.O.* at certain pivotal moments in modern French history: 1946, in the first year of the Liberation after the Second World War; in 1963 following the Algerian War; and from 1992 through 1995 with the increased inflow of immigrants to France. We found that in both 1946 and 1963 there were clear trends to try to “Frenchify” foreign-sounding names, especially German, Polish, or Jewish names. Beginning in 1963, after the end of the Algerian War and continuing into the present, there has been a marked trend to try to Frenchify Arab or other Middle Eastern names. A less frequent though consistent element each year is requests to change obscene/pejorative or ridiculous names. Some of the more striking examples of the four motivations for name changes are listed in the appendices.

Obscene or Pejorative Names

One of the most extraordinary aspects of the name change process is the clear presence in France, on the eve of the twenty-first century, of names of an obviously obscene/pejorative or indecent nature. These names represent the collective humiliation of families who have doubtless borne the weight of years of social contempt and derision. Some of the examples are obviously clear in their meaning. These names can be grouped into several broad categories corresponding to words and their derivatives as the French equivalents of such English language vulgarities as *ass*, *cunt*, *fuck*, *prick*, *cock*, *blowjob*, *tits*, *shit*, *fart*, *balls* and *whore*. A representative list is given in appendix 1.

Among the more amusing of these names to the French ear are *Boccon*³ 'beautiful asshole'; *Trécul* 'very ass'; *Troispoils* 'three pubic hairs'; *Bonichon* 'beautiful tit'; *Petitbou* 'little prick'; *Boutroué* 'small prick with hole'; *Controu* 'cunt hole'; *Mabit* 'my dick'; *Lapipe* 'the blowjob'; *Ticon* 'li'l asshole'; *Troccon* 'too much an ass'; *Bescond* 'cunt fuck'; *Ceccon* 'this asshole'; *Besque* 'prick fuck'; *Sallot* 'son of a bitch'; and *Vachier* 'go shit'. In the case of someone named *Poildessous* 'pubic hair below' or *Barrocu* 'bar in the ass', as *Le Monde* (1975, 8) reported, such names could well pose a singular obstacle when telephoning for police, fire, or emergency medical service. One's life then becomes a fabric of perceived prank calls or puerile humor. It does not take a vivid imagination to conjure up the ease with which one might be humiliated in saying one's own name.

Ironically, as Dauzat (1994) has rightly shown, many of these names had original meanings which were unremarkable, even honorable. *Boccon* originally may have meant 'little mouth'; *Labitte* was a rough quarried stone; *Descomps* referred perhaps to the location of a house; *Bescond* was the word for 'viscount' in Breton; *Mabit* meant 'majestic' in Occitan. Other names which had been just as acceptable later became undesirable: *Vachier* 'cowherd' became 'go shit' and *Lapipe* 'pipe-smoker' became 'the blowjob'. While the changing of these names was rare before the eighteenth century, it became much more common during the nineteenth. Dauzat (1949) reports that among names recorded as being changed during the nineteenth century were *Cocu*, *Pétard* or *Pète* 'fart', and *Vachier*. While the cruder meanings of these names did not appear until later in French history, in some cases the name meant—then as now—exactly what it said. *Couillon*⁴ or *Couillin* referred to testicles, and *Couillault* meant to have long testicles. *Cocu* was a nickname which emerged from village gossip and was passed down as the label of a family over generations. Moreover, Dauzat (1949, 112) insists that the name *Crotte* 'turd' was distinct from the word for excrement, but that distinction is certainly lost in modern times.

Ridiculous Names

The meanings of other names are more ridiculous than they are obscene or pejorative. Examples are *Cochon* 'pig', a word which existed with the same meaning as far back as the fourteenth century; *Chamot* 'pigheaded'; *Cretin*; *Piedvache* 'cowhoof'; *Lognon* 'the onion'; *Fromage*

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'cheese'; *Chevre* 'goat'; *Bidet*; and *Penis*. An extensive list is given in appendix 2. Among the more humorous to the French ear are: *Veschi* 'bladder'; *Lassauce* 'the sauce'; *Dodo* 'beddy-bye'; *Troux* 'hole'; *Bandet* 'get a hard-on'; *Cacamese* 'doodoo mess'; *Malmonté* 'badly mounted'; *Jambon* 'ham'; *Cornichon* 'pickle'; and *Vieilledent* 'old tooth', which perhaps originally referred to a dentist. Pierre Leulliette (1983) reports names such as *Henri Quatre* (like the French king); *Mess Aline* (which is French for the debauched Roman Empress Messalina, but also for 'my dirty ones' [*mes salines*], as well as the word for regular attendance at Catholic mass); *Jean Passe* 'I pass over many good ones'; and *Jean Doute* 'I doubt it'. When the Surrealist writer René Crevel (*crever* 'croak') killed himself in 1935, his only suicide note was his name now appropriately pinned to his shirt.

In some of the name changes, the nature of the ridicule is subtle and touches at the heart of distinctly French socio-political conflicts, such as the village-level struggle between the priest and the schoolteacher (as agent of the State), in which the teacher sought to change his name from that of *Curé*.⁵ In other instances the request was based on the meaning of the name in English, as in the case of a man named *Silly* who asked for relief, or even that of a man who argued that his first name, *Jean*, in England was "the object of ridiculous or bothersome confusion over his sex" (*Le Monde* 1972a, 10). The appellate court was unmoved in both cases. On the other hand, *Jean-Luc Sida* (*Sida* is French for the illness AIDS), publicly defended the honor of his name in *Le Monde* (1991, 1) and demonstrated no interest in changing it.⁶ At least one of the names, *Trognon* 'stump' or 'core', as in "apple core," was the subject of a highly public French court battle in 1972 which pitted a couple named Trognon against a local court which had refused to permit them to adopt, being unwilling "to ornament (*affubler*) a child, who carries a normal family name, with a ridiculous name like Trognon" (*Le Monde* 1972d, 12). However, *Le Monde* (1972b, 9) pointed out the irony of the French magistrature's taking such a position, with sitting judges in France at that time bearing names such as *Loques* 'rags'; *Connes* 'female assholes'; *Crassous* 'filthy'; *Momot* 'brat'; *Peureux* 'cowardly'; and *Bancal* 'bowlegged'. Still others were named *Couilleau* 'balls'; *Cornuault* 'horned' (in the sense of cuckolded); and *Soupe*. The decision of the court in Melun, which, according to *Le Monde* (1972c, 9), served to lift the city from the obscurity it had known since the time of Louis

XIV, provoked widespread criticism. Within three months the appellate court in Paris had overturned the original decision, arguing that it was in the best interest of the child to be adopted regardless of name, and referring explicitly to the law of 11 Germinal, XI as a means to change the name, if necessary. What is interesting about the "Affaire Trognon" is that it brought the dry administrative process of name changes, and the question of administrative caprice, into the public eye.

Arab, Jewish, or Other Foreign-Sounding Names

Often names are changed in an attempt to "Frenchify" names which were originally Jewish, German, Polish, or otherwise too "foreign" to the French ear. A number of examples can be found in appendix 3. These include *Juif* 'Jew', changed to *Arbeval*; *Wajntrojb* to *Vintraud*; *Hittler* to *Monnot*; *Metropolitanski* to *Metreau*; *Benabderzezzak* to *Razac*; the French armaments magnate *Marcel Bloch* to *Marcel Bloch-Dassault*; *Sportich* to *Desportes*; *Tamma* to *Tamarin*; *Ben Barouk* to *Baroux*; *Ben Illouz* to *Berilloux*; *Neustadt* to *Neuville*; and *Arab* to *Vallet*. On the other hand, if the motive for the name change was to avoid social stigma, there was a *Benouari* family which inexplicably changed its name to *Lépreux* 'leprous'. We found that in each of the three time periods we studied there was evidence of a clear effort by people of Jewish ancestry to change their names to more French-sounding ones. As noted above, *Conseil d'Etat* member François Bernard reported that in any given year about a third of all name change requests are to alter foreign names, and another ten percent to change Jewish-sounding names. In fact, in the last four lists of famous Parisians who had changed their names (published by *Le Figaro* in 1967-1968), the author was obliged to respond to readers who wondered whether the disproportionate number of Jewish birth names on his lists reflected a deliberate bias on his part, a charge he denied (1968). He went on to point out that now increasing numbers of celebrities are changing perfectly acceptable French names to Anglo-Saxon ones. One indication of how the French view Moslem names can be seen in a public opinion poll conducted in 1989 which revealed that twenty-five percent of French respondents felt that Moslem children should not be allowed to have a Moslem first name on their birth certificates. Only five percent of French Moslems felt the same way (*Le Monde* 1989, 3).

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Related to these issues is the nature of the name chosen by immigrants as part of their naturalization process. In these cases, the law permits the Frenchification of a name if its "foreign character" would be "of a nature to disturb the integration into the French community" (cited in Besnard 1994, 13). As part of the modification proposed in 1993, naturalized French citizens would have the clear right to "Frenchify" both their given and family names (*Le Monde* 1994, 10). Nicole Lapierre's statistics (1993, 207-13) demonstrate that consistently fewer than twenty percent of naturalized French citizens in fact change their names to make them more French. Still others now regret having changed their name in the first place: "Changing names was a little odd, but I didn't have any choice at the time. I thought it would be better for the future to have a name like my friends'. I have never gotten used to it since" (cited in Besnard 1994, 13). As Leuillette argues (1983), "finally, semantics and ontology aside, a proper name must remain proper, being always more than a package of syllables.... Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going?" Many then felt forced to adopt a name which was a "lie" or a "false identity" (cited in Besnard 1994, 16). One young Jewish woman, in seeking to reassume her ancestral name, explained her family's history: "My parents changed names because they wanted to write another [family] history after the war; it's like Etch-a-Sketch magic: you erase everything and begin again" (cited in Lapierre 1993, 212).

If Jewish families were motivated to change their names to avoid the historic discrimination against them in France (of which the Dreyfus Affair and Vichy's General Commissariat for Jewish Affairs are among the best-known modern examples) as elsewhere, Arabs were constrained because of prejudice compounded by the fear with which they were greeted by the French. This has become particularly true following the crisis of decolonization, as immigrants have given whole suburbs and *arrondissements* of French cities a nearly total Islamic air. Attempting to co-opt the growing right-wing sentiment of Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front, even such respected politicians as former President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing or then Paris Mayor Jacques Chirac decried "these people with their noise and smells" (quoted in *Le Monde* 1993, 3). As one Moslem put it, "My grandfather fought in Alsace and was decorated with the Légion d'Honneur; my father fought for France. The Alsatian cemeteries are full of Mohammeds dead for France. Why does my name cause such fear?" (cited in Besnard 1994). Others found that

changing their names did not serve as a talisman against police harassment, for the police would now detain them because of their new name, claiming that "You have a name which doesn't correspond to you" (Besnard 1994). Philippe Besnard (1994) also points out that, in at least one case, the motivation of one set of extreme right-wing compilers of a dictionary of French name changes since 1806 is to catalogue Jewish and Arab families who were attempting to hide their origins.

Ennobling Names

Some names were changed in order to add nobility acquired through marriage, etc., or out of vanity. A representative list is given in appendix 4. As noted above, striving for nobility has always constituted one of the motives for name change to which the *Conseil d'Etat* has been most sympathetic. The chance to ennoble oneself has proved to be historically attractive to the French bourgeoisie. The growth of these "nobles de robe," as opposed to the older and authentic "noblesse d'épée," has been offered as one explanation for the late industrialization of France as productive money was siphoned off into buying titles. Yet, in a society where titles and privilege are still valued, it is understandable why M. *Beharelle* changed his name to *Beharelle d'Estienne de Chaussegros de Lioux*. In the same way, the father of *Valéry Giscard d'Estaing* received permission to change his name in 1922 from plain *Edmond Giscard* to *Edmond Giscard d'Estaing* (Le Gendre 1979b, 11). In one such case, the *Teilhard d'Anterroches* family changed their name to *Teilhard de Chardin d'Anterroches*, no doubt to imply kinship with the famous religious philosopher of the same name. Very few people choose to commonize their names, at least by legally dropping the "de" particle suggesting noble origins. As Le Gendre put it (1979b, 18), the two-volume *Dictionnaire des changements de noms* (1958-62) compiled by M. Jérôme does not reveal any *Gontrand de la Tour Pointue* choosing to call himself *Paul Durand*.

Conclusion

We have sought in this analysis to examine the history, processes, and motivations which explain why and how the French change their names. Looking at a representative sample of official name changes mandatorily published in the *J.O.*, we identified some of the most important reasons for changing names. Our research revealed a number of names which are strikingly obscene/pejorative or ridiculous. While

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we expressed surprise that names of this kind still exist in contemporary France, it is clear that the decision to request a name change at this late date was the last refuge for families who had suffered indignities and humiliation because of those names. One family named *Labitte* 'the prick' chose to change their name to *Asset*, which sounds simply in French like 'enough'.

The question of name changes in France has been subsumed of late within the broader debate over the loss of family names of French origin. While the number of actual French surnames is itself in dispute (Callery 1981), some French social scientists and legislators are concerned that fully 150,000 of the estimated 250,000 French names currently in use will not exist in another two centuries (Le Gendre 1989) and many fear that the number of people bearing such common names as *Martin*, the most widespread name in France, along with *Bernard*, *Durand*, and *Dubois*, may be multiplied in the future by a factor of five or even ten. As a result, French Deputy Xavier Deniau, a specialist in onomastics, fears that "in a century, the French patrimony will hardly count more than seven thousand surnames" (quoted in Righini 1979, 76). At the same time, disproportionate birthrates among immigrant populations will swell the numbers of families named *Gardetto*, *Lopez*, *Tankoano*, or *Ben Rachid*.

The French government announced in 1985 that families could henceforth legally use double names (combinations of the surnames of father and mother, for example) but these double family names would not be transmittable from generation to generation (*Le Monde* 1986b, 10). Other legislation has been periodically introduced which would permit married couples, as in Germany, to choose which name to take as a family name—that of one spouse or the other, or both. That name would, in turn, pass to the next generation, which would then have its own choice to make. The benefit for France would be to transmit the French surname of the woman who today is forced to take her husband's name and cannot pass her own name on to her children, even in part.

It is clear today that much of the vitality in the domain of French family names has been contributed by immigrant families who, in Frenchifying their family names, contribute a new name as well as a new family unit to the onomastic and social vitality of France. Yet, as elsewhere in Europe, the end of the colonial era and the rise of both political refugees and economic immigrants will greatly diversify the body of French surnames, just as it dilutes their French roots.

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One of the most amazing aspects of the body of French surnames today is the persistence of obscene/pejorative and ridiculous names entire generations if not centuries after they took on their modern meanings. While we understand and sympathize with the bearers' plight, the richness of France's social history is slowly lost with each *Couillon*, *Cocu*, or *Labitte*. As Deputy Deniau put it, "The world of names is the world of signs, the transfer into the realm of symbols of the living experience of a population.... The death of names means the death of a civilization" (quoted in Righini 1979, 76).

Appendix 1 Obscene and Pejorative Names

NAME	GLOSS	CHANGED TO	J.O.
Anus	anus	Philippe	21 Oct 95, 15418
Apicella	pissed here	Aricella	14 Aug 93, 11540
Bandet	to have a hard-on	Laudet	14 Dec 93, 17363
Batard	bastard	Bastard	5 Feb 46, 995
Bescond	cuntfucker	Bessond	3 Mar 92, 3219
Besqueut	lowers prick	Besquet	24 Oct 63, 9500
Bit	prick	Buit	23 May 63, 4700
Bitoun	prick	Richaud	23 May 63, 4700
Bitte	prick	Genet	27 Oct 94, 15298
Boccon	beautiful asshole	Bosson	5 Feb 46, 995
Bocon	beautiful asshole	Beaumont	27 Jul 63, 6980
Bonichon	nice tit	Gourves	22 Oct 94, 15048
Bordel	bordello	Borel	7 Sep 46, 7750
Bordel	bordello	Belleau	14 Jun 63, 5292
Boutroué	prick with hole	Boutederoue	27 Aug 94, 12462
Branlard	(a) jerk off	Barland	3 Mar 92, 3219
Caccamese	doodoo mess	Barberi	14 May 94, 7057
Caunard	asshole	Lambert	14 May 94, 7058
Ceccon	this asshole	Cesson	21 Jan 92, 1003
Chion	let's shit	Chelon	26 Mar 92, 4203
Cocu	cuckold	Daguzan	7 Sep 46, 7750
Cocu	cuckold	Jouanneault	23 Apr 94, 6019
Cocul	cuckold	Consul	12 Jul 46, 6291

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Conard	asshole	Colard	23 Nov 93, 16138
Conard	asshole	Chenard	16 Apr 94, 5654
Connard	asshole	Bonnart	22 Oct 94, 15048
Cosnard	asshole	Frere	22 Oct 94, 15048
Coqu	cuckold	Coque	14 Apr 46, 3139
Couillandreau	ball/jerk	Coulandreau	12 Jun 94, 8530
Couillault	ball/jerk	Covillault	27 Aug 94, 12462
Couille	ball	Bertrand	7 Sep 46, 7750
Couillé	balled	Coville	8 Jun 94, 8284
Couillin	ball/jerk	Coullin	27 Aug 94, 12462
Couillon	jerk	Coulleret	14 Jun 63, 5292
Controu	cunt hole	Cyril	27 Jul 94, 11010
Cretin	cretin	Crespin	13 Dec 63, 11068
Cretin	cretin	Landry	23 Apr 94, 6019
Cretin	cretin	De Gimel*	14 May 94, 7057
Crotte	turd	Coste	23 May 63, 4700
Crotte	turd	Grotte	8 Jun 94, 8284
Crotte	turd	Clément	27 Jul 94, 11010
Crotti	turdy	Corti	16 Apr 94, 5655
Descamps	assholes	Descamps	9 Aug 63, 7379
Duffes	of the buttock	Duffets	25 Oct 94, 15153
Foucu	crazy ass	Fouquenal	9 Oct 63, 9060
Grossin	big breast	Joubert	29 May 94, 9389
Hanus	anus	Hans	26 Jan 94, 1371
Hanusse	anus	Hanuisse	16 Jul 93, 10035
Kon	asshole	Rosain	26 Jan 94, 1371
Labitte	the prick	Lafitte	12 Jul 46, 6291
Labitte	the prick	Asset	7 Sep 46, 7750
Labitte	the prick	Morel	12 Jun 94, 8530
Lacrotte	the turd	Laurant	12 Jun 94, 8531
Lapipe	the blowjob	De Maury*	22 Oct 94, 15048
Lapisse	the piss	Larisse	2 Apr 92, 4773
Lecocu	the cuckold	Lecossu	24 Aug 93, 11962
Lecul	the ass	Lecal	10 May 94, 6825

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Legland	the penis head	Evrard	25 Oct 94, 15153
Lop	fag	Larderet	28 Sep 63, 8709
Mabit	my prick	Maby	26 Jan 94, 1371
Merda	shit	Meard	23 Jun 95, 9484
Penis	penis	Peny	10 May 94, 6825
Pète	farts	Paquot	22 Oct 94, 15048
Péteur	farther	Piteur	23 Apr 94, 6020
Petibou	little prick	Petibon	22 Oct 94, 15048
Pett	farts	Petit	23 Apr 94, 6020
Pett	farts	Muller	29 May 94, 9389
Petton	let's fart	Patton	27 Jul 94, 11010
Pipi	peepee	Raimond	15 Nov 46, 9644
Pippi	peepee	Dori	22 Oct 94, 15048
Pissotte	pisses	Pissot**	4 Apr 63, 3203
Pornot	porno	Bertincourt	6 Mar 92, 3354
Putin	whore	Murtin	28 Sep 63, 8703
Putin	whore	Hutin	28 Jul 92, 10141
Putin	whore	Burtin	17 May 94, 7215
Salaud	s.o.b.	Saland	8 Aug 46, 7002
Salaud	s.o.b.	Nauleau	11 Aug 93, 11319
Sallot	s.o.b.	Valot	14 Jun 63, 5292
Sallot	s.o.b.	Sollat	16 Apr 94, 5655
Soulard	drunkard	Suhard	29 May 46, 4659
Tachier	you shat	Tacier	10 May 94, 6825
Ticon	li'l asshole	Perrier	8 Jun 94, 8284
Trécul	very asinine	Treval	15 Nov 46, 9644
Troccon	too asshole	Troccin	18 Jun 93, 8642
Troispoils	three pubic hairs	Trapiers	14 Jun 63, 5292
Vachier	go shit	Vacher	7 Sep 46, 7750
Vachier	go shit	Vallier	26 Mar 92, 4203
Vandeputte	wind of whore	Vande	27 Aug 94, 12463

* Also ennobling through the use of "De."

** The reason to change *Pissotte* 'pisses' to *Pissot* 'pisses high' remains a mystery.

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Appendix 2 Ridiculous Names

NAME	GLOSS	CHANGED TO	J.O.
Alanvert	upside down	Payet	21 Jan 92, 1002
Assassaint	assassin	Allain	14 Apr 46, 3139
Berret	beret	Ponsot	26 Nov 63, 10548
Bidet	bidet	Delorme	23 Apr 94, 6017
Bidet	bidet	Martincourt	16 Jul 94, 10272
Bidon	baloney	Monceu	12 Aug 92, 10978
Bohbot	booboo	Beaufort	8 Jun 94, 8283
Bonbon	candy	Frémont	28 Nov 93, 16448
Boniche	maidservant	Belmont	23 Apr 94, 6020
Boudin	blood sausage	Violet	27 Jul 63, 6980
Boudin	blood sausage	Baudin	16 Jul 93, 10034
Boudin	blood sausage	Herbillon	16 Jul 94, 10272
Bouzerar	rare cowshit	Jacquet	17 May 94, 7215
Cauchon	pig	Varin	2 May 95, 6898
Chamot	pigheaded	Charmot	15 Nov 46, 9643
Chevre	goat	Gesvre	13 Dec 63, 11068
Clochard	hobo	Videau	10 Jul 94, 9991
Cochon	pig	Carlier	14 Jun 63, 5292
Cochon	pig	Courtois	28 Sep 63, 8703
Cornichon	pickle	Corbier	28 Sep 63, 8703
Cornichon	pickle	Coron	27 Dec 63, 11720
Cucu	silly	David	26 Feb 46, 1664
Cucu	silly	Caldin	12 Jun 94, 8530
Culot	nerve	Anglade	11 Aug 93, 11318
Derriere	rear end	Debriere*	27 Oct 94, 15298
Dodo	beddy-bye	Dodier	13 Dec 63, 11068
Fessé	spanked	Fossey	11 Aug 95, 12062

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Fessier	buttocks	Tessier	12 Apr 94, 5402
Fromage	cheese	Jacquet	4 Nov 92, 15266
Gahgah	gaga	Garat	29 Jun 94, 9389
Gourde	dumbbell	Durieux	27 Apr 95, 6536
Gros-Balthazard	fat Balthazar	Balthazard	14 Dec 93, 17364
Herbette	little herb	Herbert	13 Dec 63, 11068
Jambon	ham	Bonefond	28 Feb 93, 3215
Kukula	silly	Aubert	23 May 63, 4700
Lassauce	the sauce	Lassance	4 Dec 46, 10294
La Vacherie	the dirty trick	Signoret	30 Aug 94, 12557
Le Barbu	the bearded one	Le Barny	27 Dec 63, 11720
Lecher	to lick	Delacroix	10 May 94, 6825
Le Rigoleur	the funny guy	Castiau	27 Dec 95, 18724
Lesinge	the monkey	Lecoudray	23 Jun 95, 9484
Lognon	the onion	Lonno	27 Aug 94, 12463
Louche	cross-eyed	Fabre	27 Oct 94, 15298
Malfay	badly made	Malfaille	12 Jun 94, 8531
Malmonté	badly mounted	Malmont	27 Oct 94, 15298
Mauvais	nasty	Chatelain	23 Apr 94, 6017
Menteur	liar	Allain	23 Nov 93, 16139
Moncoucut	my cuckold	Codol	10 Jul 94, 9992
Mouchard	stoolpigeon	Cavelier	23 Apr 94, 6019
Moutardier	mustard pot	Montaldier	21 Apr 63, 3203
Mullet	mule	Pavie	14 May 94, 7058
Piedplat	flatfoot	Savary	27 Dec 63, 11721
Piedvache	cow hoof	Pievac	13 Dec 63, 11068
Pognon	bread (money)	Durand-Mille	27 Aug 94, 12463
Poireau	leek	Dallençon	5 Mar 63, 2188
Porçon	piglet	Tannou	22 Oct 94, 15048
Pucelle	virgin	Mellec	8 Jun 94, 8284

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Robinet	faucet	Ronet	14 Jun 63, 5292
Souiller	to dirty	Soullier	12 Jun 94, 8531
Taillefesse	buttock chiseler	Taillefer	26 Feb 46, 1665
Taillefesse	buttock chiseler	Le Pommelec	28 Feb 93, 3216
Taillefesse	buttock chiseler	Fontenoy	12 Jun 94, 8531
Tettard	tadpole	François	24 Apr 93, 11962
Toupet	nerve	Moreau	23 Apr 94, 6018
Tournevache	turn the cow	Tournevac	12 Apr 94, 5402
Trognon	core or stump	Benzoni	12 Jun 94, 8531
Troux	hole	Trouxe	25 Oct 94, 15153
Truant	crook	Bruant	23 Jun 95, 9485
Vazeux	sludgy	Deseilligny*	26 Jan 94, 1371
Veau	veal	Daveau	14 Jun 63, 5292
Veschi	bladder	Vesquier	22 Oct 94, 15048
Vésigot-Wahl	Visigoth-Wahl	Wahl	23 Apr 94, 6018
Vieilledent	old tooth	Vaillent	25 May 93, 7730
Vieilledent	old tooth	Amblard	27 Jul 94, 11010
Vierge	virgin	Vauquelin	25 May 93, 10506
Vilain	nasty	Valain	4 Apr 63, 3203

* Plus ennobling through the use of "De."

Appendix 3 Arab, Jewish, or Other Foreign-Sounding Names

NAME	CHANGED TO	<i>J.O.</i>
Aït Si Ahmed	Schmitt*	24 Dec 1993, 17984
Aleksandravicius	Sandrot	14 Sep 1963, 8318
Al-Khayat	Caillat	5 Jul 1963, 6011
Arab	Vallet	23 Jun 1995, 9484
Benabderzezzak	Razac	15 Nov 1946, 9643

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Ben Barouk	Baroux	14 Sep 1963, 8318
Ben Illouz	Berilloux	14 Sep 1963, 8318
Ben Oliel	Ollier	23 Jul 1963, 6809
Benouari	Lépreux*	16 Apr 1994, 5654
Ben Sadoun	Patrick	14 May 1963, 4315
Benzouaoui	Michel	28 Feb 1993, 3215
Bloch	Bloch-Dassault	4 Dec 1946, 10294
Braslavschii	Brasse	28 Jun 1963, 5707
Chijner	Chinet	28 Jun 1963, 5707
Chonigbaum	Chambeau	14 May 1963, 4315
Cocorullo	Corulot	14 Jun 1963, 5292
Cohen	Rivière	27 Dec 1995, 18724
Dalla-Palma	Palmat	14 May 1963, 4315
Diop	Gérard	16 Apr 1994, 5655
Dreyfuss-Fleury	Fleury	15 Nov 1946, 9644
El Habib	Habier	5 Jul 1963, 6011
Gerschenbaum	Gerchambeau	14 Sep 1963, 8318
Grussenmayer	Grussan	7 Sep 1946, 7750
Hirsch-Olendorff	Grandval	26 Feb 1946, 1664
Hittler	Monnot	7 Sep 1946, 7751
Hittler	Bernard	15 Nov 1946, 9644
Hittler	Delestre	27 Apr 1995, 6536
Juif	Arbeval	5 Feb 1946, 995
Khalfaoui	Dedieu	23 Jul 1963, 6809
Kouyoumdjian	Goujean	14 May 1963, 4316
Kozlowski	Cole	27 Jul 1963, 6980
Krzyszkowski	Crissaud	14 Sep 1963, 8318
Levy	Robert	17 May 1994, 7215

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Levy	La Jeunesse	29 May 1946, 4659
Levy	Louvier	14 May 1963, 4316
Luong Cong	Duval	18 Jun 1993, 8642
Mbuba Bafi Salambiaku	Baffi	21 Oct 1995, 15418
Metropolitanski	Metreau	15 Nov 1946, 9643
Micholowitz	Michaud	14 Apr 1946, 3139
Nasser	Lacey	26 Nov 1963, 10548
Neustadt	Neuville	10 Apr 1963, 3363
Nguyen Huu Tinh	Dumond	16 Jan 1992, 771
Panayotopoulos	Pelosof	2 May 1995, 6898
Polak	Delange	15 Nov 1946, 9644
Ribaltchenkoff	Ribal	14 Sep 1963, 8319
Rosenberg	Luc-Belmont	18 Aug 1946, 7259
Rotsztejn	Rochetin	28 Sep 1963, 8709
Schwein	Chenin	16 Jul 1994, 10273
Sportich	Desportes	14 May 1963, 4316
Szwinkelsztejn	Suchait	9 Oct 1963, 9060
Taamma	Tamarin	23 May 1963, 4700
Tettaravoussamy	Deva	21 May 1992, 6864
Wajntrojb	Vintraud	12 Jul 1946, 6291
Wojciechowicz	Vogier	14 Jun 1963, 5292
Yahiaoui	Dubreuil	14 Jun 1963, 5292
Zduleczny	Cluny	26 Nov 1963, 10548
Zgryzebny	Grenier	27 Mar 1963, 2909

*We are unable to explain why a French citizen with an obvious Arab name would want to change it to a *German-sounding* one, and another to choose a new name, whose meaning ('leprous') has such negative connotations.

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Appendix 4 Ennobling Names

NAME	CHANGED TO	<i>J.O.</i>
Andreu	Andreu de Lapierre	2 Apr 1992, 4772
Bazire	Bazire d'Arguesse	27 Jul 1994, 10867
Cady Roustand de Navacelle	Cady Roustand de Navacelle de Coubertin	28 Feb 1993, 3215
Chevrier	Chevrier de Choudens	24 Dec 1993, 17984
Combes	Combes de Prades de Lavalette	26 Aug 1995, 12687
Demians	Demians Bonaud d'Archimbaud	21 Apr 1963, 3707
Durand	Durand de Miomandre	27 Oct 1994, 15298
Gasnier	Gasnier du Fresne	24 Oct 1963, 9500
Guillotini	Guillotini de Corson	7 Jul 1994, 9831
Lavagne	Lavagne d'Ortigue	24 Aug 1993, 11961
Lavenir	Lavenir de Buffon	30 Mar 1995, 5079
Marcotte	Marcotte de Quivières	7 Jul 1994, 9832
Martin	Martin Fornier de Clausonne	16 Jul 1994, 10272
Meniolle d'Hauthuille	Meniolle d'Hauthuille de la Bintinaye	4 Apr 1963, 3203
Nouvion	Nouvion Duboys de Lavigerie	27 Aug 1994, 12462
Pietri	Pietri-Bernot de Charant	7 Jul 1994, 9832
Rotton	de Rotton	14 Jul 1946, 6355
Rousseau	Rousseau-Blanquet de Combettes	25 Oct 1994, 15153
Sohm	de la Grange	12 Apr 1994, 5403
Teilhard d'Anterroches	Teilhard de Chardin d'Anterroches	27 Dec 1963, 11721

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Notes

The authors wish to express their gratitude to the French newspaper *Le Monde* for access to and use of their invaluable archives.

1. While the origins of the name derived from the cuckoo bird, it had long since come to mean 'cuckold' in popular usage.

2. For an informative discussion of French first names, see Willingham-McLain (1997).

3. The word 'con' in French literally translates as 'cunt'. However, in its vernacular meaning it is closer to the English epithet 'asshole', in the sense of 'jerk'.

4. *Couillon* today also means a stupid jerk, as in 'dick'.

5. In France, at least from the time of the Third Republic, there has existed a socio-political tension between the State and the Church, between the schoolteacher who represented republican and often anticlerical values, and the parish priest (or *curé*) who defended the Catholic faith against blasphemy and the state. Hence, in this case, the urgent request of a teacher with the name of *Curé* to change it officially.

6. Yet, at least one family changed its name to a more graceful *Colombelle* (*J.O.* 31 August 1993, 12254).

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