



300

JANUARY
2014

FRANCE'S DEEP IDENTITY CRISIS

Francis Ghilès, Senior Research Fellow, CIDOB

After Napoleon's final defeat in 1815, France began to search its soul about its loss of dominance in Europe but remained proud of its culture and society. Constrained by the Treaty of Vienna, it decided, in the words of Alexis de Tocqueville to project its "grandeur" in Africa – hence its conquest of Algeria in 1830. Dominance in Europe passed to the United Kingdom after 1815 and Germany after 1870. After 1945, American popular culture replaced German military might and the British Empire as the bugbear of many French politicians and the chattering classes. France's confidence in what it sees as its unique has been badly shaken but it would be too pessimistic to argue that it is close to collapse.

The ferocious assault on the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* and a kosher supermarket in east Paris must be assessed within the context of deep seated anxieties which afflict France today: fears of creeping Islamisation, rising anti-Semitism, economic stagnation as well as a deepening chip on the shoulder about European neighbours who are doing better than France. France continues to regret the world of Versailles and finds the world as it has evolved in recent decades distasteful. Its last three presidents have been incapable of articulation a new identity for their country, its public intellectuals such as Bernard Henry Levy and Eric Zemmour are midgets when compared with Raymond Aron and Albert Camus.

As horrendous as they were, last week's murders were not a bolt from the blue, nor a French 9/11. They fanned the flames of collective trauma about the state of French identity and specifically the impact of 7 million Muslims on Republican values. But they also provoked a show of unity unprecedented since the victory parades of 1945. France may not be about to collapse but its leaders and citizens must ask themselves some hard question. It is no coincidence that Michel Houellebecq's *Soumission*, published on the very day of the murders fantasises about a France that has become subject to Muslim masters.

In attempting to analyse the issues, France is caught between the allegedly rational views of the left and the irrational views of the extreme right. The traditional secular anti-religious agenda of the left has mutated into a public discourse on identity while the anti-immigration obsession of the Front National has become part of the mainstream debate. Left and extreme right now secure equal space as contributors to the national conversation about multiculturalism but neither have the answer of how France will hold together in the next few months, let alone the next few years.

The role of politicians from both left and right shows leaders who are apparently incapable of thinking the 21st century and all the changes it has brought to the world. This is reflected in foreign policy: since Jacques Chirac's stand against the US-led invasion of Iraq, the proud Gaullist tradition of France's foreign policy has moved steadily closer to Israel and sponsored ill-conceived military interventions such as in Libya in 2011 without measuring the consequences of such policies. General de Gaulle must be turning in his grave, he who once wrote "vers l'Orient compliqué, je volais avec des idées simple". Today's political elite is too reactionary and hidebound to understand the virtues of multi-culturalism and develop a bold new French identity as De Gaulle was able to do after the trauma of the loss of Algeria in 1962. If the conversation is conducted through clichés, the policy which results is bound to fail.

France's political leaders no longer know which fence they are sitting on, their own or that of their opponents. Before last week end's massive march through Paris, the president sought to dissuade Benjamin Netanyahu to come to Paris while his prime minister, Manuel Valls, was encouraging the Israeli prime minister to join in. Nicolas Sarkozy proclaimed on television that he would seek to meet with leaders of the Muslim community, for example, the *Conseil Français du Culte Musulman* of the *Grande Mosquée de Paris*. Such organisations however, represent nobody but themselves and carry no weight in local communities. The rector of the *Grande Mosquée of Paris*, Dalil Boubakeur, is an Algerian stooge, others are Moroccan or Saudi stooges. There is no such thing, however, as a Muslim community except in the fevered imagination of terrorists, some politicians and certain 'talking heads'.

Some French intellectuals and media argue that terrorism is the inevitable and extreme expression of a "true" Islam which entails the denial of the *Other*, the imposition of strict rules in the guise of *shari'a* law and ultimately *jihad*. Olivier Roy, a lucid analyst of his country's politics says that Muslims in France today are viewed as having a hard-wired Coranic software embedded in their sub-consciousness which renders them incapable of assimilation into French society. Their only salvation lies in repeating their allegiance to France's Republican values, preferably when pushed to do so on a live television show.

It is little understood, however, that the Republic's cherished values of secularism and freedom of speech historically have a darker side. The civil liberties which are now idealised emerged during a period of colonial rule. As the historian Arthur Asseraf reminds us, France's iconic law on the freedom of the press passed in 1881 and still enforced today, was designed in part to exclude France's Muslim subjects. The law protected the rights of all French citizens, explicitly all those in Algeria and the colonies but excluded the subjects who were the majority of the population. The law is particularly interesting when viewed in its Algerian context because it targeted Muslims specifically. In colonial Algeria – officially three French *départements* attached to the ministry of the interior in Paris, "citizens" were all those who were not Muslims and the term *musulman* or *indigène* usually overlapped. Muslim was a *racialized* legal category stripped on any religious significance.

Maybe the *banlieues* of today could be best understood as the Algeria of the 19th century: the legacy of French apartheid must be borne in mind when considering the problems of the country's minorities. In the *banlieues* of Paris, more than 50% of young people, often Muslim are unemployed, they are hitting a glass wall between themselves and the work place; prisoners with a North African father outnumber prisoners with a French father by 9 to 1 for the eighteen to twenty nine year old group and 6 to 1 in the twenty to 39 year old group points to a massive failure of French society to integrate minority groups.

Fifteen years ago, the secretary general of the CFDT trades union, Nicole Notat asked the CNRS to conduct a study of racial discrimination at work: the results were an indictment of French companies. Many young qualified Muslim had to fake Christian names and identities to have a chance of getting a job and, preferably, not post their letters from a *banlieue*.

Facts are stubborn: the radicalised young people who attacked *Charlie Hebdo* in no way represent the vanguard or express the frustrations of the Muslims in France. Thousands of French Muslim men and women marry non-Muslim partners every year and, when they are well educated hold well paid jobs in the civil service, the police, the medical, banking and legal professions let alone politics. Such people far outnumber those who seek solace in an imagined community of Muslims or yesterday and invent an Islam which they are desperate to oppose to the West. Last weeks' victims included Muslims in the police force and working for *Charlie Hebdo*. Facts however hardly seem to figure in this fevered atmosphere. Falling into a binary trap which pits coloniser against colonised, white against black, collaborators against resistance fighters does immense damage.

Civil liberties were idealised in a Republic which did not always respect them – today they are universal, not specifically French. Yes, freedom of speech must be defended but the real challenge for France is to sustain the solidarity shown last week. French minorities – not only Muslims – must be encouraged to preserve whatever identity they embrace but equally encouraged to pass through the glass walls which have surrounded them for so long, if they are to have any chance of breaking through France's glass ceilings. Above all, French leaders must reinvent a new identity for their country that builds on its vibrant culture but accepts the world of today. They must date bold economic reforms which offer jobs to young people. A new identity will take tens years to build but the political leaders fail, the future of one of the two founders of modern Europe looks sombre indeed.