Are the French still “Charlie”? Reflections after the terrorist attacks in Paris

Anyone interested in the politics and society of France can only be amazed about the country's development in the last five weeks. Following the terrorist killings of 17 people in Paris on January 6th and 7th, an indolent, but deeply divided population suddenly wakes up and rallies for one of the biggest mass demonstrations in European history, adhering in large numbers to the slogan of national unity. A president with a record of unpopularity rises to statesman-like format when exhorting his fellow citizens to go back to their republican roots and collectively refrain from scapegoating. An unprecedented debate about the pertinence of France's secular values for today's society comes up, but rapidly dies out when the media begin to focus on other news. The time has thus come to suggest some analytical perspectives on those events, which have shaken France for several days. Among the many aspects relevant for social scientists, this paper looks at three issues around the Paris killings: The "national unity" of January 11th, the search for reasons of the terrorist attacks, and the possible future electoral consequences of the events.

The Moment of National Unity

In the months preceding the Charlie Hebdo attack, French society did not impress international observers by any widespread political agitation or civic activism. The disastrous results of the European Parliament elections of May 2014, which gave the right-wing extremist Front National for the first time ever the highest number of seats in a nation-wide election, did not trigger any remarkable reaction by public opinion. It seemed as if the rise of the populist, nationalist and xenophobic party was no longer scandalizing a majority of the French. A dull, uninvolved and silently permissive attitude prevailed among the population, very different from the situation in 2002, when Jean-Marie Le Pen's electoral success in the presidential election elicited massive civil protest.

Thus, the huge mobilisation after the attacks came undoubtedly as a surprise and asks for explanation, especially as previous terrorist acts, like Mohammed Merah's random killings in front of a Jewish school in Toulouse in 2012, did not provoke any comparable reactions on the part of the population. It is almost a truism to say that France is known for such sudden upsurges of political concern, rising from widespread public indifference. May 68 provides a good example for such a phenomenon: "Quand la France s'ennuie..." ran the headline of the newspaper Le Monde of March 15th 1968. "What currently characterizes our public life is boredom", stated editorialist Pierre Viasson-Ponté. Six weeks later, the massive student and worker protests started, culminating in a general strike paralyzing the whole country. Typically for social movements in France, the mass mobilisation faded away as quickly as it had risen.

But what happened exactly in the immediate aftermath of the killings, in order to help explaining us the extraordinary mass public mobilisation? It was President Hollande who played the key role, when he conveyed, in his speech broadcasted on the evening of the killings, his interpretation of the event. The massacred journalists were, according to the president, martyrs of their vision of France as the universal homeland of liberty. He sanctified the victims to "our heroes", worthy of a day of national mourning. And he provided his reading of the terrorists' objectives: According to Hollande, their aim was to attack the Republic as a community of shared values, among them the freedom of expression, pluralism, and democracy. Thus, the president's speech can be described as an act of myth-making, in the sense that he tried to give an overarching meaning to the event, appealing to time-transcending ideas and powerful memories. The acts of the Kouachi brothers, probably primarily religiously motivated and targeted against journalists whom they perceived as blasphemous individuals, were reinterpreted as attacks on the French Republic and its citizens. The Charlie Hebdo journalists, who in their majority were irreverent towards any kind of ideologies and solemn discourses, were canonized by Hollande as republican heroes, driven by the certain "idea they had of France" - an expression taken directly from the vocabulary of Charles de Gaulle, founding father of the Fifth Republic. The president concluded his speech with a vigorous appeal to demonstrate "unity" faced with such...
Thus, the huge mobilisation after the attacks came scandalizing a majority of the French. A dull, uninlist, nationalist and xenophobic party was no longer election, did not trigger any remarkable reaction by activism. The disastrous results of the European French society did not impress international obser-

dition leads to further deepen the cleavage between an 

discrimination of immigrants, the rampant islamo-

The next step towards the mass political mobilisation was the reaction of those political forces opposing the president. With the exception of Front National and its leader Marine Le Pen, they all refrained from any politicking, wholeheartedly endorsed his interpretation of the events and his call to national unity. Some explicitly encouraged the public to close ranks around the president and help him in his defence of the French republic. Such a short-run increase of support is known in the American presidential system as the "Rally 'round the flag effect", regularly taking place when the country is perceived as being immediately threatened by an outside aggression. The sudden domestic truce among deeply opposed forces evoked again powerful memories among the French: The "sacred union" of August 1914, when all political forces suddenly stopped their constant bickering and unanimously endorsed the defence of the country against the German aggression. Union sacrée was the headline that several TV stations were running on 8th January 2015: One hundred years after the beginning of World War I, the nation seemed to have retrieved its capacity to unify when faced with unprecedented adversity.

The dramatic events of 9th January were the final trigger for the massive public mobilisation. When Amedy Coulibaly, after having shot a policewoman the day before, hijacked a kosher supermarket and killed in it four people, he confirmed the interpretation which Hollande had given to the Charlie Hebdo attack: Those events had a larger meaning than the Mohammed cartoon conflict, but concerned the rules, the values, even the possibility of living together in a republic. The President’s speech on the night of 9th January set the tone for the upcoming mobilisation: He qualified the shootings now as attacks against France and the whole nation, inviting to a mass rally in order to give a visual expression to the national unity to which he had constantly summoned.

Thus, the reaction of the political leadership towards the terrorist attacks touched upon a highly sensitive nerve of the country's political culture: Its incessant search for giving unity to a deeply divided society. Since 1789, the country had for over more than two centuries continuously striven to regain the unity it had lost, once the deep divisions over the Revolution’s objectives had broken up. The highly centralized state structure of France is a manifestation of this search, as it is often seen as the only guarantee against centrifugal tendencies, which would immediately come up as soon as the state would loosen its grip on society. However, moments of national unity have been extremely rare in France’s recent history. Collective memory recollects especially three of them: The "sacred unity" of the summer of 1914, the armistice of November 11th 1918, and the liberation of Paris in August 1944. Thus, the wake of the terrorist attacks of 2015 meant for many French - along with the grief over the death of assassinated journalists, police, and citizens - the promise of a new, history-making moment of national unity. At first sight, January 11th strikingly resembled those seminal events of the 20th century. Since August 26th 1944, when more than half of the Parisians went to the streets in order to celebrate with Charles de Gaulle the liberation of the capital, there had never again been such a massive gathering of the population. And when the deputies of the National Assembly spontaneously sung "La Marseillaise", interrupting a minute of silence for the victims, it was for the first time since 1918 that the national anthem resounded in the hemicycle of Palais Bourbon.

The emotions accompanying these powerful symbols at first overshadowed the question to which extent the unity demonstrated in the aftermath of the shootings was really embracing the whole nation: Were actually all spiritual currents of France Charlie? Were the citizens who demonstrated on January 11th representative of the whole French population? Clearly the answer was "no". The fact that by far not all French had been or were Charlie became visible, when a significant number of pupils refused to observe a minute of silence for the killed journalists, ordered by the Minister of Education. Also, it seemed conspicuous to observers that not many inhabitants of immigrant-dominated disadvantaged neighbourhoods had participated in the demonstrations of January 11th. Thus, had the national unity been only an illusion? Have the deep cleavages of French society remained untouched by the events? Before advancing a preliminary answer to these questions, I first analyse the points of view of those French who "were not Charlie". None of
the emotions accompanying these powerful words that appeared in the most famous tv news networks, where the president was seen addressing the French people directly.

In conclusion, it is difficult to judge how much support those voices critical of the national unity find. Opinion polls around the Charlie Hebdo events have been rare and produced ambiguous results. According to a poll published by Paris Match on January 14th, an overwhelming 97 per cent of those questioned agreed with the necessity to unite when faced with a terrorist threat. However, there is no real consensus about the issues at stake: 42 per cent of those questioned in a poll from January 18th declare not being favourable of the publishing of Mohammedi cartoons, if this is considered offensive by fellow citizens. According to a recent poll, 17 per cent of those questioned believe that the killings were manoeuvred by a conspiracy; 30 per cent think that Dieudonné remarks on Coulibaly should be considered as “humour” and not be subject to prosecution. Thus, the reading of January 11th as a day of national unity.
unity needs to be reconsidered. It was an event combining two interrelated processes: On the one hand the skilful mastery of the domestic political arena through President Hollande, who found the right words about the attacks so that little space for contestation by his rivals was left. On the other hand the strong concernedness of parts of the French population, for whom some of the terrorist’s victims were not anonymous faces, but well-known public figures whose cartoons they had cherished. The political truce manoeuvred by Hollande and the massive mobilization of the population worked together to forge the image of a united nation, unanimously defending the same values.¹⁸ But this image only concealed the unchanged, deep divisions within French society.

The search for reasons and adequate responses

The perpetrators of the Charlie Hebdo and the kosher supermarket killings were French citizens of immigrant background. It was thus not possible, as in the case of the September 11th attacks, to externalize the causes of the attacks and to search for adequate responses in a war against “rogue states” sheltering terrorism. Similar to the London subway attacks of 2005, whose perpetrators had been British citizens, the quest for reasons necessarily had to focus on the domestic socio-cultural situation. The frames of the discussion were set almost immediately after the identity of the Charlie Hebdo killers, the brothers Said and Cherif Kouachi, was known. Without even a vague knowledge of their biographies, the public debate had already given a stereotypical image to the perpetrators, second-generation immigrants of Algerian descent: Originating from disadvantaged neighbourhoods and deprived of educational opportunities, they had failed to internalize the values of French-style secularism and had thus become an easy prey for jihadist indoctrination. The fact that the Kouachi brother’s biographies were quite uncommon, that they had spent an essential part of their youth not in a dismal suburb but in the idyllic Corrèze region, did not change the tone of the debate.¹⁹ They immediately became a symbol for the failure of immigrant integration, as their acts were perceived as an attack on the core values of the French republic.

It is needless to say that the public debate on immigration as it was triggered by the Charlie Hebdo attacks is not the first around those issues. Like a recurrent syndrome, the immigration and integration issue periodically dominates public discourse in France, but then almost disappears from the headlines of the media. At each time, the debate tends to look on different aspects of the problem. After the 2005 riots in the banlieues, the discussion centred on questions of security, illegal immigration, urban planning and social justice. When President Sarkozy launched in 2009/10 a “grand debate about national identity”, the focus was on the meaning of Frenchness for today’s society, the role of the country’s symbols and the question of national pride. The current debate concentrates on the issue of secularism, for two interrelated reasons. Firstly, the terrorists had targeted not only a journal whose generous use of France’s permissiveness towards blasphemy has made it into a symbol of laïcité, but also four citizens because of their religious affiliation to Judaism. Secondly, secularism is at the core of the French integration model and stands for the set of values, which immigrants should espouse.

At the same time, laïcité is a concept whose pertinence for today’s society is far from being clear. Its origins are to be found in the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, when the protagonists of the Third Republic pushed back the societal influence of the Catholic Church, which fiercely combated the principles of the new order and wanted to preserve its impact especially in the educational sector. French-style secularism thus contained from its outset a never solved ambiguity: On the one hand, it is a legal system, guaranteeing the neutrality of the state towards any religions and the freedom to practise them. On the other hand, it is a moral system, postulating a set of values, which should be transmitted by state-run education and which all citizens should embrace. Hence, laïcité is a Janus-faced phenomenon, which can be tolerant (in its neutrality towards all religions) and intolerant (if citizens refuse to imbibe secular values) at the same time. Its merits for 20th century French society are incontestable: While the Catholic church succeeded in slowly accommodating to it, minority religions like Protestantism and Judaism were strongly attracted by it, because it provided them with the necessary space for their free development. New and unsolved problems for French-style secularism have come with the increased presence of Muslims: First, because it is a multi-faceted and diverse religious community lacking an institutionalised representation (regardless of the attempt of the state to create one) and a unified position towards laïcité. Second, the state’s position towards the expression of Muslim faith in the public is sometimes perceived as intolerant, for example when it prohibits the veil in public schools or...
the niqab in the public space in general. Thus, some Muslims get the impression as if French-style secularism aimed at making them progressively abandon their faith in the process of their integration into the Republic. At the same time, some staunch advocates of laïcité clearly see Islam as a threat, since they fear it could partially reverse an advanced process of secularisation of society. However, as reminds us the historian and sociologist Jean Baubérot, laïcité and secularisation are two very different phenomena, which should not be mixed up.20

In the wake of the Charlie Hebdo attacks, the question of the pertinence of French-style secularism for the society of the 21st century has not been asked with the necessary consequence. Faced with the atrocities committed by the Kouachi brothers, many voices have taken a defensive position: "More laïcité" was their answer rather than "A different laïcité".21 Also, the debate remains in a predominantly French frame of reference, as if secularism was still an element of the exception française and could be discussed without looking beyond one’s own borders. At the beginning of the 20th century, France was clearly at the vanguard in terms of liberating civil society from constraints and implementing the religious neutrality of the state. Since then, many countries have invented their own models of secularism and have succeeded in accommodating highly diverse populations. Unfortunately, examples from other countries are rarely taken seriously in France, but are quickly disregarded as not pertinent to the French Republican model.22 The multiculturalist integration model, which allows each sociocultural grouping to freely develop its distinctive features, is often perceived as necessarily leading to "communitarianism". This buzzword of French political discourse indicates a society divided into self-referential sociocultural groups, with only little connection in between them, thus the contrary of the ideal of a Republican society in which individual citizens share the same values. However, as long as foreign examples are mostly denigrated and not seriously examined, France will hardly advance in its search for a more integrated society. Why not introduce the teaching of comparative religions in public schools, so that children lose their prejudices about other beliefs and learn to historicize their own? Why not consider policies of affirmative action, in order to provide minority citizens with better educational and professional opportunities? Why not officially recognize the fact that France consists of different, linguistically, religiously and culturally defined groups, instead of insisting on homogeneity, which is less than ever attainable?

**Possible electoral consequences**

Profoundly shaking events like the terrorist attacks and the ensuing demonstration of national union will necessarily have their impact on the electoral landscape of France. Who will be able to take advantage of them, and which forces will be weakened? At first, the forcefully demonstrated unanimity of the centre right and left somewhat marginalized the Front National, whose leader Marine Le Pen acted awkwardly when demanding an explicit invitation to take part in the January 11th demonstration. The dominant public discourse around the events emphasized Republican values, instead of focusing on those themes, which are the stronghold of the Front National: security, toughness on criminal immigrants, strong protection of borders. However, several indicators show that the events have had little impact on the intention of many French citizens to vote for Front National. In the by-elections in the department of Doubs on February 1st and 8th, the FN candidate won the first round with 32.8 per cent and was defeated in the second round by a slight margin of some 900 votes. According to opinion polls carried out after the events, Marine Le Pen would be the frontrunner of the first round of the next presidential elections with roughly 30 per cent of those questioned currently intending to vote for her.23 Thus, the republican unity of January 11th has not stopped the ascendancy of the Front National, whose leader has best chances to qualify for the second round of the next presidential elections.

Meanwhile, President Hollande has seen his position strengthened by the Charlie Hebdo events. The pivotal problem of his presidency so far had been that the French massively questioned his clout to live up to the challenges of his office and to provide guidance to the country. His impeccable attitude in the days of the terrorist attacks has lifted many doubts about his capacity for leadership. Hence, his re-election in 2017, which seemed totally out of reach before the Charlie Hebdo events, has now become a serious option. It is the centre-right UMP that has not been able to capitalize on the events. In fact, the deep internal contradictions of the party led by ex-president Sarkozy have become more apparent with the by-elections in the department of Doubs: The UMP candidate scored only third and could not qualify for the second round. The party leaders deeply disagree about which position to
take in the case of a second election round between a Socialist and a Front National candidate, whether to opt for a "republican front" and support the socialist or to remain neutral and thus risk the victory of the Front National. As to its political agenda, the party is lacking a unifying, mobilising theme. If it takes a tough stance on immigration, Islam, and security, it risks alienating moderate voters, while not being sufficiently attractive for right-wingers, who tend to prefer the original (Front National) rather than the copy (UMP). The Socialist government having opted for a supply-side economic policy, the centre right finds it difficult to propose a different approach to the problems of growth, unemployment and public debt. It seems that more and more voters see in Front National the real alternative to the government in place.

* Matthias Waechter is General Director of CIFE

References
1) Pierre Vionsson-Ponté, Quand la France s’ennuie..., Le Monde, 30.4.1968.
2) The slogans Je suis Charlie - Nous sommes Charlie recall the famous May 68 Nous sommes tous des juifs allemands, which the protesting students chanted after Prime Minister Georges Pompidou had denounced their leader Daniel Cohn-Bendit as a "German Jew". The same formula of empathy and solidarity was taken up by Le Monde, which produced after the September 11th terrorist attacks the headline: Nous sommes tous Américains.
3) Full text of Hollande’s speech from 7 January 2015 on: http://www.elysee.fr/declarations/article/allocation-a-la-suite-de-l-attentat-au-siege-de-charlie-hebdo/
8) Cf.: Sylvia Zappi, La banlieue tirillée entre "Charlie" et "pas Charlie", in: Le Monde, 16/01/2015, p. 4.
13) Malcolm X’s comment on Kennedy’s shooting on: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SzuO0shpddM
14) For this discussion see: Rony Brauman, Le droit de l’extérieur doit s’appliquer à tous, in: Le Monde, 15/01/2013, p. 10.
16) For the results of the poll see: http://www.metronews.fr/in-fo/charlie-hebdo-sondage-les-francais-partage-son-liber- nation-des-caricatures-et-la-limitation-de-la-liber-te-d-expression/moarU2dwrLXBYXxpQ/
18) The media played a strong part in conveying this image. See as an example the title of “Libération" from Monday 12th January: "Nous sommes un peuple”
20) His most recent book among his prolific work on French laïcité is: La laïcité falsifiée, Paris 2014. See also his highly instructive blog on the site Mediapart: http://blogs.mediapart.net/blog/jean-bauberot
21) Exemplary for this defensive approach the speech by Manuel Valls in the National Assembly from 13/01/2015: "La laïcité ! La laïcité ! La laïcité, parce que c’est le cœur de la République et donc de l’école.” http://www.gouvernement.fr/portage/318-seance-speciale-d-hom-mage-aux-victimes-des-attentats-allocation-de-manuel-valls-premi-er-ministre
22) Certainly there are exceptions to this generally unreactive attitude towards foreign examples. See for instance: Arnaud Leparmentier, Questions sur la laïcité, in: Le Monde, 15/01/205, p. 23. Alain Renaut, La France doit faire le choix d’un multicultu- ralisme tempéré, in: Le Monde, 15/01/2015, p. 9.

Ce projet a été financé avec le soutien de la Commission européenne. Cette publication (communication) n’engage que son auteur et la Commission n’est pas responsable de l’usage qui pourrait être fait des informations qui y sont contenues.

[Avec le soutien du programme Erasmus+]