



# Has the West Really Been Defeated?

Emmanuel Todd in 'La Défaite de l'Occident'



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The label most commonly associated with French intellectual Emmanuel Todd is that of “prophet.” Reviews of his latest book, “The Defeat of the West”,<sup>(1)</sup> reinforce this narrative—albeit in diverging ways. While conservative writer Christopher Caldwell hails him as a “prophetic academic”<sup>(2)</sup> in the *New York Times*, French newspaper *Le Monde* takes a more critical stance, describing Todd as a “prophet with his eyes closed,” allegedly furthering Russian propaganda amidst the Ukraine war.<sup>(3)</sup>

The fact that the book was featured in two major national press outlets underscores the extensive media coverage Todd’s work receives. Equally representative is the ambivalence of its reception, reflecting the author’s fluid political positioning. At times, Todd aligns with the left of the French political spectrum; in other instances, he veers closer to conservative right-wing parties, or even conspiracy theorists.<sup>(4)</sup>

Before delving into the theses Todd defends in “The Defeat of the West,” it is crucial to examine who Emmanuel Todd is and how his previous work has laid the foundations for his current argument. Central to his latest book is the assertion of an inexorable decline in Western—specifically, American—hegemony, a theme that has evolved through his earlier publications and shaped his current perspective.

## Todd’s background

Todd, born in 1951 to a prominent intellectual family, embarked on a scholarly journey that would shape his unique interdisciplinary approach. His academic foundation was laid in France, where he studied at the prestigious Institut d’Études Politiques (now known as Sciences Po) and Paris-Sorbonne University. Building upon this, Todd pursued his doctoral degree at Cambridge under the guidance of historian Peter Laslett and anthropologist Alan Macfarlane, focusing on pre-industrial peasant families in Western Europe. This early emphasis on family structures as fundamental anthropological units would become a recurring theme throughout his subsequent work.

While Todd does not align himself with a specific academic discipline, his methodology draws from various fields, including history, demography, anthropology, and political science. This interdisciplinary approach is evident in his first publication, “The Final Fall: An Essay on the Decomposition of the Soviet Sphere” (1976), which catapulted him to intellectual fame. Written during the completion of his doctoral studies, this essay boldly predicted the fall of the USSR based on demographic indicators, particularly infant mortality rates. Although the relevance of this specific factor was later debated,<sup>(5)</sup> the work’s impact secured Todd a weekly column in *Le Monde*,

solidifying his reputation as a prescient thinker. In 1983, he joined the National Institute of Demographic Studies (INED), where he spent the remainder of his career, until his retirement in 2017.

Todd’s career began in a decade characterized by political and intellectual uncertainty. The late 1960s social movements, particularly the May 1968 uprising in France, ushered in new social and political demands. Simultaneously, post-war economic prosperity gradually gave way to a neoliberal shift towards austerity. The dominant ideologies that had long shaped the French political landscape were waning. Todd himself exemplified this shift; once a member of the Communist Party in his youth, he became staunchly anti-communist following a visit to Eastern Europe in the late 1960s.

Historian Jacob Collins contextualizes Todd’s intellectual project within this era of ideological flux. As “grand narratives” failed to forge political consensus, Collins demonstrates how Todd, along with other French intellectuals, turned their attention to examining “concepts, social systems, and ideologies” that they believed had evolved “over a long period of time, on the order of centuries and millennia.”<sup>(6)</sup> These works aimed to define the social realm—making claims about human nature and societal structures—while seeking political intervention. Consequently, Collins characterizes this intellectual shift as a turn towards “political anthropology.”

At the core of Todd’s work lies a grand narrative built on the premise that family structures have a causal relationship with political ideology. By studying these structures and their evolution, Todd posits that one can gain insights into a society’s trajectory or the future of a political regime. This theoretical framework serves as the foundation for most of his works, including “The Defeat of the West.”

## The Defeat of the West

Todd’s “The Defeat of the West” presents a compelling argument that the Russia-Ukraine war is merely a symptom of a much larger crisis: the disintegration of Western societies. Through eleven meticulously crafted chapters, the author examines all parties involved in the conflict, beginning with Russia and Ukraine before expanding his analysis to encompass Eastern Europe, Western Europe, Scandinavia, the United States, and ultimately, the “rest of the world.” Todd’s central thesis posits that the West’s “defeat” stems not from Russia’s military successes in Ukraine (although he explicitly favors this outcome), but rather from the West’s own internal “self-destruction.”

### a. Significant deficiencies

Todd's book, consistent with his previous publications, adopts an essay format rather than a scholarly approach. While he presents his reasoning as "scientific," the text often lacks robust evidence and academic rigor. Instead, it heavily relies on arguments from authority, with minimal consideration for contemporary research on the countries he discusses.

A prime example of this approach is his analysis of the "family type" in Russia and Ukraine, which draws primarily from the work of French historian Anatole Leroy-Beaulieu, dating back to the 1880s. Although Todd's "grand narrative" style of writing is undeniably engaging, it ultimately leads to significant shortcomings in both methodology and reasoning.

Numerous reviews have already scrutinized various aspects of this text.<sup>(7)</sup> After summarizing its main arguments, I will focus on Todd's theoretical framework, which he claims provides an "anthropological" explanation for the trends he identifies.

### b. Potent arguments

One of Todd's book's strengths lies in its ability to challenge the prevailing narrative surrounding the war, particularly as it was initially presented in Western media. Todd begins by offering a valid critique of the reductionist portrayal of Russia in these outlets. He argues that Western commentators and political actors often depict Putin as an irrational figure incapable of serious strategic thinking, which has led to a misunderstanding of how events have unfolded.

The author also takes aim at the West's overconfidence in the effectiveness of economic sanctions. Todd demonstrates how Russia had been preparing to withstand such measures since 2014, developing greater autonomy in its banking and IT sectors. More significantly, he points out that economic sanctions have the unintended consequence of drawing non-belligerent states into the conflict. For sanctions to be effective, they require widespread adoption, which inherently forces "neutral countries to take a stance." However, Todd argues that this strategy backfired, as the "rest of the world" did indeed take a position, but not the one the West had anticipated. Outside of the United States' direct allies, few nations actively participated in the sanctions, with most refusing to implement any at all.

Todd's book raises two crucial questions that merit further exploration. Firstly, how can we explain European countries'



support for the war, despite it conflicting with their direct economic interests (particularly in the case of Germany, and to a lesser extent, France)? Secondly, why did the majority of the world's nations choose not to follow suit with economic sanctions?

### c. Todd's approach

Todd's analysis in his book operates on two distinct levels. Firstly, he employs descriptive statistical indicators, which he refers to as "moral statistics." These include metrics such as infant mortality, suicide rates, and alcoholism rates, as well as figures like the proportion of engineers among higher education students. Todd uses these statistics to make broad claims about the stability,

progress, or decline of the countries he examines.

Based on these indicators, Todd paints a picture of a "stable Russia" – one that has purportedly risen from its economic and social collapse in the 1990s under Putin's leadership. In contrast, he portrays an unstable, "sick" West, exemplified by the opioid crisis in the United States and a perceived lack of engineers. This shortage, Todd argues, has left Western countries notably unprepared for war.

Secondly, Todd delves into his own analyses of family structures and religious values. Through this lens, he attempts to identify what he calls the "subconscious" trends operating within these countries. This approach echoes an outdated scholarly fascination with pinpointing the "mentality" of a people or a nation.

## Theoretical models

### a. Secularization and the downfall of religion

Much of Todd's argument builds upon and revises sociologist Max Weber's seminal thesis in "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism" (1904-5). Weber famously posited that the Protestant ethic shared "elective affinities" with the capitalist ethos, thus facilitating the rise of modern capitalism as the dominant economic system in the West. Todd extends this analysis to contemporary Western societies, asserting a decline in religious values. He contends that after passing through a "zombie" state of secularization—where religious practice waned but values persisted—religion has now reached a "point zero," characterized by the abandonment of these values without the emergence of an alternative "collective belief."

In a move typical of his writing and methodological



approach, Todd identifies the legalization of same-sex marriage as a marker of this “point zero,” signaling the death of religion. However, this assertion overlooks two critical factors: first, the continued significant influence of religious communities in US politics, and second, the complex struggles that accompanied the legalization of same-sex marriage in many countries. These struggles often led to the mobilization and, in some cases, strengthening of religious groups, rather than their demise.

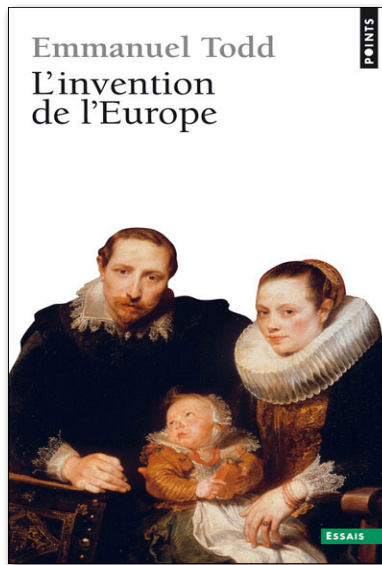
For Todd, religious decline does not signify the end of the capitalist spirit, but rather the West’s decadence. He posits that Protestantism served as the “matrix” for Western economic and socio-political development; consequently, its demise now heralds the West’s “disintegration and, more prosaically, its defeat.” Todd’s assessment of the loss of religious values is deeply paradoxical. On one hand, he attributes the rise of Nazism in Germany and the segregationist system in the US to the Protestant belief in fundamental human inequality. On the other, he seems to harbor a profound nostalgia for an era when these values formed the bedrock of Western societal cohesion.

In Todd’s view, we now inhabit the “age of nihilism”: a post-nation-state world where Western states, in particular, are governed by coalitions of educated elites. These elites, perceiving themselves as superior to the masses, are united solely by their individual economic interests- a model, which Todd argues, lacks any sustaining ideology or values.

### b. The family

Another crucial element of Todd’s argument stems from his analysis of family structures. This examination allows him to propose a fundamental “anthropological” distinction between Western societies and the rest of the world, which he believes explains why many countries seemingly sided with Russia. Todd interprets the refusal to participate in economic sanctions as a sign of support for Russia, further reinforcing his perspective.

To illustrate his point, Todd contrasts the “flexible” patrilineality of Ukrainian families with the “compact” patrilineality of Russian families. He suggests that this difference in family structure makes Ukrainians more receptive to liberal democracy, thus



explaining their affinity with the West. This perceived incompatibility in family structures serves as a basis for Todd to assert the “divided” nature of Ukraine, ultimately leading him to legitimize Russia’s claims on Ukraine’s Russian-speaking territories.<sup>(8)</sup>

Todd’s model, which correlates family structures with political ideologies, primarily focuses on two key relationships within the family unit. First, he examines the dynamic between fathers and sons, which he considers indicative of the degree of authoritarianism or liberty within the family. Second, he analyzes the relationship between siblings, particularly in terms of equality in inheritance.

His analysis begins by establishing a distinction between two family types: the nuclear family, which fosters individualism, and the authoritarian family, characterized by strong patriarchal authority. He then intersects these distinctions with the degree of equality among siblings to create a typology of family structures. From this framework, Todd derives specific values and, ultimately, political attitudes and preferences.

According to Todd’s theory, the nuclear family structure prevalent in Western Europe and the Anglo-Saxon world has cultivated “an instinctive liberalism.” By promoting individualism, this family model has given rise to a robust civil society, thus paving the way for the emergence of liberal democracy.<sup>(9)</sup> In contrast, the Russian “communitarian family,” where siblings are treated equally but subjected to an authoritarian father figure, has “naturally” led to the development of communism.

Todd’s typology also accounts for the German family model, marked by an authoritarian father who selects an heir among his sons. This structure, upholding values of competition and authority between siblings, has bred the possibility of both social democracy and submission to authoritarian regimes like Nazism, and this family-based typology forms the cornerstone of many of Todd’s earlier works.

In “The Defeat of the West,” Todd employs this framework to explain what he terms the “ideological solitude” of the West, a consequence of its “narcissism.” He argues that Western countries have failed

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to recognize that their values are not easily exportable. Their "liberal temperament" (which Todd associates with feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, and similar progressive ideals) often contradicts the "anthropological background" and preexisting family structures prevalent in much of the rest of the world. In contrast to the West's approach, Todd posits that Russia's soft power relies on a different set of values. He suggests that Russia's influence is bolstered by its stance on social issues, particularly its homophobia and hostility towards transgender rights.

## Methodological limitations

From the perspective of contemporary anthropology, Todd's chosen methodology and adopted theoretical frameworks are fundamentally problematic. His approach to selecting indicators lacks sufficient justification, raising questions about their relative value compared to alternative metrics. While it's widely acknowledged that correlation doesn't imply causation, Todd's work often fails to demonstrate even basic correlations, and causal relationships are frequently assumed with minimal supporting evidence.

This issue is particularly evident in the disproportionate significance Todd assigns to certain indicators. For example, he interprets Ukraine's prominent role in the surrogate pregnancy industry as a sign of a "failed state" where human life has lost value. However, this analysis overlooks the fact that surrogacy is also a thriving business in Russia. Todd then extrapolates this conclusion to each country's approach to warfare, suggesting that Ukraine's

alleged disregard for human life has led to widespread conscription of young men, while Russia supposedly tries to "preserve" its soldiers. This assertion has been widely refuted by numerous conflict observers.<sup>(10)</sup>

Furthermore, reviews in *Le Monde* and *The Jacobin* highlight an inconsistency in Todd's argument regarding the "point zero" of religion. While he considers this factor the primary driver of "nihilism" and the "defeat" of the West, his assessment of Russia treats the decline of Orthodoxy as merely anecdotal and inconsequential. This discrepancy in analysis further undermines the credibility of Todd's overall thesis.

These methodological shortcomings aside, the book presents serious epistemological issues. The abandonment of "grand narratives" by scholars is not without reason, yet Todd's work seems to overlook this shift in academic approach. Notably, he fails to engage with recent attempts at similar narrative structures, such as David Graeber and David Wengrow's 2021 opus "The Dawn of Everything," which could have provided an intriguing counterpoint to his analysis of family structures.

Todd's argument demonstrates a remarkable fluidity in scale, seamlessly transitioning from family structures to geopolitical decisions, and from generally shared "values" to a nation's "subconscious" or "temperament." This approach, while ambitious, raises questions about the validity of such broad-stroke connections. Ironically, while Todd advocates for the acknowledgment of cultural differences on a global scale, his vision of social groups remains surprisingly homogenizing and essentialist. In his narrative, countries

are divided, at most, between ethnically-segregated territories or between a “mass” and an “elite.”

Throughout Todd’s work, countries emerge as the primary actors, with political leaders often portrayed as embodiments of their nation’s general “temperament.” This perspective tends to gloss over internal variations and public debates, presenting a simplified view of complex national dynamics. While Todd recognizes that family structures are dynamic and can transform, he paradoxically views individuals as largely determined by a rather timeless “anthropological background.”

## Conclusion

Contemporary anthropology has spent decades deconstructing the perception of societies as fixed, bounded entities characterized by a homogeneous “culture” with easily identifiable and interpretable traits. Alongside this shift, the notion of a causal, deterministic relationship between kinship structures and political organization has been largely abandoned. In its place, more recent works have focused on the historical conjunctures that have given rise to specific forms of organization, emphasizing the complexity of systems that cannot be explained by a single factor.

From this perspective, Todd’s work, though erudite, appears as a collection of rather surface-level arguments, lacking the rigor and empirical data necessary to support his points. In Chapter 7, Todd warns his reader that his purpose is not to “reach a level of academic perfection,” but to “contribute to the understanding of an ongoing disaster.” This disclaimer raises the question of whether his objective has indeed been attained.

The main merit of Todd’s book lies in its ability to provide fodder for discussion. While the author succeeds in bringing forth interesting data and rightly calls for a less biased and more contextualized analysis of the Russia-Ukraine war, “The Defeat of the West” ultimately fails to provide the complex and nuanced understanding it purports to offer.

There is no doubt that Western hegemony has been eroding in recent years. The combination of the Trump presidency, the war in Ukraine, and now the unwavering support of the United States’ administration for the ongoing conflict in Gaza have collectively shifted the world order and diminished the ability of Western countries to make claims on the global stage. However, while Todd raises important questions, his reliance on deterministic models of family structure and caricatural descriptions of the decline of religious thought in Europe and the US does little, in my opinion, to shed further light on this complex issue.

## Notes

1- Emmanuel Todd, *La défaite de l’Occident*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2024).

2- Christopher Caldwell, The Prophetic Academic Now Foresees the West’s Defeat, *The New York Times*, 9 March 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/09/opinion/emmanuel-todd-decline-west.html>

3- Florent Georgesco, « La Défaite de l’Occident » : Emmanuel Todd, prophète aux yeux fermés, *Le Monde*, 19 Janvier 2024, [https://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2024/01/19/la-defaite-de-l-occident-emmanuel-todd-prophete-aux-yeux-fermes\\_6211727\\_3260.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2024/01/19/la-defaite-de-l-occident-emmanuel-todd-prophete-aux-yeux-fermes_6211727_3260.html).

4- La Rédaction, Emmanuel Todd, l’« eurofascisme » et le « complot des élites », *Conspiracy Watch, L’observatoire du conspirationnisme*, 25 février 2012, [https://www.conspiracywatch.info/emmanuel-todd-l-eurofascisme-et-le-complot-des-elites\\_a791.html](https://www.conspiracywatch.info/emmanuel-todd-l-eurofascisme-et-le-complot-des-elites_a791.html)

5- In *The Defeat of the West*, Todd comes back on this argument, and asserts that the fall of communism was rather a consequence of the rise of the educated middle class.

6- Jacob, Collins. *The Anthropological Turn: French Political Thought After 1968*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020). <https://www.pennpress.org/9780812252163/the-anthropological-turn/>

7- The Jacobin published a detailed and rather measured review of the book: <https://jacobin.com/2024/03/emmanuel-todd-demography-religion-putin-ukraine>.

8- Readers interested in knowing more about this model can consult Todd’s 2011 book, *L’Origine des systèmes familiaux* [The Origin of Family Systems]. Also see Collins, op. cit., chapter 4.

9- Todd considers this structure more or less stable depending on the degree of equality between siblings: in the Anglo-Saxon world, where inheritance is governed by the rule of primogeniture, the system of rotating elected officials would be quite stable; while in countries with more egalitarian nuclear families, like France, the desire for egalitarianism would lead towards anarchy and instability.

10- Scholar of Russia Anna Colin Lebedev has pointed out the factual inaccuracies in Todd’s discussion of Ukrainian and Russian societies, notably his assertion that Putin waged a “slow” war and tried to “preserve” his men, when there is evidence to the contrary. She underlines that, had he chosen other demographic indicators, they would have led to very different conclusions about the state of Russian society. See: <https://www.nouvelobs.com/idees/20240131.OBS83908/emmanuel-todd-lu-par-anna-colin-lebedev-entre-vision-partiale-de-la-russie-et-mepris-de-l-ukraine.html>