

Are we Charlie?

An academic round-table followed by open debate
Friday 30 January 2015
University Place
The University of Manchester, UK

Podcast publically available here: <http://www.alc.manchester.ac.uk/abouttheschool/news/are-we-charlie/>

English translation of speech given in French by Olivier Cyran, Paris-based journalist, contributor to *Charlie Hebdo* (1992-2001).

Hello ! I'm really delighted to be here with you. The climate in France is so oppressive these days that being here in Manchester and at this university is like a deep breath of fresh air for me. Since I've been invited to speak to you about *Charlie Hebdo* and the consequences of the massacre committed against the magazine three weeks ago, I would like to start by clarifying a few points.

I have harshly criticised *Charlie Hebdo* in the past, as I will most likely also do so tonight. But I would like to emphasise that I was just as shocked by the attack as millions of other people in France were. Not just because I worked at the paper for nine years, from 1992 to 2001, and knew most of the journalists who were killed – I even counted some of them as friends a long time ago. But also because I grew up with *Charlie Hebdo*. That magazine forged my critical outlook when I was young, and I owe a part of what I am today to it.

One thing is important to bear in mind: the old *Charlie Hebdo*, as it was in the 1960s and 1970s, had invented a type of humour that hadn't existed before. A rampaging humour, the humour of a 'scoundrel' (*humour de voyou*) as its founder, François Cavanna, described it, a humour that respected nothing, that ridiculed social conventions and power, that attacked the army, the police, bosses, traditions, political parties, as well as religions, of course, meaning essentially the Catholic religion, which was and remains today the dominant religion in France.

It was a sort of punk humour, if you like. In England, you had the Clash and the Sex Pistols – in France, we had *Charlie Hebdo*.

This is why *Charlie Hebdo* has had a powerful influence on the formation of the political and cultural outlook of two or three generations of French people and it explains the sheer scale of the shock felt by many of us at the time of the attack. Part of us died too beneath the hail of Kalashnikov bullets on that accursed day on 7 January.

Very quickly, though, the shock and grief were submerged beneath the scarcely believable tidal-wave of national unity. This was a piece of tragic irony : what was formerly an anarchist publication, forged in the rejection of polite society, was now being hailed by the mass media and by a political class that was unanimous, from the far right to sections of the far left.

From one day to the next, *Charlie Hebdo* became a national totem. Madness took over: in order to

pay homage to a magazine that openly described itself as ‘stupid and nasty’ (*‘bête et méchant’*), the bells of Notre-Dame cathedral were rung out, flags were flown at half-mast in army barracks, calls for people to hold demonstrations were put out on the Interior Ministry website – the website of the national chief of police.

This sacred union took forms which were so unheard of that I’m still staggered by them as I speak to you now. Think about this : in homage to *Charlie Hebdo*, the deputies (MPs) in the French National Assembly all sang the *Marseillaise* (French national anthem) ! This hadn’t happened for a century. The last time that the deputies sang the national anthem was in 1914, at the beginning of the First World War, another crucial episode of sacred union in the history of the country.

As you are aware, the cult built up around *Charlie Hebdo* took on global proportions. Heads of state and government flew in from all around the world to join in the huge demonstration of 11 January. Among them were some characters who are not well known for their love of press freedom, such as Viktor Orban, the Hungarian prime minister, and his Israeli counterpart, Benjamin Netanyahu.

The slogan ‘Je suis Charlie’ turned into a worldwide marketing triumph. Everybody adopted it as their banner, from the staff of the American Federal Bank to the footballers of Bayern Munich, as well as Mr Universe himself, Arnold Schwarzenegger.

And so, as you may well suspect, such an ardent and unanimous celebration was not simply done in support of insolence and freedom of expression. It also put the seal on the ideological transformation undergone by a magazine that had in the last 10 or 15 years become one of the leading lights in promoting what one could call the ‘clash of civilisations’, French-style.

Here too, is a tragic irony : aside from the very real talent of the slaughtered cartoonists, France is celebrating a concept of national identity that, frankly, has nothing funny about it whatsoever. You know, when people talk about *Charlie Hebdo*, they generally think of the cartoons. These days, one is more or less officially required to find these drawings hilarious. I’m one of those people who take a less black-and-white view of this question : over the last ten years, I’ve had to explain why I find some of these drawings quite sickening, and in certain cases even racist.

But let’s leave the drawings to one side. After all, you can easily find examples on the Internet, and everyone can form their own opinion. There is, however, another, lesser-known aspect of the work of *Charlie Hebdo* which I would like to draw your attention to. I’m talking about the written journalism published in the magazine.

This is actually something that is often glossed over : *Charlie Hebdo* isn’t just funny cartoons, but is a serious piece of editorial production which seeks to offer a critical analysis of society. This textual content has played a far from negligible role in making French public opinion, and in particular the opinion of the French left, swing towards increasingly open hostility towards Islam and Muslims.

Following 11 September 2001, we have in fact witnessed in France the emergence of a version of the American ‘War on terror’ with something of a ‘French touch’. How has this been visible ? This may surprise you, but the issue around which this ideological reformulation has been carried out is the Islamic ‘veil’ (*le voile*). After the attacks of 11 September, the French political classes decided that girls wearing the hijab posed a grave threat to French society, and that they must either be forced to remove their headscarves, or excluded from school.

Yet studies commissioned by the government showed that the number of Muslim girls wearing the

hijab at school was not more than a few hundred – a minute proportion of the 12 million schoolchildren in France. But the political classes and the majority of the mass media decided to make this issue of the ‘veil’ (=hijab) at school the central focus of their manoeuvres, or (rather) their fantasies.

And so in 2004 a law was passed forbidding religious symbols in schools, a law with a somewhat hypocritical title, as it was clearly aimed against Muslims, or to be more precise Muslim girls. France had officially renounced the idea that school should be a space of tolerance and emancipation, and instead transformed it into a proscriptive place of clothing regulations and social exclusion. This was an important turning-point in the French mindset, as the passing of this law and the military-style declarations that accompanied it were relayed far and wide in the media, using a tone that was openly aggressive to France’s Muslims, who had no say whatsoever in the matter.

This was a long way from the spirit of secularism (*laïcité*) that had been introduced in 1905, when the aim had been to limit the political influence of the extremely powerful Catholic Church and ensure peaceful coexistence between believers and non-believers.

One might therefore have expected *Charlie Hebdo* to turn its provocative talents to lampooning this manipulation of minds. For it was pretty obvious, even for a dyed-in-the-wool anticlericalist, that the governing elites had found a useful scapegoat to deliver up to public opinion. But instead of mocking the powerful, *Charlie Hebdo* on the contrary set about ridiculing the weak, namely the poor kids in their hijabs, and launched a campaign in favour of the law.

It was in this context that, in 2005, *Charlie Hebdo* decided to publish the Danish cartoons, in particular the famous portrait of the prophet Mohammed with a bomb on his head – a drawing which had no other meaning than to equate Islam with terrorism.

Given France’s colonial history, and given the discrimination suffered by the Muslim population with its roots in the former French colonies, the decision to publish these cartoons constituted a very clear statement of (ideological) position, which was warmly applauded by all the country’s most reactionary intellectuals and journalists.

Charlie Hebdo defines itself as a left-wing magazine. Now, in France, the left is traditionally anti-racist. Up until this time, the theme of foreign, or Muslim, invasion had been the preserve of the right or the extreme right. By launching a campaign against Islam, presented as a danger to the Republic, *Charlie Hebdo* helped give legitimacy the obsessions dear to the hearts of the extreme right in the eyes of a left-wing, educated public.

This amplification of racist stereotypes through islamophobia caused enormous damage, the full consequences of which we have not yet seen. One of the most absurd, for example, is that today some charitable organisations, such as the *Restos du cœur*, which gives out free meals to people hit by the present crisis, are refusing to allow women wearing the hijab to volunteer for them. If you wear the ‘veil’ (=hijab), you’re not even allowed to serve soup to the poor, this is the message and this is also the position taken by *Charlie Hebdo*.

Here is another example of this ideological commitment. In 2008, a nursery in the Paris region, the *Baby-Loup* nursery, decided to dismiss an employee for wearing the hijab. This employee, Fatima Afif, had been working in the nursery for 16 years. She had always worn the hijab, without this ever posing the slightest problem to anyone. She was recognised as being perfectly competent and devoted to the children. But in the climate of unabashed islamophobia in France today, more and

more people are finding it unacceptable to leave their kids in the care of a ‘veiled’ woman. As if the sight of a headscarf would traumatise the little ones. As a result, Fatima was out of a job.

This story would become widely known, as the employee decided to fight for her rights. She made an official complaint, and won at her first tribunal, only to lose on appeal. The case went to the court of cassation, the highest court in the land. Today it is being considered by the European Court of Human Rights. As a result, the Baby-Loup nursery came to the attention of the media, leading to a deluge of irrational commentary. We have witnessed a real media barrage against the unfortunate Fatima Afif, who has become the symbol of the threat that Islam supposedly poses to republican values and secularism (*laïcité*).

And which publication is the most militant in its defence of the nursery and the most vehement in its attacks against the now unemployed worker ? *Charlie Hebdo* !

It is true, and this ought to be pointed out, that *Charlie Hebdo*’s highly media-savvy lawyer, Richard Malka, is also acting as counsel to the *Baby-loup* nursery. For the record, Richard Malka also acts as a lawyer for Dominique Strauss-Kahn, former boss of the International Monetary Fund, and for Clearstream, a powerful Luxembourg-based business bank. We really have come a long way from the joyfully rebellious *Charlie Hebdo* of the old days. Irreverent on the surface, it is now the conduit for a particular type of neo-conservatism tinged with state-sponsored racism. A respectable publication, then, at least as far as the ruling classes are concerned.

By saying these things, by pointing out *Charlie Hebdo*’s drift into islamophobia, one places oneself on the field of debate. One thus engages in the battle of ideas, which is a million miles away the din of gunfire. Criticising the way in which *Charlie Hebdo* has evolved has absolutely nothing to do with justifying the physical elimination of its editorial team, as I do hope you have understood.

But in the climate of patriotic bigotry that is rife in France today, the slightest dissenting voice is perceived as an act of blasphemy. Those few writers who, like myself, have pointed out *Charlie Hebdo*’s islamophobia these last few years are now finding themselves accused of being virtual accomplices of the terrorists.

When I’m dragged through the mud in the pages of *Marianne* (=a left-wing magazine) and *Le Point* (=right-wing weekly) alike on account of an article published more than a year ago, this doesn’t bother me much and I can defend myself. But other forms of intimidation are a far greater cause for concern.

At the same time as 4 million French people were marching in the streets to defend ‘freedom of expression’, this same freedom was the target of a two-pronged attack on a massive scale. On the one hand, in the media, and on television channels in particular, only one position is allowed to be expressed : the sanctification of *Charlie Hebdo* and, in parallel with this, the placing on trial of Muslims in general. The last three weeks have seen a proliferation of appalling declarations whose bellicose ignorance is only rivalled by their unbridled racism.

The media are the first part of the attack. The other comes from the authorities. In the first days following the shootings at *Charlie Hebdo*, a hail of criminal charges began to rain down on all sorts of people who had committed the crime of making provocative statements. Charges of ‘apology for terrorism’ (=publicly supporting terrorism) have seen dozens of people sent to prison, including people recognised as having learning difficulties or having spoken under the influence of alcohol.

Yet it is in schools that the reprisals have been most severe. Those pupils who have refused to participate in the minute's silence decreed in homage to *Charlie Hebdo* find themselves pilloried, denounced and sometimes arrested by the police, again on the aberrant charge of 'apology for terrorism'. In one case, a philosophy teacher has been prosecuted for having held a debate with his students rather than making them hold a minute's silence. In another, a fourteen-year-old child found himself handcuffed and dragged off to the police station for having said that *Charlie Hebdo* had got what was coming to them. A stupid statement, which should be dealt with in class, not at the police station.

But this collective hysteria shows no signs of wanting to stop. On the contrary, it is taking ever more unbelievable forms. Three days ago, an eight-year-old pupil at a primary school in Nice was denounced by the headteacher for having said 'I'm not Charlie, I'm with the terrorists.' An eight-year-old kid ! Why not prosecute an embryo which kicks its mother's tummy when it hears the name 'Charlie' ? Yet, when faced with the outcry following this arrest, the French Minister of Education was at pains to declare her support for the headteacher and to emphasise that he had done the right thing.

This national unity, which has declared war on a section of the population and at the same time legitimised racist discourse and practices, this is the national unity that *Charlie Hebdo*, that former anarchist rabble-rouser, has helped to construct. And, believe me, for a former reader and contributor to that magazine, this is not a pleasant thing to realise.