

What does *Charlie Hebdo* have to do with U.S. University Campuses?

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FIVE YEARS AGO, TERRORIST ATTACKS in Paris on January 7, 8, and 9, 2015 had targeted the satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo*, uniformed police officers, and the Jewish patrons of a kosher supermarket, killing seventeen people and injuring another five. There followed a popular and official outpouring of grief for those lost and support for democratic principles and rights, including free speech and freedom of the press. Months after the attack and subsequent *Marche Républicaine* led by President Hollande alongside other world leaders on January 11, the almost religious aura that surrounded the journal was broken by the first stirrings of a backlash, notably articulated in Emmanuel Todd's book-length essay, *Qui est Charlie?*, which took issue with the #JeSuisCharlie hashtag as reactionary against a new enemy: Islam. Many began questioning the notion that any criticism of *Charlie Hebdo* was equal to support for the kind of censorship that had led to the slaughter of cartoonists, writers, staff members, and police officers on the day of the attack.¹

Paradoxically, the iconoclastic and fiercely anticlerical *Charlie Hebdo* had become, in spite of itself, the official martyr of the secular, republican state in its defense of the enlightened "truth." Who better to underscore

this idiosyncrasy than Charlie itself? When accepting the PEN/Toni and James C. Goodale Freedom of Expression Courage Award in 2015, *Charlie Hebdo* editor Gérard Biard spoke against being a symbol of "values that belong to everyone." Charlie's foremost concern was recovering its mission of giving its readers "a newspaper full of laughter and thought" and "disarming [political and religious obscurantism]." It is this ethic, this "esprit Charlie," that captured our attention, if not our imagination, despite the horror of January 7, 2015. Not everyone could revel in this spirit, however, and indeed over 240 writers signed a letter of protest to PEN Executive Director Suzanne Nossel over the decision to give the Courage Award to the magazine due to the instances in which it had depicted the Prophet Mohammed on its cover. Although it may "exemplify the principles of free expression," they argued, *Charlie Hebdo* had not exercised courage "for the good of humanity."³

Today the entire affair may leave a bad taste in our mouths, but the fact that Charlie existed—whether or not we read the magazine or even liked it—had somehow reassured many of us, including myself. There was indeed something sacred about the paper—or rather something sacred had

been violated in the murder of nine unarmed columnists, editors, and cartoonists on that seventh day of January in 2015. Charlie's total emancipation from civilized society's hang-ups, our *complexes*, the sheer and wanton self-expression of its cartoonists, had stood—briefly—as a universal banner uniting all “free” people counter cold and calculated murder with military-style weapons perpetrated in the name of a religion that the attackers claimed to be defending. As I look back on this moment, it is not Charlie's particular way of exercising the freedoms we hold as sacred that had captivated me. For the American in me, it had been the writers' and cartoonists' defiance—yes, their courage—before the numerous threats and firebombs of which they had been the targets since Charlie's republication of Danish cartoons of the Prophet in 2006. In 2015, the spectacular and horrible nature of the attacks raised the specter, all too painfully familiar to Americans today, of random gun violence and mass shootings. Indeed, deeper than my fear of the terrorism of jihadists or any uneasiness before the terrorists' vengeful motive against Charlie's blasphemy, what had struck those deep chords of apprehension in my American psyche was terrorism period, and Charlie became a beacon that outshone—not extremist ideology—but deadly violence with firearms.

As a result, the full and untethered exercise of our universal democratic freedoms, and specifically the right to speak and to draw, drew me to the unfamiliar shores of the Charlie universe. In an American context, and more clearly than Paris's Bataclan concert hall, which jihadist terrorists attacked on November 13, 2015, it could be said that Charlie symbolized the sacrosanct rights of the First Amendment of our Constitution as superior to those of the Second. The inviolable right in this country to bear firearms—and, since the 2013 U.S. Supreme Court decision, military-style weapons,

such as the assault rifles used in the Paris attacks—had long frustrated a strongly-held belief held by many (on the political left or right). Yet, given our right to the free exercise of religion or beliefs (also enshrined in the First Amendment) the contradictions in this raw moment of clarity were flagrant since our system is also built on multiculturalism, which derives from the value of pluralism.

This realization occurred on January 9, when four other victims, all of them targeted for their religious affiliation, had fallen to the same extremist violence in a kosher grocery store. Shortly afterward, the antisemitic humorist Dieudonné had posted on his Facebook page, “Je me sens Charlie Coulibaly” (“I feel like Charlie Coulibaly”), a hybrid of Charlie and Coulibaly, the perpetrator in these deaths. The French state had then promptly charged him with inciting terrorism and given him a two-month suspended sentence. This French illustration of the internal contradictions of our First Amendment rights and the value of pluralism made the incongruities clear.

Foremost in the debate over *Charlie Hebdo* are two principles that are often at odds in Western-style democracies: the egalitarian imperative to be mindful of structural power and our individual freedom to think and to express ourselves, which puts us on a par with everyone else. The fundamental value of the constitutionally protected right to free expression is its safeguard of democracy against tyranny. Indeed, any “progressive” regulation of free speech that impinges on our individual freedom is a risky endeavor, since it releases the mechanisms of despotic rule.

Regarding the violence perpetrated through language, whether hate speech or simply vulgar and crude remarks that demean or elicit laughter at another's expense, writer and regular contributor to *The New Yorker*, Adam Gopnik, offered an incisive response. It appeared in a foreword to the translation of a posthumously published *Open Letter*,

penned by the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoonist and the then editor-in-chief Charb (Stéphane Charbonnier, who had submitted the manuscript to the publisher two days before his death). Gopnik defends individual freedom of expression against the overreach of regulation in a compelling assessment of the predicament caused by the *Charlie Hebdo* affair:

*The social contract at the heart of liberalism is simple: in exchange for the freedom to be as insulting as you want about other people's ideas, you have to give up the possibility of assaulting other people's persons.*⁴

This is a writer's take on the sacrosanct right to speak and write freely. However, as researchers, writers, and the conveyors of knowledge, each one of us in academe knows the risks of this freedom as well as the traps of self-censorship that exist within our respective fields.

A Distinctly French Political Magazine

Charlie Hebdo is a distinctly French political magazine. It grew from a satirical, anti-establishment, sacrilegious tradition that dates back to the nineteenth century, when those fighting for the French Republic took on the monarchy and the Church through cartoons published in pamphlets and the press. Since the law establishing freedom of speech and freedom of the press in 1881, individuals have been protected from hate speech but not religions and their doctrines. From 1960, the year its parent paper appeared, through the January 7 attacks to the present, *Charlie Hebdo* has been a marginal and marginalized counter-cultural periodical. As a bastion for radical secularism, it continues to hurl scurrilous attacks at Catholicism (in the form of the Pope or Jesus Christ). Religion and orthodoxy of all kinds are often targets of its irreverent humor, directed at not only Catholicism but also Islam and Judaism, in addition to politicians (especially France's

far right), international relations with Israel, and popular culture. However, the paper employs people without regard to their faith and publishes articles defending minority rights. As opposed to individuals, it is the various -isms, the powers-that-be, and the status quo that are the butt of their particular form of crude and sometimes cruel ridicule—the offices, institutions, and dogmas that either govern society or threaten its protected freedoms. This is the spirit that I wish to take up with regard to American colleges and universities.

Some argue that Charlie's particular brand of humor potentially loses sight of its mission when it attacks the marginalized. Traditionally, Gopnik wrote, the magazine has "punched up"; but when it "punches down," it appears to stray from its tradition. Such is the case when *Charlie Hebdo's* cover depicts images that have compounded Muslims' feeling of marginalization. In this age of *la déculpabilisation des esprits*, or "annihilation of shame,"⁵ which has opened the gates of free discourse but also, more problematically, unleashed bigoted or racialized hate speech, Charlie is suspect. This is partly what grabbed our attention in 2015. On the other hand, Charlie's guiding principle of freedom gives us license to address the phenomenon of venerated victimhood, which relegates minorities and traditionalized victimized groups to an inviolate status, a basis on which one—either victims or their supporters—gains a claim on the truth. Victimhood status comes with rights in addition to the responsibility to speak truth to power, from which victims are excluded, by definition. For the true believers, any critical inquiry into a "progressive" policy or "truth" that has been proffered by victims is perceived as either inquisitorial or conspiratorial—in short, dangerous; a discriminating mind is suspect of backward, discriminatory, or elitist impulses. What is useful in the example of

Charlie is that its politics cannot be pinned down, and its subversiveness makes it suspect. Is it a liberal bulwark against nefarious conservative forces at work? Is it the vile mouthpiece of the extreme right? The fact that its politics or at least their impact are debatable explains its iconoclastic potency, just as its rules of engagement shed light on academe and on US campuses, where student newspapers and cartoonists have likewise come under intense scrutiny for their attacks on powerful institutions.⁶

Like the burlesque, the instability and resulting irrecoverability of Charlie's meaning upsets the power structure and all power structures—this, at its core, is Charlie's impulse—and yet the courageous stand its journalists and cartoonists take is remarkably unwavering. Which of us would accept to continue our craft or science in the face of death threats? In its cat and mouse game, Charlie stands for absolute freedom to speak as both the cat and the mouse. Pushing the limits of its constitutional protections, Charlie refuses its own victimhood just as much as it rejects venerated victimhood, which, in spite of the latter's basis in the protection of an individual's dignity and equality, coincides with the erection of another heavy-handed institutional power structure. Although we do not have laws prohibiting hate speech as they do in France, and Charlie combats antisemitism in accordance with French law, in the United States the conflict between constitutionally protected rights, aimed at preventing institutional overreach, and anti-discrimination policies has manifested itself on university and college campuses.⁷ However, unlike the burlesque in *Charlie Hebdo*, the free enterprise of university academics is caught in the intricacies of the power structure, or power structures, within academe.

The American Academy's Response

The response in the US to the terrorist attack against *Charlie Hebdo* is instructive to our understanding of the American academy, in addition to controversies spurred by the appearances on college campuses of personalities and academics, from the conservative to the provocative (including Ann Coulter, Laura Kipnis, Heather MacDonald, Charles Murray, Milo Yiannopoulos, or animal rights activists), following Donald Trump's election to the presidency. *New York Times* columnist David Brooks was among the first to draw a link between the French weekly and US college campuses when he called upon Americans to reconsider cases condemning professors for micro-aggressions on US campuses and condemn speech codes that led to the withdrawal of invitations of objectionable speakers.⁸ He further challenged Charlie supporters in academe to face their hypocrisy after railing against Brandeis's awarding of an honorary degree in 2014 to Ethiopian born and women's rights activist Ayaan Hirsi Ali (she has published books critical of Islam). His January 9, 2015 column's title, "I am not Charlie Hebdo" became a counter-slogan that was repeated on university department websites (Dartmouth, for one); and a number of French programs in institutions of higher learning published on the web detailed positions regarding the paper. Harvard University, to its credit, initiated by the work of French faculty and librarians, brought online a digital collection of *Charlie Hebdo* artifacts, "The Charlie Archive," in January 2017. It is publicly accessible and open to outside submissions.⁹

Charlie Hebdo appeared in another campus controversy in April 2015, when a University of Chicago student objected to the presence of a visiting *Charlie Hebdo* writer, who had been invited to speak on campus. From the

audience, the student declared that as a Muslim she felt threatened by the paper's apparent disrespect for people like her. The writer, Zineb El Rhazoui, who had received death threats from the Islamic State and was heavily guarded, responded by referring to the courage of the victims. She replied, "Being Charlie Hebdo means to die because of a drawing." This exchange led to a poignant debate in the student newspaper. A student editorial criticized the speaker for failing to ensure "that others felt safe enough to express dissenting opinions." Ms. El Rhazoui's "relative position of power," the writer continued, had granted her a "free pass to make condescending attacks on a member of the university." The president and vice president of the French Club, the sponsor of the talk, responded in a letter to the editor, writing, "El Rhazoui is an immigrant, a woman, Arab, a human-rights activist who has known exile, and a journalist living in very real fear of death. She was invited to speak precisely because her right to do so is, quite literally, under threat." According to *New York Times* commentator Judith Shulevitz, this exchange underscored the "cocooning" effect of safe spaces on US campuses: "You'd be hard-pressed to avoid the conclusion that the student and her defender had burrowed so deep inside their cocoons, were so overcome by their own fragility, that they couldn't see that it was Ms. El Rhazoui who was in need of a safer space."¹⁰

A Guarded Room at the MLA Convention

Security from the perceived abuses and violence of free speech, as these examples point out, has become a student demand and an administrative priority on American campuses. More often than not, it takes the form of safe spaces and Bias Response Teams,

as at my state institution. Sometimes, however, it requires expensive, elaborate plans and armed police officers; and, particularly since the August 2017 Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville, the question speakers and faculty and students must be asking themselves, beyond cost, is "Am I willing to die for my right to free speech?", or free listening, as the case may be.¹¹ This question crossed my mind when I attended a panel on "*Charlie Hebdo* and Its Publics" at the 2016 Modern Language Association convention in Austin. Attendance at the panel required going past security guards, and not only was it surreal, but it also allowed me, in my privileged Ivory Tower position as a tenured university professor and researcher of French literature, to reflect on the question.

Inside the guarded room, international scholars walked us through the process that led to the 2005 publication of twelve cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in the provincial Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, three of which were republished in 2006 in *Charlie Hebdo*. The project was originally intended to be an experiment. Editors wished to gauge the reach of self-censorship among forty-two members of the union of newspaper illustrators. Not all of the illustrators responded and of those who did, not all of them depicted the Prophet in their drawings. Their publication generated, as readers may recall, death threats, general outrage and riots in Muslim countries, and controversy among Muslims in the West. Members of the MLA panel showed and discussed the different messages of each; and what ensued was a discussion of the different cultural perspectives that collided in this project, now a time marker in history. As Jytte Klausen reports in her 2009 book, *The Cartoons That Shook the World*, the fact that some of the cartoons (and one, in particular by Kurt Westergaard) gave demonstrable evidence to Muslims of the

*Danes' disrespect for Islam, it was not the conclusion the artist had intended. . . . He intended his drawing to show that radical Muslims use the Prophet's name to justify violence. He did not for a minute consider that Muslims would interpret his drawings the other way around, as intended to show that the Prophet is the source of violence.*¹²

The cartoonists at *Charlie Hebdo* agreed, which led them to republish some of the cartoons, including a new cover of the Prophet by artist Cabu (Jean Cabut), also one of the assassinated cartoonists. Cabu's drawing, however, respected Muslims' sensibilities by not showing Mohammed's likeness. It depicted an aggrieved Mohammed covering his face with his hands and made the distinction that Westergaard had intended: "C'est dur d'être aimé par des cons" ("It's hard to be loved by f----- idiots."¹³). These examples lead us to another aspect of the ideological ambiguity of this brand of cartooning. It can suggest that artists are ignorant of the Other whom one's drawing engages in a dialogue, or, in the case of Cabu, that they knowingly play with the Other—whether or not it is perceived as respectful is another matter. More dangerously, this ambiguity can lead one to the conclusion that the artist is engaging in all-out cultural warfare against those who are likewise the keepers of a dogma. All of these possibilities are worthy of intellectual inquiry.

In academe there should be room for reasoned dialogue and exchange in which different parties listen and engage freely, both honestly and respectfully. It is not entirely clear to me that this is what occurred in this MLA conference room, where a security guard was literally protecting free speech to the extent that freedom is possible in a policed location. It was a sobering brush with reality where the guard stood as a reminder that a difference of beliefs and opinion, even as a topic of inquiry, can leave one vulnerable to a deadly encounter. While the dialogue

may not have been entirely unfettered and honest, in this hotel conference room in Austin, there was nevertheless the possibility for discussion and the exchange of ideas and resources, including graphic content that had previously been censored. Even Yale University Press, which published Klausen's book, did not include any of the twelve cartoons, including those that did not depict the Prophet.

Self-Censorship in French Studies?

On another panel at the conference, I presented a paper entitled "Free Speech Rights: France as a case in point." I addressed the pall that the fear of terrorism had cast on speech in France and the danger of self-censorship in my field of French studies and more generally in the American intelligentsia. What had finally pushed me to address the latter topics was a reader's report from a scholarly journal, not recommending the publication of one of my articles, a retrospective study of two Franco-Algerian politicians who had worked in conservative governments, Azouz Begag (delegate Minister for Equal Opportunities in Dominique de Villepin's government, 2005-2007) and Fadela Amara (Secretary of State of Urban Policy in François Fillon's second government, 2007-2010). With no explanation, one reader had asserted that the article was "dangerous," and, although Begag is a sociologist, the other directed me to other specialists. Whether or not my article was ready for publication is not what most concerned me but rather the nature of the response I received.

Afterward, I sought advice from a senior colleague in the field, who alerted me to the article's violation of political correctness barriers. It was addressing the advances that Muslim political appointees had made toward normalizing French Muslims in politics and the media in a post-9/11 period marked by

not only xenophobia but also controversy surrounding the anti-immigration and specifically anti-Muslim policies of Interior Minister and later President Nicolas Sarkozy. The examination of multicultural advances gained through the service of government officials linked to Sarkozy, in whom caricaturists traditionally accentuate the demonic, had been my error.

However, I was seeking to understand their role in the subsequent election of representatives of Muslim origin to French Parliament for the first time in 2012.¹⁴ Not one Muslim had been elected to France's most powerful legislative chamber before, which raised questions in my mind. For instance, what had led them to turn away from the Socialist Party and take positions in conservative, even controversial governments that took up a problematic debate on national identity, passed legislation banning religious insignia in public schools (following years of reported dismissals of Muslim school girls who refused to remove their head covering), and enacted immigration laws discouraging family reunification through the use of DNA tests? My "dangerous" article was seeking to understand the ways in which a new political force was taking form and the shape and arc of its contours.

Enter Michel Houellebecq

A book that made a sensation, launched on the same day of the *Charlie Hebdo* killings, and which quickly sold out, *Soumission*, a satire by Michel Houellebecq, has since given me insight into the phenomenon that I had been attempting to discern. It, too, however, was deemed "dangerous" and the author—which academe has tepidly embraced—condemned as "irresponsible." French thinkers slammed its portrait of a France under the leadership of a Muslim president, Mohammed Ben Abbes, with the charge of

Islamophobia.¹⁵ In the France of this imagining, arranged marriages and polygamy are allowed, women deprived of their right to work, and the education system funded by Saudi magnates. Houellebecq pushed back against his book's detractors by questioning their interpretation. Ben Abbes, he argued, is a political moderate, educated in the country's elite *École Nationale d'Administration*, the institution where France's high officials receive training, as well as an ambitious and skilled tactician who wins the election against the National Front Party candidate, Marine Le Pen, by forming alliances with the Socialist Party and the conservative *Union pour un Mouvement Populaire* (UMP) Party. Once elected, Ben Abbes succeeds in lowering France's chronically high unemployment rate, which reduces criminality, and expands the European Union to the Mediterranean basin through peaceful accords, all the while maintaining under his control radical elements within his Muslim Fraternity Party. Houellebecq dismissed the contention that this story line would give impetus to the National Front and its anti-immigrant, anti-European Union platform, by rejecting the notion that a book could change the course of history.

Remarkably, on the eve of his book's launch, Houellebecq, France's best-selling and most internationally read contemporary author, was compelled to defend his professional freedom as a writer by arguing that his novel's Muslim hero—fully integrated and electorally elevated to the highest office in France—would have no impact, positive or negative, on the country's future, only to learn hours afterward of the jihadist attacks and of the death of his good friend, the economist Bernard Maris, who was on the *Charlie Hebdo* writing staff and among the victims. In mourning, Houellebecq cancelled scheduled promotional events and proclaimed solidarity with the paper, stating,

“Je suis Charlie.” Then this conservative, self-proclaimed agnostic atheist, the author of a story exploring religion’s draw, so powerful that, in the world of his novel at least, it eclipses France’s staunch proponents of the secular state and educational system, left a France he described as decidedly right-leaning for a kind of spiritual retreat. The real danger in his book, as he had revealed to the public and his critics prior to the attack, was captured in the pages preceding the election of Ben Abbes, when Marine Le Pen’s victory appeared all but certain and unidentified masked gunmen were storming polling places to steal the ballot boxes and put an end to the vote. How had this message been lost? In Houellebecq’s admonishment, he pointed to a potentially grave consequence of the primacy of pluralism over freedom of expression, that is, intellectual laziness, the charge Columbia University political scientist and historian Mark Lilla had leveled against Todd’s influential essay and critique of the #JeSuisCharlie movement, *Qui est Charlie?*²⁶

The phenomenon is far from new, however, and the charge of lazy thinking to be considered carefully. Included in *Yale French Studies*’ 2010 issue, titled “Turns to the Right?”—with a French road sign on the cover and the caption, “Virage dangereux à droite. Signalisation de danger. Annonce d’un virage à droite à une distance de 150 m en rase campagne et 50 m en agglomération” (“Dangerous right-turn. Warning sign. Notice of a right-turn from 150m in open country and 50m in urban areas”)—one finds Douglas Morrey’s enlightening analysis of the subject of “sexual frustration” in Houellebecq’s oeuvre. Titled “Sex and the Single Male: Houellebecq, Feminism, and Hegemonic Masculinity,” the article examines Houellebecq’s thesis on the frustration of single men who find themselves marginalized in the social hierarchy of the post-1968 liberalized sexual marketplace. Morrey’s study

focuses on earlier works, but the description applies to *Soumission*’s protagonist, a specialist of the 19th-century French novelist Joris Karl Huysmans and middle-aged, melancholic, university professor named François.

The portrait of the university professor is of interest to us here. When Ben Abbes’s election seems imminent, François’s Jewish girlfriend Myriam, one of his former students, departs with her family for Israel, leaving him alone to face a bleak future of waning sexual performance and pleasureless sex with prostitutes. François initially takes the principled decision to take early retirement rather than follow new university policy and convert to Islam, which would allow him to continue working. He then rethinks his decision when invited back by the rector Robert Rediger, who offers him the added bonus of an arranged marriage. The salary would afford François three wives, he adds. This aspect of the new regime effectively resolves the need for sexual dominance as here articulated by Rediger in an attempt to persuade François.

Men are animals, all right; but . . . [what] ensures their dominant position in nature, . . . is truly their intelligence. So, I’ll tell you in all seriousness: there is nothing abnormal about professors being classified among dominant males. . . . In their natural state, of course, women, like men, are above all attracted by physical attributes; but you can, with an appropriate upbringing, succeed in convincing them that that is not what is most important. You can lead them to be attracted to rich men—and, after all, getting rich already requires more intelligence and cunning than the average. You can even, to a certain degree, impress on them the high erotic value of university professors...²⁷

The public effacement of women at first startles François, but then he is lulled as though into a dream. Although François envisions no promising future intellectual pursuits in his new state of submission, in

this case to Allah, a quiet serenity washes over him at the prospect of a “devoted” and “submissive” Muslim wife.¹⁸

Despite their sexual frustration, men, even marginalized men, profit from the systems portrayed in Houellebecq’s novels. Often at the expense of women, they gain power, money, and prestige, Morrey argues. He in particular takes issue with Houellebecq’s narrators’ animus toward feminism, which along with consumerism are among Houellebecq’s vexations. “On the contrary,” Morrey argues,

... it is feminism that allows us—that allows Houellebecq—to identify [society’s objectification of men and women in a process that determines their exchange value and right of access to bodies] in the first place, and to denounce it with such indignation. It is free-market capitalism—which feminism has always understood as playing an integral role in the patriarchal order—that has extended this situation to the whole of society such that men today are equally well-placed to feel its dehumanizing effects. In Houellebecq’s novels, beneath the resentment directed at women and the sulks and scowls of sex-starved men, there rumbles a subterranean howl of rage inspired by our consumer society.¹⁹

By underscoring the overlap between Houellebecq’s analysis and feminist theory, Morrey strives to waken Houellebecq’s readers—perhaps with the goal of alerting the author himself—to the danger of reacting strongly against -isms, such as feminism, to such a degree that they become susceptible to another -ism, in this case patriarchalism. This is undoubtedly the pitfall against which critics caution the supporters, readers, and editors of *Charlie Hebdo*. The central question, therefore, is the following: to what degree do satire and the burlesque unwittingly reproduce power hierarchies through their farcical play with belief systems and institutions? On the other hand, Houellebecq’s

biting portrait of the lazy French male intellectual, specialist of Huysmans and patriarchal opportunist, seems to undercut Morrey’s argument just as *Charlie Hebdo*’s editor Biard’s and writer El Razoui’s responses to their critics exposed the vacuousness of the latter’s claims and charge of moral depravity.

The aforementioned thoughts were the subject of an abstract I submitted to the same scholarly journal that had rejected my earlier article and was preparing a special issue focused on international responses to the *Charlie Hebdo* killings. I was eager to uncover in *Charlie Hebdo* how subversive discourse or populist political rhetoric becomes a pop culture vehicle for the active defense of democratic principles and specifically free expression, and conversely how its targeting of democracy’s would-be foes can lapse into hate speech. I spoke with one of the guest editors, who conveyed to me the importance of Todd’s essay *Qui est Charlie?* in her framing of the issue, attributing the outpouring of French republican pride and indignation not to the defense of democracy and free speech but to reactionaryism, grown from a residual traditionalist Catholicism, apprehensive toward Islam (despite there being thousands of Muslims, as well as Jews, Buddhists, and agnostic atheists in that diverse human outpouring of 3.5 million). Needless to say, my abstract was not selected. As I had been earlier with the controversial politician Fadela Amara, I found myself up against the formal problem of how to approach a thorny issue *à contre-courant*—whereas questioning the status quo is central to our work as researchers.

French Feminism and French Academe

French sociologist Nacira Guénif-Souillamas, a darling of American academe, particularly in French studies, had previously censured Amara as a “French feminist” in her work

Les Féministes et le Garçon arabe. She had charged Amara specifically with doing a disservice to Arab boys by adopting a French feminist framework in her defense of (“subaltern”) Muslim women in neighborhoods Amara claimed were under the control of radical political Islam. Guénif-Souilamas did not address the violence afflicting women, including gang rapes or immolation. She rebuked Amara for blowing it up into “generalized victimization” and failing to see rather “the aftereffects of colonial domination, which was also a domination of native women’s bodies.”²⁰ As Guénif-Souilamas argued in a subsequent essay, “The Inflated Ego,” by playing the role of victim, Amara was not only reinstating patriarchal power but also feeding the negative stereotype of violent Arab men and recklessly sensationalizing a societal problem, caused by the “inquisitorial,” “hegemonic, republican, universalist regime” in all its forms.²¹

Although Amara, the daughter of Muslim immigrants and a practicing Muslim, shares Guénif-Souilamas’s goal of emancipating both the Muslim woman and the homosexual Arab from patriarchal power structures, she fiercely defends French secularism as a means of liberation. As opposed to Guénif-Souilamas’s critique of the West’s market-based egotistical subjectivity, Amara demands the right to be visible and to live freely in one’s body. Additionally, she does not share Guénif-Souilamas’s biased view of the police as agents of violent escalation. Rather, Amara has expressed her firm support for a zero-tolerance police policy in high-crime areas: “The Republican order is emancipating. . . I consider one’s right to safety to be a fundamental right. It’s not because you’re poor that you don’t have a right to security and serenity.”²² Guénif-Souilamas, on the other hand, sees the Western-style individualism espoused by

Amara as the cause for “inflated egos,” which serve to maintain the “egalitarian fiction” of French society in which language, dress, and sex act as gate passes to the land of human rights from which the “deviant” are excluded.²³

Although directing her analytical acumen at dominant Western masculinity and violence, Guénif-Souilamas avoids engaging head-on with the phenomenon of jihadism in France. Rather, she dismisses cultural and political figures, including the police, in a manner that verges on the burlesque. As a result, her broad condemnation of racism in twenty-first-century secular French society, much like Houellebecq’s treatment of feminism, reduces her subjects to mere puppets, depriving her of valuable interlocutors who might alert her to her blind spots or to areas where her expertise could prove valuable, which is regrettable. Notably, her sociological approach could be applicable to Gilles Kepel’s compelling analysis of France’s political and social crisis in the face of Islamic radicalization, *Terreur dans l’Hexagone* (Gallimard, 2015). Kepel’s genealogy of the re-Islamicization of France’s third generation of immigrants since the 1980s identifies the 2005 youth riots in the outskirts of France’s largest cities and the tough police crackdown on communities with a high proportion of ethnic minorities as the events that “crystallized” a new political consciousness among this demographic. There is a nihilistic worldview, however, since these youths are not devout Muslims nor well-informed readers of the Koran. Guénif-Souilamas addresses male androgyny in traditional Arab culture and encourages young men to rediscover it. However, it seems to me that as a sociologist she could add something directly pertinent to this discussion rather than conclude her article on the “Inflated Ego” with a discussion of humor and irony as a “clandestine” refuge for the marginalized in France.

Conclusion: How To Bridge the Gap?

Overall, there is a reinvigorated interest in the genres of satire and the baroque, the Carnival spirit of Charlie Hebdo, as vehicles for free expression and subversion. Both *Charlie Hebdo* and *Soumission* made the disruptive power of these genres clear to me, not only by their beating the economic odds—what loan-strapped student in the twenty-first century would go to college to become a cartoon journalist or novelist?—but also with regard to power structures and victimization.²⁴ Although their heretical irreverence risks blinding them to their own excesses, their assertion of freedom is compelling. Yet, Guénif-Souilamas's basic point is valid: how can one give voice to voiceless victims or how can victims escape victimhood from structural oppression without victimizing a category of people identified with this power structure in return?

When looking to the young people in the U.S., I see and hear the same debates here over language, dress, sex, visibility, representation, and the option to unplug or, terrifyingly, drop out. I also recall Houellebecq's observation that religion is making a political comeback. People, feeling

overwhelmed and marginalized in this hypertechnological world of incomprehensible algorithms dictating to whom and to what we are exposed, marketed, and sold, are seeking more than visual stimuli or material comforts to fill the void that can only be satisfied with human thought, philosophy or religion. Honesty, or at least authenticity, humor, holding the powerful to account, all conducive to dialogue, seem to be common denominators to their needs. When we look at the news or turn to our screens, we confront a dangerous world, which can be scary but also a call to make connections that we might otherwise not make. In such circumstances, it seems essential that the message not get lost or be misconstrued—a matter of personal responsibility, yes, but also a challenge when we do not master the codes, know the rules, find an open ear, or see the humor of inside jokes. When on the outside looking in or on the inside looking out, our frustration or misunderstanding growing due to the gap, we have a choice. How we choose to bridge that gap is a test of ourselves and of society. These are the lessons that these cartoonists who died for a drawing bring home to me. ■

Endnotes

- 1 See Saïd Benmouffok, "Ai-je le droit de critiquer 'Charlie'?", *Libération*, 28 May 2018, http://www.liberation.fr/debats/2018/05/28/ai-je-le-droit-de-critiquer-charlie_1654792. Accessed 12 June 2018.
- 2 See 2015 PEN Literary Gala: Alain Mabanckou, Dominique Sopo, Gérard Biard, and Jean-Baptiste Thoret, *Pen America: The Freedom to Write*, 12 May 2015, <https://pen.org/2015-pen-literary-gala-alain-mabanckou-dominique-sopo-gerard-biard-and-jean-baptiste-thoret2/>. Accessed 1 December 2019.
- 3 "PEN Receives Letter From Members About Charlie Hebdo Award," *PEN America: The Freedom to Write*, 5 May 2015, <https://pen.org/pen-receives-letter-from-members-about-charlie-hebdo-award/>. Accessed 1 December 2019.
- 4 Adam Gopnik. Foreward. *Open Letter: On Blasphemy, Islamophobia, and the True Enemies of Free Expression*. by Charb. Little, Brown and Company, 2016, p. xiii.
- 5 Bret Stevens, "Trump and the Annihilation of Shame: Charles van Doren's Death Marks the End of an Era," *The New York Times*, 12 April 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/12/opinion/charles-van-doren-trump.html>. Accessed 1 December 2019.
- 6 See Samantha Schmidt. "Berkeley Student Newspaper Apologizes for Cartoon Depicting Alan Dershowitz Stomping a Palestinian." *The Washington Post*, 27 October 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/10/27/berkeley-student-newspaper-apologizes-for-cartoon-depicting-alan-dershowitz-stomping-a-palestinian/?utm_term=.04c6494a4274. Accessed 4 January 2019. See also David R. Wheeler. "The Plot Against Student Newspapers? At many colleges budding journalists and their advisers are still fighting for freedom of speech." *The Atlantic*, 30 September 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/09/the-plot-against-student-newspapers/408106/>. Accessed 4 January 2019.
- 7 See works written by Erik Bleich, such as *The Freedom to be Racist? How the United States and Europe Struggle to Preserve Freedom and Combat Racism* (Oxford UP, 2011) and *Race Politics in Britain and France: Ideas and Policymaking since the 1960s* (Cambridge UP, 2003).
- 8 David Brooks. "I am not Charlie Hebdo." *New York Times*, 8 January 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/09/opinion/david-brooks-i-am-not-charlie-hebdo.html?_r=0. Accessed 7 January 2016.
- 9 See Harvard libraries for a link to the Charlie Archive: "The Charlie Archive Documents a Global Response." <<http://library.harvard.edu/10262015-1514/charlie-archive-documents-global-response>>. Accessed March 16, 2017.

- 10 Judith Shulevitz, “In College and Hiding From Scary Ideas.” *New York Times* (March 22, 2015) <<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/22/opinion/sunday/judith-shulevitz-hiding-from-scary-ideas.html>>. Accessed March 15, 2017.
- 11 Some college campuses (e.g., Berkeley) have written into their campus speaker-event or access to campus facilities policy security costs determined in a “viewpoint-neutral” manner.
- 12 Jytte Klausen. *The Cartoons That Shook the World*. Yale UP, 2009, p. 22.
- 13 All translations from the original French are my own.
- 14 In the June 17, 2012 legislative elections and for the first time ever, five candidates elected to the French National Assembly were of Maghrebi origin: Kader Arif (Haute-Garonne), Malek Boutih (Essonne), Kheira Bouzine (Côte-d’Or), Chaynesse Khirouni (Meurte-et-Moselle) et Razzi Hammadi (Seine-Saint-Denis), all from the Socialist Party.
- 15 Michel Houellebecq. Interview by David Poujadas (journalist), Malek Chebel, Michela Marzano, and Alain Jakubowicz. *France 2 Journal télévisé*, 6 January 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8E-lkVp8oHY>. Accessed 25 January 2019. See also Houellebecq’s interview with Patrick Cohen, “Le 7/9.” *France Inter*, 7 January 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=05ttzXGKbSY>. Accessed 25 January 2019.
- 16 Mark Lilla. “How the French Face Terrorism.” *The New York Times Book Review*, 24 March 2016, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2016/03/24/how-the-french-face-terror/>. Accessed 25 January 2019.
- 17 Michel Houellebecq. *Soumission*. Flammarion, 2015, pp. 292, 294.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 297.
- 19 Douglas Morrey. “Sex and the Single Male: Houellebecq, Feminism, and Hegemonic Masculinity.” *Turns to the Right?*, special issue of *Yale French Studies*, edited by Michael A. Johnson and Lawrence R. Schehr, no. 116/117, 2009, p. 152.
- 20 Guénif-Souilamas. *Les Féministes et le Garçon arabe*, Aube, 2004, p. 86.
- 21 Nacira Guénif-Souilamas. “The Inflated Ego and New Games of Belonging.” *Turns to the Right?*, special issue of *Yale French Studies*, edited by Michael A. Johnson and Lawrence R. Schehr, no. 116/117, 2009, p. 115.
- 22 See “Fadela Amara Naulleau & Zemmour Ruquier.” Interview by Laurent Ruquier. *On n’est pas couché*. Dailymotion, 2 May 2010, <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/xd50q3>. Accessed 1 December 2019.
- 23 Guénif-Souilamas, *op. cit.*, 117.
- 24 Houellebecq did not go to university, nor did a number of the murdered *Charlie Hebdo* cartoonists.