

# Emmanuel Todd: I've Always Been Amazed by Russia's Role in World Processes

**Emmanuel Todd** is a French historian and social anthropologist known for unorthodox views, and the author of many sensational books. His most recent, *The Defeat of the West* (La Défaite de l'Occident)<sup>1</sup>, hit bookshelves last year. At the request of our journal, **Natalia Rutkevich** asked Emmanuel Todd a few questions.

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– The term ‘values’ often takes center stage in public political discussions. The liberal world is adamant they are universal, while its non-liberal opponents vow commitment to traditional and family values, insisting that they are unique and specific for each society. In a sense, both indulge in political rhetoric. It’s nothing but a shell. But given the informatization of modern society, a huge role is attached to it. Would it be correct to say that this clash of opinion determines the nature of global confrontation?

– The question of values certainly matters, but it is only a tiny component of the disputes and quarrels that rock the world. In discussing the confrontation between Russia and the West, or other interstate conflicts, I would suggest looking not at values, but at the balance of power.

I side with the realists, such as John Mearsheimer, in that great power rivalry is central to global conflicts. In this context, the starting point of the confrontation between Russia, on the one hand, and the United States and its vassals, on the other (I view the Japanese and Europeans as vassals of

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<sup>1</sup> The book became a bestseller in France in 2024. It has been translated into Russian and released in Russia by several publishers.

the United States rather than its true allies), is the collapse of the American superpower.

The USSR's dissolution produced the illusion that the West had triumphed, when in reality the West itself had long before entered economic and cultural decline, as early as the mid-1960s. The disappearance of the Soviet rival accelerated the pace of globalization, depriving U.S. industry of its original strength. The same happened to the economies of Britain, France, Germany, and to some extent Japan. I would therefore first speak of the underlying reasons for the shift against the West in the balance of power: shrinking production, lack of engineering personnel, and the overall decline of the education system that the United States had experienced since 1965 and France since 1995.

**– Why these particular years?**

– Both were milestones of change in the education systems. In the U.S., 1965 saw the adoption of the Elementary and Secondary Education Development Act. Ideally it was the right thing to do, as it provided expanded access to learning. But, according to the Scholastic Aptitude Test, it was precisely after 1965 that the performance of university candidates began to deteriorate in mathematics, spoken and written language.

In France, the number of lycée (high school) graduates had been on the rise in all social groups up to 1995. After that, it declined for a few years and grew again later—but not because the level of knowledge rose, but because exam requirements were eased.

These processes triggered re-stratification, a trend towards deeper inequality and the isolation of elites. Whereas before all applicants to universities were admitted on equal terms, now admission boards consider which lycée an applicant graduated from, just to reaffirm that his/her declared performance corresponds to reality.

**– So, the problem does lie in the educational sphere?**

– To an extent, yes. But eventually this will bring us to what I believe is the basic reason behind the West's waning power—the gradual erosion of the pillars of its former greatness. First and foremost, the Protestant ethic

(English, German, American, Scandinavian, and so on) and its values, such as education, discipline, and hard work.

In my book *The Defeat of the West*, I describe the West as a civilization that has reached the limit of its own ability to exploit the rest of the world. The West lives on the cheap labor of Chinese workers and Bangladeshi children—that is, the merciless exploitation of other countries. It seeks to retain its privileged position, while the other world actors are ever less willing to tolerate this.

So, I see the world confrontation through the lens of relations of power and exploitation, but I note at the same time that the existing systems are keen to use values as an instrument of struggle.

**– To what degree, do you think, slogans extolling liberal or conservative values correspond to reality in the societies where they are preached?**

– The discourse about liberal democracy and “Western values” is an indispensable element of official Western rhetoric, but it is addressed mainly to external audiences. It is an export commodity, if you wish. In the meantime, inside our societies we have long realized that our democracy is in deep crisis. Its signs are clear to the naked eye: Trump’s rise to power in the United States, the soaring popularity of the National Rally (*Rassemblement Nationale*) in France, the rise of the extreme right in Germany, and so on. We realize that our democracies are turning weak for internal, endogenous reasons.

True, a certain level of personal freedoms remains; for example, I am free to speak my mind, and I am not sent to jail for this. Although some don’t stop charging me with being an agent of the Kremlin. But I still publish my books in France and they sell very well. This shows that our country is still pluralistic, and the people keep an open mind about alternative viewpoints that may be absent from the official media.

A certain spectrum of alternative opinions is still there, although I should say that I am *persona non grata* on official TV channels, which, of course, is incredible in a country that positions itself as a “guardian of freedom of speech” and lectures other countries, particularly Russia.

As for the values of the opposite camp, I do not believe in the widely promoted viewpoint about Russia’s religious resistance to the West, of some kind of Orthodox revival. Communism was made possible in Russia

by the Orthodox Church's decline before the 1917 Revolution, just as the French Revolution of 1789 was made possible by the crisis of the Catholic Church between 1730 and 1789. I am not hostile to attempts to portray a conservative religious alliance, but I see the essence of the present confrontation in a different way.

The international positioning of Russia, whose type of statehood I describe as "authoritarian democracy," in my view reflects the core value of that country: the ideal of national sovereignty. So, the two core values that clash today head-on are the ideal of U.S.-controlled globalization, on the one hand, and the ideal of national sovereignty embodied by Russia, on the other hand.

This situation generates some remarkable paradoxes. As a French citizen, I enjoy a fairly high level of freedom in a society that has largely lost its independence and is under foreign rule. A Russian citizen, on the other hand, has much more limited freedoms, but his country is sovereign. The puzzle is who is freer—I or a citizen of Russia? This is a great riddle yet to be solved.

**– In Russia the term 'World Majority' is now widely used to denote the Non-West. Yet the space it designates is huge and extremely heterogeneous, with many conflicts simmering or sleeping within it. But still, do you think it's possible to say there is a commonality among states beyond the West? Is there some unifying factor? And is it correct to speculate about traditional, cross-culture values? Traditions vary from country to country, after all.**

– In fact, the West itself is far from homogeneous. In my latest book, I explain in detail the differences between the familial and political models that historically existed in the various countries that currently make up the Western bloc. Take Japan or Germany, for example. Liberal democracy was imposed on them by U.S. military force; neither developed it in a natural way. In other words, today's West is united primarily by the U.S.'s leadership, its military control of the NATO bloc. Another factor that cements the Western alliance is a chance to reap the greatest dividends of globalization. Subordination to the U.S. and exploitation of the rest of the world are the hallmarks of being part of the West.

As for the rest of the world, the so-called Non-West, it represents great diversity. Although often compared, Russia and China are two totally

different and, in my opinion, incomparable systems—the former is closer to an authoritarian model, while the latter to a totalitarian one. The Arab world is split. India's democracy is a unique combination of the Hindu majority, a large Sunni minority, and a tiny Christian community. Africa is a separate world in its own right. Finally, there is Brazil, whose BRICS membership makes it a strategic partner of both Russia and China, but which remains ideologically close to the West.

The only thing that unites this large and disparate world, which you call the "World Majority," is its wish to shrug off the yoke of exploitation by the West.

This World Majority emerged as a reaction to the last-ditch efforts of an empire, caught in the web of delusions of its former grandeur, to retain its world hegemony. The World Majority emerged when Russia rose in revolt to challenge the United States and to oust the "lords of the world" from the podium. No one had thought that such a thing would ever be possible. No one dared take such a step. But gradually ever more people are beginning to identify themselves as part of this very World Majority that refuses to obey the Americans. Watching this process is a thrill. The flywheel of history is in motion again!

In general, I've always been amazed by Russia's role in world processes. During the Communist era, Russia was the engine of world history. Now it is assuming this function again and displaying remarkable resolve in defending the sovereignty of the great nations (let me stress this again, not all of them, but only the great ones). Also, Russia has become a center of gravity that attracts those who reject the Western LGBT ideology<sup>2</sup> (which takes us back to the question of values). It is noteworthy that the LGBT issue goes far beyond the bounds of liberal democracy and already takes center stage in international relations.

### – Could you please elaborate on that?

– As I delved into the evolution of sexual minority rights while writing my previous book on feminism,<sup>3</sup> I realized that these issues are central to

<sup>2</sup> The LGBT movement was recognized as extremist, and its activities banned, by the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation on 30 November 2023.

<sup>3</sup> See : Todd, E., 2022. *Où en sont-elles? Une esquisse de l'histoire des femmes*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.

geopolitics. That's why I decided to address geopolitical matters in my next book. The West has been remarkably naive in failing to realize that its LGBT ideology would not be perceived by the rest of the world in the expected way. This strong misconception of the surrounding world opened vast opportunities for Russia to position itself as a conservative power on the world scene, because resistance to the Western LGBT ideology is much stronger than the West had expected. It is about something more than just protection of the rights of sexual minorities. These minorities have always existed, and their right to a decent and peaceful existence looks obvious to me. However, the letter "T" in the LGBT acronym denotes a phenomenon of a very different nature. Transgenderism is essentially tantamount to the denial of biological reality. As an anthropologist I declare: to claim that a person can change gender is a form of nihilism and an escape from reality. This nihilism has swept the modern West, making the LGBT ideology its creed.

Contrary to the West's expectations, this ideology is almost universally rejected, and it drives the formation of alliances by societies that are frightened by its radicalism and refuse to follow in the West's footsteps.

Russia is crucial as a pole of attraction for all those who oppose the distortion of reality and disagree with the West's nihilistic course.

**– Your forecast of the Soviet Union's collapse stemmed from demographics and labor productivity statistics.<sup>4</sup> If the same methodology is applied to modern Russia and other major countries, what do we get?**

– The parameter that let me predict the collapse of the USSR was the rise in infant mortality between 1970 and 1974, followed by the decision to cease the publication of such data. Infant mortality is one of the main indicators illustrating not only the health care condition in a country, but also the general well-being of its society. In 2020, infant mortality in Russia was 4.4 per 1,000 live births, while in the United States it was higher—5.4. In my book I cite various demographic and economic indicators, but the infant mortality rate remains the key one. In 2023, the U.S. infant mortality rate began to rise again.

<sup>4</sup> See: Todd, E., 1976. *La chute finale: Essais sur la décomposition de la sphère Soviétique*. Paris: R. Laffont.

**– The nature of democracy is changing. Previously an instrument of ensuring legitimacy through popular opinion and a means of legally transferring power, it is becoming a means of maintaining the status quo and preventing changes that threaten to place it in doubt. Regulatory and informational manipulation has become an integral part of elections in any country. What shall we see next?**

– I am certain that we no longer live in a democracy. In 2008, I published a book entitled *After Democracy*.<sup>5</sup> In 2005, the people of France voted against the Constitution of the European Union in a referendum, but this decision was ignored and the Lisbon Treaty adopted. This was a clear sign that democracy was gone. What has been happening in France in recent months, when the country existed normally, without a government, in a state of acute political crisis, only confirms this fact.

Life goes on after democracy. When you accept the concept of liberal oligarchy—and precisely this is our current form of government—it becomes clear that it is a very different system.

For me, the real problem is in the decline of everything that made the West successful, particularly Protestantism (I believe modern Evangelicals are something entirely different). Protestantism created universal education, collective government, and strong individual morality. Then, although religions collapsed, they were replaced by what I call “zombie forms of religiosity”—secular civic beliefs. Now we have entered the “zero religion” phase, where there are no longer any collective beliefs left.

I see the West as a civilization that has exhausted its moral and social capital. Many people today worry about the depletion of energy resources. My strongest concern is the depletion of the social and moral resources inherited from our religious base. The religious heritage dating back to the Middle Ages was a kind of fuel reserve that fed the West's ascendancy. This resource has run dry. The atomization of our societies, aging populations, fertility problems, deindustrialization, and the inability to act collectively—brought about by the religious crisis—are a source of concern and sadness to me. I myself am a native of the West. England, France, and the United States—my family history is linked to all these countries, and it is hard for me to see their decline.

<sup>5</sup> See: Todd, E., 2008. *Après la démocratie*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard.

Nevertheless, I think that sooner or later Europe will have to take its destiny into its own hands. It will not remain under the tutelage of the United States forever. The European countries have gotten unused to freedom and responsibility. Being free is not so easy. Today it is very hard to imagine, but I can imagine, the future restoration of the European continent's autonomy through rapprochement between Russia and Germany, the two countries that survived totalitarianism and have always had a special significance for Europe. I also hope for the revival of the original European trio—Germany, Italy, and France; they could together wrest Europe from American control, which is currently organized around the axis including Great Britain, Scandinavia, Poland, and Ukraine.