

Frigide Barjot; homophile malgré tout?¹

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Abstract

Frigide Barjot is the dethroned leader of the Manif pour tous movement that saw hundreds of thousands take to the street to protest against the gay marriage and adoption bill in France from late 2012 onwards. Despite what many claimed to be the self-evident homophobia of the movement, through the denial of equal rights to all, Barjot ferociously maintained and proclaimed her homophobic proclivities, and instead shrouded her arguments against gay marriage and adoption in notions of protection of natural 'filiation', the rights of the child and ultimately the promotion of the heterosexual (one man/one woman) family unit above all others. It is through this overt heterosexism, however, that one could perfectly well oppose gay marriage and remain a homophile, or in the least attempt to divest oneself of the charge of homophobia. This paper explores the extent to which this homophobic/homophobic split was maintained by Barjot through the analysis of three of her published works, before, during and after the Manif pour tous, and the extent to which this split was borne out by other members of the movement, and places this within shifting notions of French republicanism.

Keywords: Barjot, Frigide, gay, marriage, homophobia

Virginie Tellenne née Merle, 'stage name' Frigide Barjot (literally translated as 'Frigid Bonkers'), is the television star, devout catholic and erstwhile leader of the 'Manif pour tous' ['The Demo for all'] – principal opponent to the proposed 'Mariage pour tous' ['Marriage for all']² law of the Hollande government in France – an opposition that saw hundreds of thousands take to the streets to protest against gay marriage and adoption. Barjot is also the author of numerous works including *Confessions d'une catho branchée* (2011) [*Confessions of a Trendy Catholic*], *Touche pas à mon sexe: Contre le 'mariage' gay...* (2012)

[*Don't Touch My Sex: Against Gay 'Marriage'...*], and her most recent *Qui suis-je pour juger? Confessions d'une catho républicaine* (2014) [*Who am I to Judge? Confessions of a Republican Catholic*]. However, throughout her combat against equal marriage and adoption for same-sex couples, she remained a self-proclaimed 'fille à pédés' ('fag hag') and the 'Manif pour tous' extolled its principal virtue as being 'mariageophile, pas homophobe' ('marriageophile, not homophobic') (qtd. in Zeller and Wandrille 2013: 43). Furthermore, Barjot was ousted as leader of the very movement she helped to create for her more homophilic views – most notably her desire for the creation of gay Civil Unions – to be replaced by the more radical Ludovine de La Rochère, who seems only to desire to see the abrogation of 'la loi Taubira' (sobriquet for the law opening equal marriage and adoption rights to same sex couples) with little or no provision remaining for gays and lesbians in terms of marriage or adoption rights. Barjot's psychical schism with regards to homosexuality represents that of a good majority of French citizens who oppose(d) gay marriage; that of a sustained attempt to divest themselves of and defend themselves against the charge of homophobia, yet desiring nonetheless to prevent the extension of equal rights to all citizens of France.

These arguments, at least in the beginning, were couched in terms of 'protection de la famille' ('protection of the family') and of 'la filiation', the fear of a 'bouleversement de la civilisation' ('civilizational upheaval') and that of the good republican, lay citizen, than those of any overt form of homophobia. In this way, one could perfectly well be opposed to gay marriage and adoption and (at least claim to) remain a homophile. It is by questioning Barjot's self-expressed homophilia that we can begin to unearth a relatively new form of anti-gay sentiment in France – that of a catastrophizing and essentialist logic that seeks to promote the male-female family unit as the 'only one that works' – 'un papa, une maman: il n'y a pas mieux pour un enfant' ('One Dad, one Mum: there is nothing better for a child')³ – an often tacit and yet more pernicious form of homophobia – that of heterosexism. This paper will analyse the degree to which this homophobia/homophilia dichotomy applies to Frigide Barjot, and by extension the majority of the anti-gay marriage protests in France of 2012 onwards (including some of its more radical expressions) and consider this within the broader context of a move towards more conservative values enshrined within the ideals of the French Republic. It will, ultimately, aim to answer the following question: can one remain a homophile whilst opposing gay marriage and gay adoption?

Confessions of a Trendy Catholic by Frigide Barjot is the first published work of two that preceded the 'Manifs pour tous' in France. This autobiographical account predates the election of François Hollande to the presidency of the Republic and the gay marriage and adoption debates as discussed here. The work describes in detail Barjot's conversion to Catholicism, her stalwart defence of two Popes through various scandals (from prophylactics to paedophilia), her early hedonism, and relationships with her parents, husband, children and finally her (brief) television career. The book is revealing not only of republican dynamics in a country which had recently celebrated one-hundred years of secularism – and of the tension between the State and the Church that remain, in theory, separated – but also prefigures her involvement in the anti-gay

marriage protests, and sets out the disjuncture between her homophilic and homophobic views. The unease between her stance as a good, lay, republican citizen and her (re-)emerging religious beliefs is palpable and is mapped on to a France that struggles to come to terms with its Christian origins in the light of Sarkozy's 'laïcité positive' ('positive secularism'). It underscores the thin and wavering line between the French lay state and the Catholic lobby – a line that was decidedly blurred during the 'Mariage pour tous' altercations. Barjot's beliefs as a republican citizen and self-declared 'fag hag' clash with those of her emerging Catholic faith that lead her towards homophobia, or at least heterosexism in the course of the book.

The work also epitomises the argumentation of the majority of those involved in the anti-gay marriage debates – i.e. that it is not homophobic to desire marriage to be reserved to one man and one woman and that, whilst homosexual love is justified and perfectly legitimate, it does not merit equal rights and/or legal recognition. Barjot's internal struggle between homophilia and homophobia also represents that of French republican society between individualism and universalism, the public/private divide and mirrors the debates that took place some fifteen years earlier surrounding the PaCS law. Enda McCaffrey discusses the PaCS law of 1999 in relation to French republicanism and points to the fact that '[...] the Catholic church and the political right [...] expressed tolerance of it within the confines of sexuality as a matter of private concern, but not an issue for public debate, let alone legal equivalence' (2005: 41-42). Barjot, and through her the Catholic Church, used a near carbon copy of this standpoint during the gay marriage debates of 2012-2013 (and onwards). The line between homophilia and homophobia within contemporary France seems, thus, to lie between tolerance and the accordance of limited rights to the minority and acceptance through full equality.

The battle for equal marriage in France in 2012 began with one simple statement – number 31 of François Hollande's 60 'Manifesto promises' ('engagements') in his programme for election to the presidency of the Republic. A simple statement, 'J'ouvrirai le droit au mariage et à l'adoption aux couples homosexuels' ('I will extend the right of marriage and adoption to homosexual couples') (qtd. in Zeller and Wandrille 2013: 23). Yet, the French propensity for protest *en masse* notwithstanding, few could have predicted the size and scale of public and political debate that took place before the equal marriage law was adopted in early 2013. Thousands took to the streets across several protests, and hours of debates took place in the National Assembly and the Senate and through media platforms – the likes of which had not been seen since the PaCS debates. The principle opposition in the public domain came from the 'Manifesto pour tous' (a play on the name given to the law early in its conception – 'le Mariage pour tous' – 'The Demo for all' versus 'Marriage for all'). At the head of this movement was Frigide Barjot.

During the same period, Barjot published *Don't Touch My Sex: Against Gay 'Marriage'...*, a small pink treatise on the traditional family unit and which set out the *mots d'ordre* (watchwords) for the anti-gay marriage movement. Following on from her work discussed above, we find the same arguments re-formulated in the context of the presidency of François Hollande and of the

'Manifs' ('Demos'). The same homophobia/homophilia dichotomy is borne out once more. The same heterosexism based on the supposed anthropological truth of 'l'altérité sexuelle qui fonde la filiation humaine' ('sexual alterity that serves as the basis for human filiation'), leading Frigide to oppose 'ce pseudo-mariage [gay]' ('this pseudo (gay) marriage') (qtd. in Zeller and Wandrille 2013: 9). And, as with *Confessions of a Trendy Catholic*, Barjot is quick to refute any accusation of homophobia and insists on a display of her purported qualifications with regards to homophilia – her 'brevet d'homophilie' ('diploma in homophilia') (as she describes it on the popular television programme *On n'est pas couché* on France 2) – gained in Paris with her gay friends, all the while maintaining her opposition to gay marriage. There is no contradiction for Barjot since her arguments are couched only in terms of protection of the rights of the child and of 'la filiation' (since marriage in France traditionally creates this filiation de facto). What is at stake here is the continuation of the tradition of republican marriage, and with this the continuation of the French nation. Barjot is not, therefore, a homophobe, but the would-be-saviour of nothing short of France itself.

Arguments regarding the rights of children, the protection of *la filiation* and promotion of the 'traditional' family unit fit squarely within the heterosexist mentality of Barjot, but one has to wonder to what extent the active rejection of homophobia by the latter and the 'Manif pour tous' can hold up under scrutiny. And if Barjot's homophobia and that of the 'Manifs' under her leadership, remains a subject of debate, this was certainly not the case for other participants in the anti-gay marriage movement. Moreover, in an article for the French Huffington Post, Yohann Roszévitch (president of SOS Homophobie – an association created in 1994 that has as its mission the struggle against homophobia) makes this point very clear when he states,

Souhaitons que dans 10 ans SOS Homophobie n'ait plus de raison d'exister! Écrivions-nous en 2004 à l'occasion de notre dixième anniversaire. Force est de constater que ce vœu ne s'est pas exaucé et que l'existence de notre association est aujourd'hui plus que jamais nécessaire.

('Pas de lune de miel pour l'homophobie')

[Let us hope that in 10 years SOS Homophobie no longer has any reason to exist! We wrote in 2004 upon our tenth anniversary. We must admit that this wish has not been fulfilled and that our association's existence is, these days, more necessary than ever.

('No honeymoon for homophobia')]

Roszévitch places the blame firmly on those who took to the streets to deny others equal rights, and also on certain politicians who fed into the ambient homophobia with their actions in parliament itself. He, also, points to an 80% increase in the number of reports of LGBTphobia made to SOS Homophobie in 2013 compared with 2012, stating that 'ces paroles décomplexées ont légitimé

les insultes et les violences homophobes' ('such disinhibited talk has legitimised homophobic insults and violence') (Ibid.). Radicals had been present from the very beginning of the anti-gay marriage movement with groups such as *Civitas*, *Le Printemps français* and with individuals such as Christine Boutin (who had memorably brandished a bible in the National Assembly during the PaCS debates) and Eric Zemmour. Zemmour's 2014 work *Le Suicide français* [*The French Suicide*] bears the subtitle 'Les quarante années qui ont défait la France' [*The Forty Years that have Un-made (/un-done/defeated) France*]. In it, he attempts to demonstrate this form of collective suicide through the (his) deconstruction that has occurred during the last forty-years of French history. His central premise (and one that links him to the anti-gay marriage protestors) is that of 'la mort du père de famille' ('death of the father (as the head) of the family') (Zemmour 2014: 29). He blames this death on feminism, sexual liberation, changes in the law (designed to promote equality), consumerism and inevitably – homosexuality and 'l'homoparentalité' ('gay parenting'). Zemmour's views, coupled with the rise in popularity of the *Front national*, in recent years, points to an increasing swing to the right within the Republic of which the (anti-)gay marriage debates could be considered a symptom.

Returning to Barjot, however, it seems her more virulent homophobia comes by association. Throughout *Don't Touch My Sex!* she quotes various authors and experts, including her personal friend Philippe Ariño, who happens to be gay, and states,

La nature même de l'homosexualité, et ses causes profondes, suffisent de mon point de vue pour comprendre l'incompatibilité du mariage avec des personnes du même sexe: l'homosexuel est une personne souvent blessée, à la sexualité souvent immature [...] avec une infidélité quasi-consubstantielle: [...] Qu'est-ce qui différencie le couple homo des autres couples? En premier, c'est son manque de solidarité [...].

(qtd. in Barjot, *Touche pas à mon sexe* 2012: 12)

[The very nature of homosexuality, and its profound causes, are sufficient in my view to understand the incompatibility of marriage with same-sex individuals: the homosexual is an often [emotionally] wounded person, with an often immature sexuality [...] [and] a virtually identical level of infidelity: [...] What differentiates a gay couple from other couples? Foremost, their lack of solidarity [...].]

In quoting Ariño, Barjot clearly strays from the heterosexist logic that had permeated her work until now. Here, homosexuality is presented as decidedly inferior and 'immature'; gays and lesbians should thus, by their very nature, be barred from the institution of marriage and adoption. In addition to this, the use of Ariño's comments within Barjot's book points to a more significant phenomenon within the gay marriage debates in France – that is to say the

opposition to the bill by (certain) homosexuals themselves, as evidenced by the emergence of groups such as *Homovox* and *Plus gay sans mariage* (Gayer Without Marriage) during the protests to oppose ‘la loi Taubira’ (‘The Taubira Law (extending marriage to same-sex couples)’). At first glance, this seems a somewhat extraordinary stance to take, but as one begins to delve further in to the arguments used by these ‘gays against gay marriage’, one tends to find a heterosexist logic and argumentative structure not dissimilar to that of Barjot. Within the French context, there is a notable history of ‘gays against gay marriage’. In the wake of both the events of May 1968 and those of Stonewall, radical gay movements began to form in France, such as the ‘Front homosexuel d’action révolutionnaire’ (‘Homosexual Front for Revolutionary Action’) or the FHAR. The group’s 1971 *Rapport contre la normalité* (Rapport against normality), for example, lambasts traditional heteronormative, capitalist, bourgeois society and extols the virtues of the homosexual to disrupt the family order (Borillo and Lascoumes 2002: 22). However, whereas the FHAR clearly expressed a desire to ‘bring down’ the heterosexist order, a quick review of the discourse of *Plus gay sans mariage*, most notably of its leader Xavier Bongibault (a self-professed gay man, who could be found by the side of Frigide Barjot as one of the spokespersons of the ‘Manif pour tous’) reveals his desire to maintain this order or, more importantly, prevent its destruction from the so-called ‘LGBT lobby’. The arguments are not couched in the revolutionary, anti-assimilationist or queer potential of the same-sex couple, but in a heterosexist discourse of ‘protection and promotion of the male-female family unit’ to the exclusion of all others (see Stainville, ‘Les surprénants opposants au mariage gay’ 2012).

The final work of Frigide Barjot to be considered here is *Who am I to judge? Confessions of a Republican Catholic*. Published in 2014 and, thus, after the major three demonstrations of ‘La Manif pour tous’, the promulgation of the equal marriage/adoption law and Barjot’s ultimate ousting from the said movement she helped to create, the work reads as an autobiographical account (and to some extent apologia) of Barjot’s time as the leader of the main opposition to the law. Barjot, it would seem, has been transformed from a ‘catho branchée’ (‘trendy catholic’) to a ‘catho républicaine’ (‘republican catholic’) and it is within the values of the Republic that she places her actions during the debates and her subsequent desire for a ‘Contrat d’union civile’ (‘Civil Union Contract’) for same-sex couples to replace ‘Le Mariage pour tous’ – a view not shared by the now somewhat traitorous rest of ‘La Manif pour tous.’ Despite the promulgation of same sex marriage in France, the time has not come, it seems, for its opponents to *baisser les bras* (to give up) – many protests have occurred since amidst increasing radicalisation, most notably the infamous ‘jour de colère’ (‘Day of Anger’) on 26 January 2014, and other protests against the Hollande government’s ‘loi sur la famille’ (‘Law relative to the family’). Barjot’s homophobic/homophilic split is, also, ever present – if not more so as she reflects on this momentous year for contemporary French society.

In the book, Barjot seeks to distance herself from her so-called friends of 2013, and is critical of the increasing radicalisation and ambient homophobia. She describes her actions and those of her contemporaries as a ‘mouvement de consciences’ (‘consciousness movement’) that aimed to protect the rights

of children to have ‘son père et sa mère [...] dans la mesure du possible [...]’ (‘his/her father and mother [...] wherever possible [...]’) and more importantly ‘[...] ce, sans porter atteinte aux couples de même sexe’ (‘[...] this, without undermining same-sex couples’) (Barjot, *Qui suis-je pour juger* 2014: 16). It is clear that Barjot still views herself as a homophile, and sees no contradiction between this and objecting to gay marriage and adoption. It would seem, therefore, that post-adoption of the equal marriage bill, there are on one side what the French like to call ‘les tradis’ (‘the traditionalists’) or ‘les réacs’ (‘the reactionaries’) and ‘les progressistes’ (‘the progressives’) on the other; or, for the purposes of this paper – the (true) homophobes and the (true) homophiles. The latter (theoretically) being Barjot in a spirit of French republicanism versus the more fundamentalist Catholics who would subvert it. Unlike the more radical opposition to emerge against the equal marriage bill, it is evident that Barjot’s discourse does not warrant the title of overtly ‘homophobic’, but the full appellation of ‘homophile’ is equally inappropriate. Any homophobia remains buried and denied, couched in terms of the rights of children, filiation and conventional anthropology in general. Thus, Barjot and a good number of French have (re)laid the foundations for a relatively new form of homophobia – that of heterosexism.

In conclusion, therefore, Frigide Barjot or Virginie Tellenne to use her given name, has a somewhat split-personality with regards to the gay community. She, undoubtedly, is (at least in part) ‘gay-friendly’ – and indeed, before her conversion to Catholicism and politicisation in the ‘Manifs pour tous,’ she was often to be found surrounded by her gay friends in bars across Le Marais (the principal gay quarter in Paris). Barjot, also, makes her explicit stance against homophobia very evident in all three of her published works discussed in this paper. Yet, her actions and comments during her battle against gay marriage would seem to belie her homophilic persuasions. In a vacuum, Barjot’s homophobia is equally as striking and it is no coincidence that she was voted amongst the thirteen most homophobic men and women (in the world) in a 2013 poll for *The Advocate* (Pudlowski 2013). And for good reason! – the movement she helped create stirred up a wave of homophobia in France that has perhaps not been seen since the PaCS debates. The effects of the ‘Manifs pour tous’ are still being felt as we have now passed the two-year anniversary of the adoption of the equal marriage bill and the cries of ‘abrogation’ can still be heard even in the highest political circles. More worryingly, however, Barjot’s split personality with regards to the gay community was not borne out by some of the more radical protest groups such as *Civitas*, who expressed their homophobia in a far more overt fashion, not to mention acts of physical violence such as the gay couple who were attacked in Paris in April 2013 to cries of ‘Tiens, des homos!’ (‘Hey, look! Homos!’) (qtd in Delahaie 2013), or the gay bar (and its patrons) that was physically attacked in Lille during the same month (see Aballain 2013).

The adoption of equal marriage law seems, in addition, to have done little to quell the fervour of some of its opponents; ‘La Manif pour tous,’ under new leadership, having demonstrated once more on 5 October 2014. Moreover, during a meeting of *Sens commun* (Common Sense) (a splinter group of the ‘Manif pour tous’ associated with the UMP) entitled ‘La droite que nous

vouloons' ('The Right that we want') (qtd. in *20 Minutes*. 16 Nov. 2014.), Nicolas Sarkozy ceded to chants of 'abrogation' from the audience, stating his desire to see the law repealed resulting in widespread condemnation and consternation even from within his own party; the majority of whom claimed repeal would be impossible ('La position de Nicolas Sarkozy sur la loi Taubira', *Le Monde* 2014). Nonetheless, in view of the upcoming presidential elections in 2017 and the possibility of the Right's return to power, many French gays and lesbians are left wondering if the new rights they have been accorded will be subsequently removed. Furthermore, the effects of Sarkozy's declaration and of the homophobia (and/or heterosexism) that emerged from the debates surrounding the 'Mariage pour tous,' are not yet known. Additional work needs to be carried out to investigate the dialectical relationship between homophobia and homophilia in modern France – of which Frigide Barjot has been and is the nodal point.

Endnotes

- 1 A homophile in spite of in all?
- 2 Please note that all translations in the present paper are my own.
- 3 A familiar chant heard throughout the demonstrations.

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Biography

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