

Entretien avec Danny Postel

Tzvetan Todorov

Translated by Gila Walker

Tzvetan Todorov is Director of Research at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris. A native of Bulgaria living in France for over four decades, he is among the most influential literary and cultural theorists writing today. His books available in English translation are: *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1973), *The Poetics of Prose* (1977), *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Sciences of Language* (1979), *Introduction to Poetics* (1981), *Theories of the Symbol* (1982), *Symbolism and Interpretation* (1982), *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle* (1984), *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (1984), *Literature and its Theorists: A Personal View of Twentieth-Century Criticism* (1987), *Genres in Discourse* (1990), *On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism, and Exoticism in French Thought* (1993), *The Morals of History* (1995), *A French Tragedy: Scenes of Civil War, Summer 1944* (1996), *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps* (1996), *Voices from the Gulag: Life and Death in Communist Bulgaria* (1999), *A Passion for Democracy: Benjamin Constant* (1999), *The Fragility of Goodness: Why Bulgaria's Jews Survived the Holocaust* (2001), *Frail Happiness: An Essay on Rousseau* (2001), *Life in Common: An Essay in General Anthropology* (2001), *Imperfect Garden: The Legacy of Humanism* (2002), *Hope and Memory: Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (2003), and *The New World Disorder: Reflections of a European* (2005). His most recent book is *Les aventuriers de l'absolu* (2006).

What follows is an excerpt of *Critical Inquiry*'s forthcoming interview with Todorov, conducted by Danny Postel, senior editor of *openDemocracy* magazine (www.opendemocracy.net), and translated by Gila Walker. *Critical Inquiry* will publish part of the interview online, with the full text to come in the print edition.

The November riots in France

My first question is about your thoughts on the November riots in France. There has been such a range of explanations and interpretations put forward: that the key factor is Islam; racism; class oppression; ethno-religious strife; a clash of civilizations; the return of the colonial repressed; the manifestation of a global underclass culture < to name a few. There is controversy over the statements of Alain Finkielkraut that the issue is one of republicanism and its discontents. What was your own reaction to the riots? What is your sense of the phenomenon and its repercussions?

First I must say that I have absolutely no direct knowledge of the events. The acts of violence did not reach the city centers and so they did not penetrate into Paris, the center of an extensive region. The violence was geographically limited to

housing projects in the *banlieues*. What I know, then, comes from television and newspapers. My opinions were shaped by contact with intermediaries, with journalists, social workers, local teachers, legal professionals, and the police. As a result, my first-hand knowledge is of the discourses on the violence in November, not the violence itself. This is to set the boundaries of my comments.

From these discourses, I'd like to single out two extreme views, two marginal interpretations which are given all the more credence the farther we get from the actual scene of the violence. So what if they don't correspond to observable facts, they meet the expectations of the people to whom they are addressed. One of these explanations, which I first heard on a visit to New York's Columbia University in December 2005, was that the violence was the legitimate revolt of a population oppressed and persecuted by a colonialist, racist State that is Islamophobic to boot. The other, which I also read in the American press, regarded the events as an attack on France and its values, an anti-republican pogrom of sorts, to be seen in the context of terrorist Islam's threat to the West. There are people who subscribe to these explanations in France too, mainly those who have never had any contact with the *banlieues* in question. These two standpoints imply opposing judgements but they share the idea that we are dealing with a political conflict, the basis of which is ethnic and religious. Personally, I'm afraid that both explanations tell us more about the fantasies of their authors and about their conscious or unconscious anxieties and hopes than about the reality of the facts.

But what exactly was this reality? Let us start with some essentially indisputable facts. In January 2006, the *procureur general* [the state prosecutor] of Paris announced that 63% of those arrested for acts of violence were minors, 87% had French nationality, 50% had no previous arrest records, and 50% were not in the school system. As to their motivation, he declared that there was "no trace of identity claims and no sign of political or religious instigation and appropriation." Indeed, during the events, the only Islamic voices to be heard belonged to religious figures imploring the youngsters to go home. Even Jean-Marie Le Pen, head of the far-right National Front, ever ready to fuel cultural or racial conflict, was forced to admit to this; he declared that he was "in complete disagreement" with those who saw "religious and ethnic" reasons for the violence, which he described as a "game

that was not revolutionary at all." It seems that the clash of civilisations only took place in the minds of those who believe in it in the first place.

How then can we describe what happened in France in November? And what can we learn from the events? First I think it's important to distinguish between the immediate factors involved in the violence and the indirect factors that have an impact over the long term. Both are present but they do not lead to the same consequences, nor do they call for the same reactions.

The crisis was sparked by the death of two teenagers, electrocuted while running away from the police (whether or not the police were actually chasing them is secondary from this standpoint). The Interior Minister then proceeded to add fuel to the fire by announcing that he was going to "clean up" the housing projects of this "lowlife."¹ The reaction of those who felt targeted by the minister's comment was instantaneous. In a show of force aimed at both the minister and the public at large, they clashed with the police for several weeks without, however, exceeding certain boundaries, as in a game: no one died on either side (although one person was killed outside the clashes). The show of power quickly turned into a contest of one-upmanship, the question being who could start more fires, torch more cars, and defy the police better and longer. This contest was both followed and fueled by TV ("140 cars burned here. Who can raise the stakes?") One cannot help but be struck by the "macho confrontation" side of these acts: groups of youngsters were trying to gain recognition and respect from their peers by strutting their stuff (but so was the minister). Significantly, girls did not take part in the clashes. For the boys, two-thirds of whom were between 12 and 18, they were performing a kind of rite of passage to masculine adulthood.

The particular forms of violence displayed are also worthy of note. At no point were political, ethnic, or religious demands expressed. The gangs of youngsters did not come to Paris where the rich live and they didn't attack city

¹ TN: The proper English translation for *racaille* has been the subject of much controversy. Insofar as the current usage of the term designates a specifically French socio-cultural group with characteristic modes of dress and behavior, it simply has no equivalent in English. This is not the place to unpack the past and present meaning of the term, a subject that warrants an essay apart. What is important to keep in mind in our context is that, even though the youngsters thus designated may call themselves *racaille* (or *caillera*, its slang equivalent based on syllable inversion), the term is pejorative and insulting coming from someone outside the group, and especially from the Interior Minister.

halls or other institutional buildings. They hardly stepped out of the housing projects where they live. Instead of taking their anger out on symbols of the French Republic, they did so on their neighbors who resemble them in every respect but age and on structures of social order that are there for their benefit. They burned cars on their streets and their parking lots, cars that belonged to their uncles or neighbors. They tried to destroy sports facilities and other meeting places intended for their use. They set fire to day-care centers and schools where their younger siblings went and to state employment services that were meant to help them. All these acts have an evident self-destructive character (even though their agents do not always realise it). When they burn buses that connect (however poorly) their housing projects to the outside world, they and their families are the ones to suffer not the people residing in the upscale districts.

It's not the first time we've seen such self-destructive behavior and we know today the mechanisms at work in terms of the individual and the group. Children who have been given a negative image of themselves, end up adopting this self-image and taking it a step farther, in an "I'll show them that I'm even 'meaner' than they think" attitude. They feel that they owe nothing to a society that has rejected them, and which they reject in turn and so they rejoice over its destruction. A hundred thirty years ago, Dostoyevsky had a few people in this situation say, "If I can't succeed, let the whole world perish!" These are nihilistic not religious words. The identity that the youngsters are asserting is not ethnic. Their focus is restricted to their district and the only value they are defending is its control in face of the threat of police incursions. The only law that prevails is the law of the strongest; the only goal that subsists is the immediate satisfaction of a few simple desires. This hatred of the outside world and its norms — the rules inherent in any organized social group — reflects a repressed self-hatred and a state of profound dejection.

I'd like to quote a few remarks by the great French novelist Romain Gary about a similar outbreak of violence that took place some thirty years ago in 1975: "The adolescent feels insignificant in face of the overwhelming and all-powerful giantism of the surrounding foreign community. He feels crushed and imprisoned by it. His self, which is at once stricken with insignificance and continuously challenged in every respect, is transferred onto the group's "self": the group

becomes the individual and seals its unity, its pact of union, by a criminal initiation from which there is no turning back, and which is a manifestation of belonging.”

We can see from such behavior how important it is for children to be structured at an early age if they are to lead fully human lives. Contrary to what has been all too thoughtlessly suggested by some theorists of postmodernity, nomadism, flexibility, and non-affiliation are not necessarily good things. Families, communities of origin, and traditions can be oppressive, but their total absence produces even more negative consequences. These youngsters have sorely missed out on the early childhood integration necessary to the construction of their personality. Many have grown up in families without fathers or with fathers who were humiliated and depreciated. Because their mothers were either at work all day or suffering themselves from an absence of social integration, the children had no framework for internalizing the rules of communal life. From day one at school, they felt excluded: they had trouble with the language and could not find the conditions they needed to work quietly at home. Their families had immigrated to France, but they themselves are one, two, or more generations away from the distant land of origin, and so they have no other identity to put in the place of the one they are having difficulty constructing in France. And when they reach the age to work, they can't find anyone willing to hire them: they have no particular skills, and their conduct is not considered trustworthy. With unemployment in the housing projects often hovering at around 50%, they end up turning to small-time drug dealing and petty crime to survive.

The impact of the images that our society disseminates in profusion is not to be underestimated either. Children left alone from early infancy in front of the television — the babysitter of the poor — watch and absorb scenes of physical and sexual violence. The foreigners who they imitate are not so much imams from Cairo as rappers from Los Angeles. The models that inspire them inhabit their TV sets and they themselves have absorbed so many television images that they readily confuse fiction and reality. In many respects, these youngsters are acting like caricatures, but they are caricatures of our own society. Everywhere there is advertising constantly inviting them to buy new things and they don't have the means to do so. The wealth is there on display but they live in low-income high-rises that are falling to pieces in projects lacking in everything, stuck between highways and railways,

without nice streets, without stores, without commodities. Might as well set fire to them. In a comment about our “baiting” or “provoking” society Romain Gary argued that, “constantly subject to advertising that calls on them to consume, they are refused the means to do so. Whence the explosion.” It is true that he was referring at the time to the riots in the African American inner city districts in the United States.

Macho aggressiveness, self-destructive nihilism, and exasperation at being outcasts are immediate factors responsible for the recent outbreak of violence. But how can they be explained in turn? Here we have to step back from the November 2005 events. To try to bring some elements of an answer to this question, we could start from the following observation: youngsters whose parents or grandparents migrated from Asia (China, Vietnam, or India) have managed their social integration in France more successfully than those whose ancestors come from North Africa or Black Africa. There may be several reasons for this. One is that, aside from the Indochinese peninsula, French colonial conquests were situated in Africa. This experience, that lasted nearly a century, sometimes more, has left wounds that are still unhealed. The former colonized first internalized an image of inferiority and then violently rejected it; the former colonizers retained a sense of superiority and an attitude of condescendence and contempt toward the colonized. Whence the racist or hostile behavior on the part of government representatives (i.e. police officers) and private individuals (e.g. property owners or business managers). Whence also the self-destructive or aggressive acts on the part of the children or grandchildren of the former colonized.

Another characteristic of this population has to do with family structure and the place of women in Moslem families. Contrary to popular belief, there is no necessary relationship between Islam and the submission of women. In a pioneering work on Mediterranean kinship systems, *Le harem et les cousins*, anthropologist Germaine Tillion demonstrates that we are dealing with structures that predate Islam and extend beyond its geographical reach since they are found in the pagan world of ancient Greece and the Christian culture of modern Sicily and Corsica. Nonetheless, the part of the immigrant population that practiced the Moslem religion has proven to be particularly vulnerable to the shock of the encounter with Western lifestyles. Women are exploited in all traditions but Moslem women are

often confined to their homes by their husbands. Young men who have ties with this tradition tend to divide women into two categories, the virgins and the whores, and to cling to their privilege as older brothers to keep an eye on their sisters. This situation generates new types of frustration.

Since the roots of these difficulties run deep, remedies for them will not be easy to find. Our world is no longer made up of self-contained homogenous societies living apart from one another. Men and women from a wide variety of traditions have been torn from their original homes and have settled in foreign, even hostile, environments where they have to live side by side and adapt to one another. Friction between them is inevitable. France is a country that is not accustomed to gradual change; it alternates long conservative periods with radical upheavals. Yet we know in which direction we have to go to deal with these difficulties: everything must be done to recreate the social fabric and allow the people living in this country to gain confidence and recognition through peaceful activities. For this purpose, it is indispensable to speak truthfully: this means not giving into fantasies but not shying away from looking the facts in the face. Politically correct discourse is responsible for a great deal of hypocrisy and ignorance. Having said this, one also must be careful not to attack the wrong target and mistake the awkward defence of outcasts and the poor for the enemy. On the pretext of avoiding the politically correct there is a danger of lapsing into the politically abject. And we have nothing to gain from this.

An edited version of this article is scheduled to appear in the Summer 2007 issue.

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