

Emmanuel Todd and the Great Charlie Hebdo “Sham”

Philippe Marlière

ON JANUARY 11, 2011, in the wake of the *Charlie Hebdo* killings, over four million people took to the streets in Paris and in several cities across France. These were the largest crowd gatherings that France had known since Liberation Day in August 1944. Ahead of them, carefully separated from the commoners and under tight police protection, François Hollande, the French president, was accompanied by heads of state who had come to pay tribute to the victims of atrocious acts of terrorism. It was widely noted that among the statesmen who marched in defense of “free speech” and “democracy,” several had poor records at home on these issues.

Messages of support for the victims, and by extension for the French nation as a whole, poured in from across the world. One simple but powerful slogan—which originally cropped up as a hashtag on Twitter—encapsulated the zeitgeist: *Je suis Charlie*. This was meant to show solidarity with the victims, but it also expressed support for *Charlie Hebdo*’s alleged “values”: freedom of speech and an antiestablishment stand (against all “established powers,” be they political, religious, or economic).

It did not take long, though, for the first cracks to appear on the façade of national unity. Critics started mocking the “mythology” of the movement; they questioned its “false unanimity” as well as the authoritarian consensus imposed on the French nation by the French government. The latter, embattled because of unpopular recessionist austerity policies, saw an

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opportunity—some commentators argued—to divert attention from the dire economic situation. However, virtually no voices dared to openly challenge this media and political unity until the publication of Emmanuel Todd’s book *Qui est Charlie?* four months after the events: his contribution took the media, political, and intellectual worlds by storm.¹

AN ACT OF “COLLECTIVE HYSTERIA”

Emmanuel Todd is a demographer, historian, and anthropologist at the National Institute of Demographic Studies (INED), an institution based in Paris. He is no orthodox academic, though: his critics point out that he has so far largely avoided submitting his work to scientific journals and engaging in discussions with his academic peers. He has, rather, made a name for himself by publishing opinion pieces in major newspapers or writing best-selling essays. Todd’s political punditry can sometimes be brash and wide of the mark: for instance, in the run-up to the presidential election in 2012, he predicted that, if elected, Hollande would implement a robust social justice agenda, calling it “Revolutionary Hollandism.”² Since day 1 of his presidential term, Hollande has, instead, implemented austerity policies. Despite all this, Todd’s research is undoubtedly of an academic nature and cannot be rejected out of hand. As early as 1976, the demographer wrote a book that foresaw the final collapse of the Soviet Union.³ In 1997 he published an essay about immigration, in which he defended the “assimilationist” French model of integration.⁴ In 2007, against Samuel Huntington’s thesis of the “clash of civilizations,” Todd argued that there were indications of convergence in lifestyles and in values among civilizations.⁵

In short, Emmanuel Todd is a well-known intellectual, on the left, albeit not on the radical left. He is a staunch French-style republican who voted for François Hollande in the first and second rounds of the 2012 presidential election. Todd’s book on *Charlie Hebdo* came therefore as a major surprise. His main thesis is indeed quite provocative, as it blows to smithereens the French government’s doxa of national unity. In a nutshell, Todd’s central argument is that the January demonstrations across France were not, as the world was led to believe, a display of national unity and solidarity after the crimes committed by the Kouachi brothers and Amedy Coulibaly. They were, conversely, a “sham,”⁶ an act of “collective hysteria,” and a “Europeist happening,” mainly enacted by white middle-class citizens. In a heated debate with “pro-Charlie” proponent and *Libération* director Laurent Joffrin, Todd affirmed that the days following the killings were like a “totalitarian flash.” For the first time in his life, he felt that free speech had deserted France, and he conceded that he “was afraid of expressing his views publicly.”⁷

¹ Emmanuel Todd, *Qui est Charlie? Sociologie d’une crise religieuse* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2015).

² Philippe Marlière, “Hollandisme révolutionnaire,” *Mediapart*, April 9, 2014, <http://blogs.mediapart.fr/blog/philippe-marliere/090414/hollandisme-revolutionnaire> (accessed July 23, 2015).

³ Emmanuel Todd, *La chute finale: Essai sur la décomposition de la sphère soviétique* (1976; Paris: Robert Laffont, 2004).

⁴ Emmanuel Todd, *Le destin des immigrés: Assimilation and ségrégation dans les démocraties occidentales* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1997).

⁵ Emmanuel Todd, *Le rendez-vous des civilisations* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2007).

⁶ Aude Lancelin, “Emmanuel Todd: ‘Le 11 janvier a été une imposture,’” *L’Obs*, April 29, 2015, <http://bibliobs.nouvelobs.com/actualites/20150428.OBS8114/emmanuel-todd-le-11-janvier-a-ete-une-imposture.html> (accessed July 23, 2015).

⁷ Grégoire Biseau and Cécile Daumas, “Emmanuel Todd: ‘Le 11 janvier est un tour de passe-passe,’” *Libération*, May 3, 2015, http://www.liberation.fr/politiques/2015/05/03/le-11-janvier-est-un-tour-de-passe-passe_1287114 (accessed July 23, 2015).

Todd contends that the demonstrators were not upholding the values of the 1789 Revolution—liberty, equality, fraternity—but represented the counter-Revolution of 1815; they embodied the traditionalist Catholic France. To say that Emmanuel Todd’s thesis is “counter-intuitive” is indeed a major understatement. The first chapters of *Qui est Charlie?* provide an in-depth analysis of the January 11 marches. In order to engage with Todd’s stimulating take on the January demonstrations, one must not be put off by some of his abrasive comments, which are often self-defeating, as they tend to undermine his own credibility as a “serious” researcher. Todd has acknowledged in various media interviews that the “tone of the book was not academic.” But it is one thing to denounce the “implicit Islamophobia” of the crowds (an allegation that he substantiates throughout the book) and another to label the marchers “Vichysois,” with reference to the French collaborationist regime during World War II. If one sets aside the more vitriolic and hyperbolic remarks, his analysis is indeed stimulating and interesting.

Todd points out that working-class people and members of ethnic minorities (who are often the same people) were overwhelmingly underrepresented in the massive crowds that took to the streets on January 11, 2015. This is a contentious point, as several commentators were prompt to remark that no tangible data are available to substantiate this claim with certainty. Todd—who did not participate in the demonstrations—relies on “intuition” and people’s empirical observations. Critics may argue that the social or ethnic background of demonstrators is not essential to grasp the meaning and intentions of a march. What characterizes a demonstration is what it stands for, supports, or opposes.⁸ In May 1968 students showed solidarity with blue-collar workers although most of them were petit bourgeois. The youngsters supported the cause of working-class emancipation all the same.

“ZOMBIE CATHOLICS”

Todd’s book presents and compares various maps to account for the intensity and nature of the demonstrations across France. This offers a “geography of marches,” a “landscape of demonstrations,” with quite strong variations in terms of popular mobilization from one city to another. Thus, Todd observes that more people demonstrated in Paris, Grenoble, Lyon, Brest, and Cherbourg than in Marseille, Lille, Béziers, and Saint-Nazaire. Todd is certainly right in stressing that demonstrators were largely “white, middle-class people,” a socially, economically, and politically hegemonic population in France that he refers to as MAZ (“classes Moyennes, personnes Âgées, catholiques Zombies,” or “middle classes, elderly people, zombie Catholics”). He is less convincing though when he emphatically concludes that, overall, those marches were the expression of an “old French brand of Catholicism” embodied by “selfish and repressive” middle-class people. In other words, these demonstrators were not the egalitarian children of 1789 but “zombie Catholics,” a recurring expression throughout the book that Todd uses to refer to marchers from “de-Christianized regions of France.” He argues that in those areas, Christian roots are traditionally more resistant to the republican values of tolerance, solidarity, and secularism (*laïcité*).

The differences in the sizes of the marching crowds—the more egalitarian cities were less supportive of the movement than the inegalitarian ones—were evidence that those demonstrations were driven by selfish, individualistic, and Islamophobic sentiments. Todd remarks that the

⁸ Samy Joshua, “Todd, impair et passe,” *Mediapart*, May 6, 2015, <http://blogs.mediapart.fr/blog/samy-joshua/060515/todd-impair-et-passe> (accessed July 23, 2015).

greatest attendance records were reached in cities that supported the European constitutional treaty that was rejected by 55 percent of French voters in 2005. The opponents to the treaty argued at the time that it would set in stone “neoliberal” policies and principles at the heart of European integration. Although Todd was criticized for making rather loose and unscientific use of his maps, cartographic experts, despite pointing to some factual errors, agreed that the correlation established between the number of marchers and the sociology of the populations studied was basically correct.⁹

By comparing several maps of France, Todd is able to draw an overall picture of demonstrations and to point to the hotbeds of “pro-Charlism,” which run from Normandy (northwest) down through Brittany to the Pyrenees, then up to the Alps region and to Alsace (northeast). According to Todd, these are the bastions of zombie Catholics, the staunchest battalions of the *Je suis Charlie* movement. Although in these areas Catholicism has dramatically declined since 1960—notably its social influence—it nonetheless still continues to structure the political and social life of citizens, even those who are not believers or worshipers. This is the meaning of the provocative label “zombie Catholics,” which are undead creatures, typically depicted as mindless, reanimated corpses.

MILITANT LAÏCISME AND INEGALITARIAN VIEWS

With the exception of Paris—historically, ground zero for all upheavals and therefore an egalitarian city—the other cities with a high turnout have historically been seen as “conservative” and deeply attached to the Catholic church. Zombie Catholics may not be churchgoers or even believers but they are fundamentally under the influence of the inegalitarian views of the church. What is more, Todd lambasts the middle-class “militant *laïcisme*” directed against the poor, uneducated immigrants of Muslim faith. He regards the increasingly anticlerical, antireligious, and Islamophobic stand of the *laïcistes* as deeply disturbing. It is for him one of the perverse effects of de-Christianization and of the rise of socioeconomic inequalities in France. He points to the negative role of the Parti socialiste (PS), which has given up on constructing a society in which wealth is fairly distributed and in which those in need can be supported by the state. After sabotaging the very idea of Socialism in France, Todd argues that the PS is now on course to “destroy the Republic” and its egalitarian ideals.¹⁰ For Todd “genuine” republicanism belongs to all: it means universal suffrage and pursuit of equality and solidarity through the “Social Republic.” What he calls “neo-republicanism,” conversely, turns its back on this demanding type of universalism and has been “confiscated” by the privileged few in French society.

Since the Revolution, the Left has had to fight the power and hegemony of the Catholic church in French society. Until the 1960s, the church was deeply hostile to the republican regime and to the 1905 law separating the state and religions in France (*laïcité*). According to Todd, the new religion of the MAZ is exactly a virulent Voltairianism, a militant atheism that looks down

⁹ See Thierry Joliveau, “Où était Charlie? Ce que montrent réellement les cartes d’Emmanuel Todd,” *Slate*, May 22, 2015, <http://www.slate.fr/story/101827/ou-est-charlie-cartes-emmanuel-todd>; and Jean-Laurent Cassely, “Manifestations du 11 janvier: Qui était vraiment Charlie?,” *Slate*, May 6, 2015, <http://www.slate.fr/story/101221/11-janvier-qui-etait-vraiment-charlie> (accessed July 23, 2015).

¹⁰ Emmanuel Todd, “Ce livre, c’est aussi la révélation du rôle du PS dans la destruction de la République,” *Atlantico*, May 17, 2015, <http://www.atlantico.fr/decryptage/e-todd-livre-est-aussi-revelation-role-ps-dans-destruction-republique-qui-est-charlie-2146250.html> (accessed July 23, 2015).

upon working-class Muslims. The demographer here “essentializes” groups of people and argues that regional cultures impact in a quasi-deterministic manner on people whatever their personal background. These cities and regions, Todd argues, thrive on growing economic inequalities and the widening gaps between people in terms of wealth and career opportunities. Furthermore, the *Je suis Charlie* movement comes across as “intolerant and largely Islamophobic.” The zombie Catholics have become key supporters of the governing PS, a party that Todd describes as uninterested in addressing and curbing rampant inequalities in France as well as racism and anti-Semitism.

Emmanuel Todd’s central thesis is that the *Je suis Charlie* nebulous gatherings are “neo-republicans” who support a “Neo-Republic.” However, this neo-republicanism has nothing to do with the ideals of the “true” Republic, because it has marginalized the poor and immigrants. Todd finds it repulsive that on January 11, the so-called zombie Catholics demonstrated in order to affirm the “absolute right to mock, caricature, and to blaspheme” a minority religion, one practiced by some of the most vulnerable members in French society. Todd seems to have a point here: “the right to blasphemy” in the context of the *Charlie Hebdo* killings seems to boil down to the right of the majority to ridicule people from a poor background. Todd notes that such ridicule is cowardly, as Muslims are not more than 5 percent of the entire population and have been strongly discriminated against in France for the past three decades.

Critics such as geographer Jacques Lévy argue that, on a theoretical level, Emmanuel Todd is a “culturalist”: the demographer tends to dismiss far too easily “historicity”—that is to say, the influence of historical processes on individuals’ actions.¹¹ In Todd’s analysis, human behaviors tend to be “essentialized,” explained through deeply engrained cultural patterns, types of “habitus,” as Pierre Bourdieu would have put it. There is little room for making history, conflicts, or class struggles. Todd neither belongs to the Anglo-American liberal Left nor does he think as a European Marxist: he is above all a French republican. The French republican tradition—in its revolutionary Left and reformist conceptions—has always been ideologically “Jacobin.” Mainstream Jacobins hold a strong belief in representative democracy as opposed to popular democracy; in a “unitary” and “indivisible” nation; in centralized institutions and a top-down approach to power and politics.¹² John Stuart Mill, who did not think much of this “abstract republican mind,” described it as proceeding “from an infirmity of the French mind, which has been one main cause of the miscarriages of the French nation in its pursuit of liberty and progress; that of being led away by phrases, and treating abstractions as if they were realities which have a will and exert active power.”¹³

THE RISE OF NEO-REPUBLICANISM

Emmanuel Todd’s book might have another profound effect in France: it may provoke a realignment of the French intelligentsia. It may also impact left-wing thinking about issues such as

¹¹ Catherine Calvet, “Jacques Lévy: ‘Un Todd stimulant, mais brouillé avec la réalité,’” *Libération*, May 3, 2015, http://www.liberation.fr/politiques/2015/05/03/un-todd-stimulant-mais-brouille-avec-la-realite_1287119 (accessed July 23, 2015).

¹² Philippe Marlière, “The Paris Commune: Globalisation before Globalisation,” *London Review of Books* 37, no. 13 (July 2, 2015): 21–22.

¹³ John Stuart Mill, *The Letters of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 2 (1910; London: Forgotten Books, 2013), 347.

citizenship, ethnicity, and class. Todd lambasts the “neo-republicans”; however, it must be noted that he is a “republican” himself. Before his dramatic intervention, Todd was indeed close to the stream of French “national-republicans,” an intellectual feted by the weekly *Marianne*, which is a Euroskeptic, ultrasecular, and anti-multiculturalist publication that endeavors to unite “republicans from the two banks” (the left and right banks). Following the book publication, the media backlash was brutal. Todd was often ridiculed and even sometimes insulted by former political allies, who certainly felt betrayed. Indeed, Todd has exposed the fake universalism of “neo-republicanism” and what he calls its “objective xenophobia”—that is, a type of xenophobia that is not self-aware.

In the last part of the book, Todd reflects on France’s national identity in general and the rise of Islamophobia and anti-Semitism. He makes two fundamental observations. First, French society is experiencing a state of “religious confusion” caused by the completion of de-Christianization. France is today one of the most unreligious nations in the Western world. In this country, it is fair play to bully, humiliate, and blaspheme Islam, a minority religion. The zombie Catholics are essentially people detached from religion who for the most part live in former Catholic bastions. They reject religion in general and Islam in particular, and they are deeply inegalitarian. Todd observes that the declining PS remains fairly strong in Brittany and other western parts of France that used to be conservative and Catholic strongholds. He argues that the Socialists became politically hegemonic in those areas because they largely embraced the conservative values of those zombie Catholics. For Todd, the PS has become a new conservative party, a party that tolerates social injustice and entrenched socioeconomic inequalities.

Second, Todd laments the rise of a “neo-republicanism,” which regroups white middle-class people and the elderly in support of an abstract and conservative brand of republicanism. Neo-republicans masquerade as liberal freethinkers, but in reality they are prejudiced against the poor, immigrants, and foreigners in general. This is the new “majority bloc” in French society, one that elected Nicolas Sarkozy in 2007 but that also voted for François Hollande in 2012. Todd pours scorn on the presidential incumbent, whom he describes as “insignificant” and “trivial.”

What is to be done? Emmanuel Todd does not shy away from the issue: France should without any further delay grant the Muslim population the same rights and prerogatives that the state gave the Catholics and Jews a century or so ago. Reasonable accommodation should be made in order to facilitate the integration of Muslims (Todd remains adamant that the ban on the hijab in state schools has been a “positive thing” though). Todd warns that if the MAZ hegemonic bloc does not start treating Muslims in a more fraternal and fair manner, then French society may disintegrate in violent conflicts between the different social and ethnic groups. Todd has a contingency plan as well to recapture the country’s sense of solidarity: France should exit the Eurozone and break radically with the government’s free-market policies.

Claiming that he was “shocked” by Todd’s demonstration, Manuel Valls, the Socialist prime minister, was prompt to debate publicly with him. In an opinion article published in *Le Monde*, Valls replied to Todd’s major claims.¹⁴ He denied that an “arrogant” oligarchy was ruling France and did not accept that the January demonstrators were “racist” or “selfish.” Emmanuel Todd has a tendency to go into overdrive and to make sweeping statements or generalizations. Those flaws apart, it is hard not to see how important this contribution is to the current debate on France’s

¹⁴ Manuel Valls, “Non, la France du 11 janvier N’EST pas une imposture,” *Le Monde*, May 7, 2015.

identity and on the issues of solidarity, fraternity, and equality, which are so dear to the French people. Todd slams a France that is no longer a community of equals. The staunch republican *souverainiste* no longer understands or likes it. For Todd, the new dominant conception of the Republic is deeply flawed and dangerous: it is one that thrives on growing economic inequalities and on the suspicion of foreigners. A fundamental discussion about the future of the French Republic has just begun. Whatever reservations and objections one may have regarding the work's methodology or the author's abrasive style, one has to recognize that Todd has launched a vital debate about this depressed and increasingly disunited country. A