

UDK 323.285:316-482]:316.75(44)“2015”  
Original scientific article

## PARIS, JANUARY 2015: THE TERRORIST ATTACKS AND THE REACTIONS

**Roland PFEFFERKORN,**  
Université de Strasbourg,  
France

*Abstract* The aim of my presentation is first to examine precisely the killings. Who are the killers? Which are their motivations? Why the killers did it? What about their backgrounds, their ideologies, their beliefs? Secondly it is necessary to observe the evolution of the vocabulary used in the public space by journalists, politicians, ordinary people... and the reactions (police, government, media, panic, false alarms... but also stigmatization of Muslims in general and more than a hundred anonymous attacks against mosques and other places related to Muslim people, like shops...) Third, how can we analyze the reactions of ordinary people on one side and of prominent political leaders on the other? What were the different meanings of the mass demonstrations just after the attacks in France? In Paris? Was the question of freedom of expression really the main question? Which are all the other questions hidden behind the unanimous "Je suis Charlie"? What are the different and contradictory meanings of this sentence? We will try to go beyond much of confusions and hypocrisy. For such a precise analysis it is necessary to go deeper in some important details, very often forgotten, about the magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, about all the victims, about the murders, about the weapons, about French society and its contradictions, about the different kind of reactions...

*Keywords:* collective commotion, social relations, race relations, international relations, migrations

The January 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris caused 17 deaths, 20 including the murderers. In the late morning of January 7, two killers forced their way into the offices of the French satirical weekly magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. Armed with assault rifles and other weapons, they killed 12 people, cartoonists, journalists, other employees, together with two policemen, and injured 11 others. A massive manhunt led to the discovery of the suspects of the attack two days later, January 9, 2015. At the same moment, a third killer, linked with the previous two, heavily armed, took several hostages and killed 4 people in a kosher food superette in east Paris, all of whom were Jews. All three terrorists were shot

dead after police assault. These events were broadcast almost live, from a few minutes after the first attack, during all the manhunt, like an enormous reality show<sup>1</sup>, the media taking the risk of giving information that could help the terrorists and endanger the lives of the hostages.

**The murderers were French-born**, the first two of them of Algerian background, the brothers Saïd and Chérif Kouachi, and the third from Malian background, Amedy Coulibaly, responsible for the second attack and later confirmed to be the gunman who, on the previous day, killed a female Municipal Police officer. The killers were quickly identified; one of the first two even forgot his ID-card in a car after the first attack. The police had known them for years.

These are just a few facts I would remind the audience of. In my short presentation, I cannot take into account all the aspects of these events, for instance the question of the origin of the weapons, directly related to the traffic that developed after the armed conflicts in Europe over the last decades, particularly in ex-Yugoslavia. I want to focus on a few aspects only<sup>2</sup>.

- 1) First, about **the French-born killers and their motivations**. Their actions can be explained rationally.
- 2) Second, I want to focus on the **reactions** immediately after the massacre; by French society in general, ordinary people and civil society, dominant mass media, and the French state and government in particular.
- 3) Third, I want to discuss the different **meanings of the mass demonstrations** after the attacks.
- 4) Fourth and linked with the three previous points, the **relations to Islam and to the Muslim minority** in France and in Europe.

---

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that there was a great difference in the coverage by the French press and television, between *Charlie* and *Garissa*, Kenya, and even the killings of *Bardo* in Tunis, which was a little more covered than the Kenyan slaughter, because French were among the dead.

<sup>2</sup> I followed some of the live TV broadcasts, I read the press during a few weeks, particularly all the articles published by *Mediapart*, also a lot of analysis, most of them published on Internet a few weeks after the events. I was particularly inspired by the arguments of Gilbert Achcar, Cinzia Aruzza, Alain Bihr, Philippe Blanchet, Saïd Bouamama, François Burgat, Alain Gresh, Maïwen Leray, Matthias Reymond, Pierre Rousset, Julien Salingue, Slomo Sand, Bernard Umbrecht... some collective tribunes... and of course others. I did not consult papers and books published after the 23th of april 2015.

## I – A “French attack”: the murderers and their motivations

Of course, the murderers are not "crazy" young men, foolish "monsters," or "barbarous" animals, as some journalists or commentators said. Their murderous actions can be explained rationally, and, of course, they are not justified.

The three French-born killers are **products of French society and political policy**, both domestic and foreign, but they cannot be understood mechanically as a consequence of these policies because the killers are **subjects** who thought for themselves and took action: they are **not simply passive byproducts of racism** and imperialism.

The killers have a discourse; they have their own theoretical views; they have their own organizational reference points (Islamic State, Al-Qaeda in Yemen). It is necessary to understand this in order to shed light **on the discourse and the political positions** of the Kouachi brothers and Amedy Coulibaly, who, from their point of view, **believed, rationally, that they were at war with a certain part of France**<sup>3</sup>. The killers were not just "crazy" or simply "victims" of discrimination. They were **political actors engaged in a war**. They held a worldview that has as much in common with that of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria as it does with many of our rulers: **civilization against civilization, identity against identity, violence against violence**.

These recent killings are not the first manifestations of this war on French territory and probably not the last. The **factors that radicalized the Kouachi brothers and Amedy Coulibaly** (and others) are not confined to **French foreign policy**, but also (and even primarily) spring from its **domestic policy**. We only have to recall various episodes in the “miserable childhood of the Kouachi brothers” or remind that Coulibaly's best friend was killed by a police officer during a robbery in 2000, and that he was singled out in 2010 for denouncing prison conditions at Fleury-Mérogis.

In other words, we can say that **this murderous terrorist attack was a French attack and expressed a violent resentment against the “French republican model”**, often idealized, but which serves, in reality, as nothing more than a machine that manufactures and stigmatizes inequalities, **particularly class and race inequalities**.

---

<sup>3</sup> *Mediapart* published interesting information about books and other writings found in the murderers' homes.

The strategy behind the attack aims at a **polarization of French society**, at an **escalation of the conflict** and, above all, at the **resuscitation of the topic of "the clash of civilizations"**. It further **isolates the Muslim population in France** (around 5 million people) and exposes it to more Islamophobia. It is **pushing the white population to gather behind the banners of the national republican unity and identity, perceived as been under attack from the "new French"**, that is, the Muslim French. The Islamic terrorist actions in Paris appear to have been successful in achieving their goals of **intensifying the conflict and further polarizing French society**.

## II – The reaction by French society: from ordinary people to prominent leaders

Second, I want to focus on the immediate **reactions** to the massacre of the French society in general, ordinary people and civil society, dominant mass media, and the French state and government in particular. I want to ask questions rather than provide answers.

The killings at *Charlie Hebdo* and at the kosher superette have **provoked a massive shock and dismay**. Many people in France have been forced to abruptly absorb years of recent history in just hours or days, after the United States (2001), after Spain (2004), after Great Britain (2005) and others (more recently Denmark, but also Tunisia, Nigeria, Kenya, and so on).

At first, people experienced **compassion for the victims**. On the evening of January 7, thousands of people gathered, even when they rejected the editorial lines of *Charlie-Hebdo*, to express **solidarity to the victims and their relatives**. For example: in Strasbourg thousands of people gathered in a central square of the city, including hundreds of people from my university.

These massive demonstrations were, more or less spontaneously, organized in the streets in many cities, by ordinary people often organized in NGO or trade unions, and also by political organizations or religious associations. Civil society had taken the initiative in most of the places. **The demonstrations were primarily emotional**.

And, of course, **the shock was immediately exploited by the French government**. A few hours after the attack President François Hollande has interpreted the assassination on the spot and again the same evening on television, such as a terrorist attack **against "France", against "the République", against "democracy"** and he called for **"national unity"** against

terrorism. All French political leaders have also appealed to national unity in defense of the "République"<sup>4</sup>.

But a lot of people felt quite confused.

There is nothing very original about all this, if we compare it, for instance, with the initial reaction to 9/11 in the United States.

In the media the interpretation of the attack as a **violation of "Republican values"** was immediately dominant. The other theme developed by the media was that of **fear of Islamism and communitarianism**.

Four days later, on January 11, mass demonstrations were organized in the streets of Paris and in a lot of other cities. Probably between 2 and 4 million people went on the street all over France.

People gathered under the motto "Je suis Charlie" (I am Charlie). The slogan could be seen everywhere. But the meaning of the unanimous sentence: "Je suis Charlie" is problematic. What are the different and contradictory meanings of this sentence? Why are there some people who do not identify with this slogan? What are all the other questions hidden behind the motto "Je suis Charlie"?

In Paris it was a mix of thousands of ordinary people and world prominent political leaders of 40 governments who put themselves at the front of the march. Media and political leaders, especially members of the government, this time probably played a more important role than civil society, particularly with regard to the meaning of the events.

But before analyzing this we also have to remember the violent anti-Muslim acts which increased strongly after the terrorist event<sup>5</sup>.

---

<sup>4</sup> Of course, it would be interesting to investigate more the words used in the public space by journalists and politicians in these moments to comment the events, the attacks and the demonstrations and the changes of the rhetoric, in the first hours and days. See the excellent analysis of Philippe Blanchet: « De la « liberté d'expression » à la « marche républicaine ». Amalgames, manipulations et blanchiment d'images autour de Charlie Hebdo », site *Les mots sont importants* : [http://lmsi.net/\\_Philippe-Blanchet\\_](http://lmsi.net/_Philippe-Blanchet_)

<sup>5</sup> 222 anti-Muslims acts were counted in the first quarter 2015 in France, six times more than in the same period last year, announced on Thursday, April 16, the National Observatory against Islamophobia. In Q1 2014, 37 anti-Muslim acts had been identified, according to this component of the French Council of the Muslim Faith (CFCM). The count is made on the basis of complaints and handrails transmitted to the Ministry of Interior. There were 178 shares and threats only for the month of January 2015 after jihadist attacks.

### III - The meanings of the mass demonstrations

Was it only mass demonstrations **for freedom of expression** as media and officials told on the spot? Was the meaning the same in Paris (place of the attacks, seat of the government and of the major media, with the presence and visibility of forty heads of state...) and in other cities of France? Even if the theme of freedom of expression was, of course present, the dominant narrative about attacks on the freedom of speech and of press is **not sufficient** to understand what really happened.

Was it a way to **support the editorial line of Charlie-Hebdo**? **Probably not**, the magazine had less than 50,000 readers; and, after runs of several million copies, sales fell back to a very modest level; I have to add that a lot of the people in the streets didn't share the controversial editorial line of the magazine: this was the result of the orientation initiated by former director Philippe Val<sup>6</sup>.

Was it a way to express **solidarity to the victims and relatives**? **Yes, absolutely**. It was the position of a great majority of the people, particularly the first day, but also on January 11 in most of the cities. **People in the streets wanted to reject the violence of the attacks**, and they probably also wanted to **support freedom of expression**.

Was it a demonstration **against Islam as a religion and against French Muslims**? The answer is **no** for the great majority of the non-Muslim demonstrators. In a lot of cities the calls to demonstrate and the public declarations were explicitly clear in this respect, even if a tiny minority of the people could express this kind of position. The leaders of the National Front for example didn't join the main demonstrations.

Was it a way to express **"national unity"** as it was requested by officials and some commentators? **Not sure**, even if it was the motto of the Paris demonstration. A lot of people were confused about the exploitation of the events

---

<sup>6</sup> Philippe Val changed the editorial line of the magazine when it was recreated. He was explicitly in favor of EU policies, NATO policies, particularly during the conflict in ex-Yugoslavia... Under his direction Charlie-hebdo changed from irrelevant cartoon magazine born after 1968 to a mix of irrelevant cartoon magazine and nearly neoconservative magazine. He fired a famous cartoonist, Siné, under the false accusation of anti-Semitism. Finally his links with the political establishment around Sarkozy led him to the direction of France Inter, the national public radio, where he fired again critical humorists like Guillon and Porte. In April 2015 he published a neoconservative essay: *Malaise dans l'inculture* (Grasset). He also rejected the idea of islamophobia, as well as Charb, the new director killed during the attacks. In a posthumous book Charb writes: "the concept of Islamophobia has no other purpose than to push the victims of racism to be assertive Muslims" (*La Marseillaise*, 18 avril 2015).

by the government<sup>7</sup> and, even more, by other foreign political leaders. As Pierre Rosanvallon wrote, "We first saw the gathering of a frightened and questioning community. Suddenly the horrors of the world we hear every day broke from us, from within". He asserted that **the union which everyone spoke about regarding January 11 did not exist**: "Far from showing a real national unity, the frightened community immediately reveals the problematic nature of this alleged unity. Beyond the rejection of the events represented by the motto "I'm not Charlie," a part of the population didn't identify themselves with these demonstrations. Part of the country remained outside".<sup>8</sup> Amalgams made by some commentators between terrorists and Muslims added more confusion, and most of the observers noted that Muslims remained largely outside the demonstrations.

But it is necessary to point out the **dangers of the "national union" rhetoric** and the exploitation which can be carried out in its name, and which has, in fact, been carried out. Some commentators have answered that the call for unity was not necessarily an affirmation of excessive patriotism or chauvinism. For many of them, in fact, they did so to affirm a **commitment to certain principles and values (freedom, equality)**, which are supposed to be guaranteed by the "French Republican model." National unity is indeed, in many respects, a **republican unity** ("republican" in the sense of the French Republic), with which it should not be confused. This sort of unity does not necessarily defend France just because it is France. Rather, it is put forward to **defend a certain model of society, in the name of values and emancipatory principles** that have nothing to do with chauvinism or nationalism.

But **behind this unity, a number of divergent discourses and contradictions can be seen**: For some (institutional parties, leading editorialists, mainstream media, media-intellectuals), the killings are a sign that **"our model" is under attack and it is necessary to defend it**. For others (more critical commentators), the killings are a sign that **"our model" is dysfunctional and it is necessary to question it**. Does such a French republican model truly guarantee liberty and equality for all and protect us from such violence? It is not nearly as clear.

---

<sup>7</sup> Even if, after these events, the polls have measured an increase in the popularity rates of President Hollande and Prime Minister Valls, it does not reflect support to the government.

<sup>8</sup> Pierre Rosanvallon: *Une communauté d'effroi ne doit pas conduire à l'illusion de l'unité nationale* in *Le Monde* 11-02-2015.

Millions of people who went on the street are clearly posing relevant and legitimate questions, which can be summarized as follows: **“What have we done to create such terrorists?”**

And finally, a few months after the events, there is a new question: What is the meaning of the new expression “The spirit of January 11”? Does it mean defense of liberty and particularly freedom of speech? Not sure when, a few months after the murderous events, the French government will impose a “French Surveillance State”<sup>9</sup>.

#### **IV – The relationships with Islam and the Muslim minority in France and in Europe**

Fourth, and linked with the three previous points, it is necessary to deepen the question of the relations to Islam and to the Muslim minority in France.

The murderers claimed to belong to terrorist organizations of political Islam. Their acts are explicitly linked with the situation in the Middle-East and with the intervention of Western armies, including the French army, in that region and in Africa. The first target of the terrorists, the weekly *Charlie Hebdo*, was chosen because of the cartoons of the Prophet published several times in the last years.

But there is of course also **a link with the situation of Muslims in France. Why did these young men become terrorists?** We have to think about the conditions that bring young people to such a level of resentment that they become willing to engage in suicidal attacks in order to kill. Not that any reason whatsoever could constitute an excuse for the murders that were perpetrated, but **because it is indispensable to investigate the origin of such hatred and resentment.**

**They are French, born in France, but they belong to a racialized North-African or Black minority (and also to a stigmatized Muslim minority).** The question of the stigmatization of Muslims in general in French and European societies seems to be very important. Several investigations

---

<sup>9</sup> See editorial of *New York Times*, 31 March 2015.



describe the **construction in France of an imagined Islam by main media<sup>10</sup> and the rise of islamophobia<sup>11</sup>**.

The core issue is the condition of the populations of immigrant origin inside France. One obvious indication of this is the fact that a majority of inmates in French prisons are people of Muslim background, although they constitute less than 10 percent of the population. And there is the related fact that the French society and state have never really settled accounts with their **colonial legacy**. France is a country where, 10 years ago, the parliament voted a law about the colonial legacy, and it required, among other things, schools to teach the positive role of the French colonization!

Political leaders from the dominant parties have also participated in these developments since the mid-seventies, and not only those of the far right.

**The preferred target of the hate speech of the far right in France is Islam. Muslims are their scapegoats**, much more so than Jews or any of the other victims of fascism and Nazism in the 1930s and 1940s, save the Roma, who are still the object of much racist hatred. Nowadays, since the beginning of the 1980s, it is Islam that is by far the main target of far-right hatred.

The fight against ethnic discrimination and the colonial legacy has not been central enough in the actions of the left. This is connected to an **abstract republican secularism** within French society and particularly in the French left.

As long as the targeted religion is the dominant one, the Catholic Church, this isn't a major problem. But it is a major problem when the targeted religion is the religion of a dominated and oppressed minority. Muslims are increasingly becoming the scapegoats of the economic crisis, the mirror upon which white Europeans project their deepest nightmares and fears.

The question of the veil is another illustration of the same problem. It arose in 1989 over the issue of young girls coming to school wearing the headscarf, and being expelled for insisting on doing so, with the support of their families. This led to a 2004 law banning "ostentatious" religious symbols from being worn in public schools. The social use of "laïcité", French secularism,

---

<sup>10</sup> Th. Deltombe, *L'Islam imaginaire. La construction médiatique de l'islamophobie en France, 1975-2005*, Ed. La Découverte 2005; See also many articles published by acrimed: for example, 2011, <http://www.acrimed.org/article3595.html>; 2012, <http://www.acrimed.org/article3928.html>; 2015, <http://www.acrimed.org/article4606.html>

<sup>11</sup> A. Hajjat et M. Mohammed, *Islamophobie. Comment les élites françaises construisent le "problème musulman"*, Paris, La Découverte, octobre 2013.

changed completely in the last 25 years. When it was constructed by the end of the nineteenth, beginning of the twentieth century, "laïcité" was an obligation for the state, not for children or ordinary people.

The secular school laws of the 1880s and the 1905 law form a common framework that respects believers and non-believers. Historical secular laws oblige the state and its institutions, first school to be secular (programs, buildings and teachers). But schools have to receive all children regardless of their beliefs. Now "laïcité" is mainly used against Islam and French Muslims. Neo-secular school law (about religious symbols - March 2004) leads to exclusion from public schools of underage girls wearing headscarf and / or their schooling in religious institutions.

Sociologist Nilufer Gole<sup>12</sup> presents the results of a field survey conducted from 2009 to 2013 among « ordinary Muslims » and their non-Muslim fellow citizens in 21 European cities. It shows how secularism is being transformed in its encounter with Islam, the republican ideal becoming an instrument of exclusion; and how Islam is transformed by this radical secularism. The main problem with this radical secularism is the belief that liberation can be "imposed" on the oppressed. The rationale is that in forcing you to remove your headscarf, I am "liberating" you, whether you approve of it or not. This happens to be an exact reproduction of the colonial mindset.

\*\*\*

Discrimination, ethnic profiling, police brutality, islamophobic campaigns and military expeditions increase resentment and provide "jihadist" currents new potential candidates. Most of them who will take action are recruited under these conditions. How is it possible to act to limit "jihadism" **and** to accept ethnic and religious diversity in French society?

To conclude my presentation, I give here only two limited directions for action. First, reconsider French military expeditions (remembering the slogans heard in the demonstrations that followed the Madrid attacks: "Your war, our dead," "Bombs dropped in Iraq explode in Madrid," etc.). Second, act strongly against Islamophobia in all its forms to stop the ongoing islamophobic campaigns in the media and political discourses, reconsider the neo-secular headscarf law of 2004 and not reinforce it like a French minister asked a few weeks ago, or accept different meals in public canteens, and do not cancel meal choices as it was decided in the last weeks by some mayors in certain cities.

---

<sup>12</sup> Nilüfer Göle, *Musulmans au quotidien. Une enquête européenne sur les controverses autour de l'islam*, La Découverte, 2015.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY:**

Blanchet Philippe, *Les mots piégés de la politique*, Textuel, col. Petite encyclopédie critique, 2017.

Charb, *Lettre ouverte aux escrocs de l'islamophobie qui font le jeu des racistes*, Editions Les Echappés, 2015.

Deltombe Thomas, *L'Islam imaginaire. La construction médiatique de l'islamophobie en France, 1975-2005*, Ed. La Découverte, 2005

Göle Nilüfer., *Musulmans au quotidien. Une enquête européenne sur les controverses autour de l'islam*, La Découverte, 2015.

Hajjat Abdellali et Marwan Mohammed, *Islamophobie. Comment les élites françaises construisent le "problème musulman"*, Paris, La Découverte, octobre 2013.

Rosenvallon Pierre, « Une communauté d'effroi ne doit pas conduire à l'illusion de l'unité nationale », *Le Monde*, 11 February 2015.

The Editorial Board, "The French Surveillance State", *New York Times*, 31 March 2015.

Val Philippe, *Malaise dans l'inculture*, Grasset, 2015

And many other articles published by different Newspapers and Magazines, particularly *Acrimed*, *Mediapart*, *Le Monde*.