Guest Editorial

Special Issue: Islam, Culture, and the Charlie Hebdo Affair

When Satire Meets Islamic Fundamentalism: Are We All Charlie?

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After the attacks of January 7 on the editorial offices of "Charlie Hebdo" and the hostage taking at a Jewish supermarket two days later, yet another Western country asked itself why do they attack us? Why do they hate us? France experiences a moment of bewilderment and soul-searching similar to the one the US went through after the attacks of September 2001 and to what took place in Britain after July 5, 2005. The gut-reaction of nations struck by such horrific acts of terrorism is to say: We have done nothing wrong. In fact, the collective wearing of signs with "Je suis Charlie" ("I am Charlie") says: We would do it all over again. Last week, almost a whole nation lined up at French newsstands to buy the first issue of "Charlie Hebdo" after the attacks on the satirical magazine. It showed yet another caricature of a dark-skinned man in white jelabiyya and turban carrying the now famous "Je suis Charlie" sign. The headline above the drawing of the man reads: Tout est pardonné, all is forgiven. Regular readers of the journal know the man with the brown skin, white jelabiyya, and turban well. It is a familiar depiction of the prophet Muhammad as drawn by the caricaturist Luz, a member of Charlie Hebdo's staff, who survived the attack on its office simply because he happened to be out at the time. For the magazine's frequent readers the front page needed no further explanation. Foreign observers, however, did not understand so quickly and when a journalist of Slate.com asked him to explain, Luz said that the drawing is a callback to an earlier 2011 cover showing the Prophet Muhammad with the words: "100 lashes if you don't die of laughter." On the day that cover appeared, the offices of Charlie Hebdo were attacked by a firebomb. Luz explained Charlie Hebdo's motivation for the most recent cover as, "to show that at any given moment, we have the right to do anything, to redo anything, and to use our characters the way we want to."

France, like other European countries has a long tradition of provocative and satirical journals unknown to Americans. ("Mad" magazine tried its hand at a moderate version of this kind of humor with mixed success.) One of the early heroes of this genre, the German writer Kurt Tucholsky, responded in 1919 to critics who asked: What is satire allowed to do? by simply saying: Everything! Satire may make fun of rulers and the powerful, satire may exaggerate and turn the small matter into a big issue, and satire may drag whatever people hold holy through the mud. Americans, who grow up with the spirit of the First Amendment flowing through their intellectual veins will sympathize with this view. France and Germany, two countries that do not have a First Amendment and indeed severely sanction public expressions of opinion that go unpunished in the US, seem to be ahead of the game when it comes to matters of free speech and its defense.

Are they? My European friends joke about American attitudes of political correctness. You cannot tell a female colleague in a business meeting that she looks nice? You can't say that your president is not a real African-American given that his mother was white and he grew up among white people? You can't make fun of your Jewish friends' noses? Europeans often regard political correctness as a matter of polite etiquette that tries to make it right for everybody and denies the existence of real differences between people. Most importantly, they regard it as a stifling of humor. Political correctness prevents us from making jokes about those people that stand out. Political cor-

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rectness prevents satire.

What critics of political correctness often overlook is that it is not a matter of etiquette but a matter or morality and of justice. Women at the workplace do not deserve to be judged on their looks just as men do not. Without sounding all too moralistic, I would insist that commenting on the looks of women at the workplace is a genuine act of injustice against them. The same applies to African-Americans of mixed parentage. Racist prejudice is directed against all Americans of color, and making differences based on perceived degrees of blackness would be like South African apartheid in its legal distinction between the racial categories of "blacks" and "coloureds." Political correctness might indeed be detrimental to some forms of humor—there are many genuinely funny chauvinistic and even racist jokes—but it tries to put an end to the kind of injustices that Western societies have struggled with for many centuries, most importantly chauvinism, racism, and anti-Semitism. Here, I wish to add Islamophobia to that list.

Islam has always been the quintessential other to Europe's perception of its own culture. As far back as the Middle Ages, European leaders used enmity against Islam to create a sense of unity among all Europeans. Since the Battle of Tours and Poitiers, the Crusades, the Reconquista of Muslim Spain, or the Turkish siege of Vienna, Islam was considered the collective enemy of everything that counted as European. Much has changed in recent centuries, both in Europe as well as in Islam (yes, even Islam has changed!) but the perception of a fundamental antagonism between the two seems hard to overcome. This became clear, for instance, when Turkey applied for membership of the European Union. Submitted in 1987, the application became serious in the early 2000s, when Turkey had resolved its differences with EU-member Greece. After all, almost 15% of Turkey's population lives in what is geographically Europe. The debates particularly in Germany and France, however, showed that culturally, Europeans do not consider Turkey part of their continent. This despite the fact that its thriving economy makes it a much better candidate than many of the struggling economies of eastern Europe that have been admitted to the EU in the past decade. Through delays and ever more delays, Turks were told that they are not welcome in the EU. Not because they are Turks or because they don't subscribe fervently enough to the principles of liberalized capitalism (they do!) but rather—this is my impression of following the debates—because they are not Europeans. What distinguishes Turks from Bulgarians, Lithuanians and other Europeans is that they are Muslims.

When I saw the original Jyllands-Posten cartoons that created so much uproar in 2005 I personally did not think that they were blasphemous. Like Luz's recent cartoon on the front-page of Charlie Hebdo, they did not use any distinctive iconography that suggested the dark-skinned person who appeared in them was Muhammad, the prophet of Islam. For by now well-known reasons, there is no established iconography of Muhammad. To me the cartoons showed a naïve European perception of Muslims, some of them running around with turbans (with bomb-fuses) others having two women veiled in burkas in the background. I didn't see Muhammad here, I saw pictures of a stereotypical Muslim. These cartoons weren't blasphemous to me—why would they be? I am not a Muslim. Yet they were deeply Islamophobic and indeed racist. To me the caricatures weren't different from the cartoons of Israelis that I had become familiar with in the Syrian state-controlled press when I was a student in Damascus during the 1990s. Reduced to seemingly distinctive attributes of facial features, skin-color, and clothing, the people depicted in those cartoons engaged in acts that we find alien and morally reprehensible, to say the least. The message that the Syrian leaders wished to convey to their population was that Israelis and the world-wide Jewish community that they believe supports it are radically different from us and they do not belong to the same moral community. I saw the same message in the original Jyllands-Posten cartoons.

By now it has probably reached the last classroom that Islamic fundamentalism is not an attempt to return to an idealized past—even if its own protagonists portray it that way—but rather a very modern reaction to an equally modern conglomerate of challenges, problems, and perceived problems. Islamic fundamentalism found its earliest voice in the 1920s and 1930s in Egypt, a county that was then still suffering from British colonial domination. Early Muslim fundamentalist thinkers had an ambiguous relationship to what might be called "Western values," such as democracy, liberalism, and freedom of speech. They distinguished between Western values "in their own environment," as Richard P. Mitchell put it in a landmark study on early Islamic fundamentalism, and when these values were projected upon Muslim countries. More recent episodes of the relationship between “the West” and “Islam” have added further nuances to this early view but the overall thrust of Islamic fundamentalism’s critique of the West has remained the same. Western political culture, as it unfolds in its own Western environment has, for Muslim fundamentalists, both positive and negative qualities. Effective democratic processes, justice and equally, respect for individual freedom, and the right of citizens to take action on behalf of their interests are indeed admired by many Muslim and even many fundamentalists. After all, Islamic fundamentalist organizations aim at the empowerment of the Muslim populace to allow for Islamic religious lifestyles that are often prohibited under the secular dictators of the Muslim world. Quite often these despots use arbitrary justice and oppression against fundamentalist activists. Muslims understand that unlike in most contemporary Muslim countries democracy, political participation, and free speech in the West produce admirable results. But with this sense of admiration for Western political processes comes a long-standing resentment of the West’s imperialism and its racism. Racism and imperialism are for Muslim fundamentalists inherent features of Western culture, which are—for them—manifest in almost every step of its history, be it in the Crusades, Europe’s various colonial projects, in Zionism, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, or the mistreatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib. Westerns acts of blasphemy against the Prophet Muhammad are just one of many expressions of an inherent racist attitude towards non-Europeans. In the context of the Muhammad-cartoon debate, it has been asked why Muslims do not in equal measure go out on the streets to prevent blasphemy against Christian religious symbols. The answer is that they don’t really care what Western culture does “in its own environment.” They care when the West acts toward the Muslim world, and in their myopic perspective they see therein only imperialism, Islamophobia, and racism.

In contrast, Muslim fundamentalists regard Islam as a religion that knows neither imperialism nor racism. Numerous injunctions in shari’a, they believe, forbid and prevent Muslims from being racist. Muslim fundamentalists don’t accept the argument that since classical shari’a allows for slavery, for instance, Islam has not at all been free from racism. Slavery under Islam, so the point made by Muslim fundamentalists, is highly regulated by God’s law, the shari’a, and that could never have even remotely allowed for the kind of ruthless excesses that existed, for instance, during slavery in the Caribbean or the American South. Islamic fundamentalism thinks of Western culture in similar ways to how traditional European culture has always thought about Islam. It is the quintessential other, the “civilization” on the opposite side, and it is not a member of one’s own moral community.

What clashed on January 7 at the horrific attacks on the journalists and caricaturists of Charlie Hebdo was Islamic fundamentalism’s view of the West’s inherent racism on the one hand, expressed in blasphemous caricatures, and Kurt Tucholsky’s insistence that satire is allowed to do everything on the other. It is not very original to say that Islamic fundamentalists deny Charlie Hebdo the right to be blasphemous against Islam. The fact that blasphemy against Christian symbols does not raise their blood-levels even by a tiny measure illustrates that Islamic fundamentalists see blasphemy against the Prophet of Islam as part of Europe’s inherent racism against non-European cultures and religions.

January 7 was a terrible day for France and comparisons with 9/11, the London attacks of July 5, 2005, and the train bombings in Madrid 2004 are not out of place. All these days were also very dark ones for Islam when the worsts elements of its religious and intellectual tradition surfaced. Yet if we accept for a minute the in my opinion outdated view that Islam functions as Europe’s quintessential other, then these are also days when a mirror is held up to the West’s face. Those of us who dare look into it see the ugly scars of imperialism and of racism.

Kurt Tucholsky, who professed that satire is allowed to do everything, was persecuted by the Nazis and died in his Swedish exile in 1935. He did not live to see the worst acts of racism and anti-Semitism ever committed by humans. Would he have changed his mind? Whoever has leaved through issues of the Nazi-weekly “Der Stürmer” of the 1930s and 1940s will understand that racist caricatures did their fair share in preparing the German people for the Holocaust. Like many Europeans who have moved to the US, I have become a fervent believer of the First Amendment that guarantees freedom of speech to everybody. In that sense Tucholsky’s phrase should be extended: Not only satire, every form of speech is allowed to do everything. With this legal freedom, however, comes the moral responsibility to stand up against racism, anti-Semitism, and Islamophobia, and while I will go out on the street to demonstrate for Charlie Hebdo's right to publish caricatures of the prophet Muhammad, I will not wear a button saying "Je suis Charlie."

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