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Ozkirimli, Umut; Sofos, Spyros

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*Total number of authors:*  
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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117  
221 00 Lund  
+46 46-222 00 00



# #QuiSommesNous? A Socratic dialogue on “L’Affaire Charlie Hebdo”

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Umut Ozkirimli and Spyros A. Sofos

Freedoms are not unlimited but who, when and how can we limit them? Two colleagues agree to disagree.

*Content warning: graphic and potentially offensive imagery, including torture.*

**Umut** – This time it was different. I could not put a finger on how I felt on the morning of January 7, as I was refreshing my Twitter feed every ten seconds, hypnotized by the cold-blooded execution of Ahmed Merabet at the scene of the massacre. I was horrified of course, and angry like everybody else, at the perpetrators, at the structural conditions that have produced them, at the way in which religion had become a cloak for what was essentially a politically motivated act of barbarism. But there was more to it. I was also numbed by disbelief, a profound sense of desperation, even defeatism.

In a way, I felt like the Knight in Ingmar Bergman’s *The Seventh Seal*, seeking answers to existential questions about life and death. ‘How can we have faith in those who believe when we can’t have faith in ourselves?’ the Knight was asking, while playing chess with Death who had come to claim his life. ‘What is going to happen to those of us who want to believe but aren’t able to? And what is to become of those who neither want to nor are capable of believing?’

I felt uneasy with the slogan #JeSuisCharlie as well, but I sympathized with the millions who adopted it as a sign of solidarity with the victims. I know several others refused to use this slogan even as they unequivocally condemned the atrocities.<sup>[1]</sup> What was it that bothered you about it?

**Spyros** – A Twitter post encapsulated some of my objections better than a thousand words. It said: ‘I am not Charlie, I am Ahmed, the dead cop. Charlie ridiculed my faith and culture and I died defending his right to do so’.

Despite claims to inclusiveness #JeSuisCharlie seemed to me from the first moment divisive and alienating. To use the Ahmed parable, because I think it serves as a parable, hundreds of thousands of people have to go through the daily ridicule, the suspicion, the scrutiny that confirms their ‘Otherness’ throughout Europe.

*Charlie Hebdo*, *Jyllands Posten*, the racist broadcasts of the late Theo van Gogh: you see, there is a tradition of systematic abuse of the values that hold European Muslim communities together that is not the progenitor of our tradition of freedom as it is enshrined in our constitutions and the ways we practice it.

They originate in Libertine and Libertarian traditions and the highly atomized views of society which, I would hazard to guess, made inroads into European Nazism before they drowned in its extreme collectivism and leadership cult. We cannot uncritically accept these traditions as representing hard-won freedoms such as the freedom of expression.

Let me bring a telling example to bear on this: on the night of the murderous attack at the *Charlie Hebdo* offices, the UK Channel 4 news reported from La Place de la République where thousands of people stayed up late to protest against the brutal massacre. The square was packed; banners and posters featuring #JeSuisCharlie were everywhere and, later on, the same hashtag was projected onto the statue of the Republic in the centre of the square, superimposed over the crowd that had gathered. Matthieu Ecoiffier, journalist with the French newspaper *Libération*, talking to Channel 4, was shocked, surprised that *Charlie Hebdo* could have caused offence. He mentioned the ‘innocent’ cover of the magazine issue with the title *Charia Hebdo* and a cartoon depicting ‘Muhammad with a red nose saying that humour and Islam are after all compatible’.

In moments like this, collective amnesia can paralyze our critical reflexes and lure us into the vortex of a false sense of superiority and self-righteousness. The journalist, like many others who addressed these television audiences, has been instrumental in cultivating a collective amnesia by leaving out some ugly details and focusing on the innocence of the humour that *Charlie Hebdo* professed to be serving.



I will not refer to the many caricatures of Muhammad that may have been considered offensive by Muslims but I will briefly discuss a particular instance that I found extremely revealing of the insensitivity and aggressiveness of the magazine editorial team’s satire.

In a 2012 issue of *Charlie Hebdo*, there is another depiction of Muhammad, on the back cover, not with a red nose this time but with a star (on/in his rectum). In it, he is depicted naked, kneeling and leaning on his elbows. His posture can be construed in many ways and I will not enter here into a detailed discussion of the possibilities of interpretation.

I will, however, point out a similarity, possibly accidental, but nevertheless quite telling. When I first saw this caricature, my mind flew to the 2003-4 photographs that came out of Abu Ghraib prison, in particular the naked brutalized bodies of Iraqi prisoners.

Abu Ghraib. Wikimedia/Public domain.

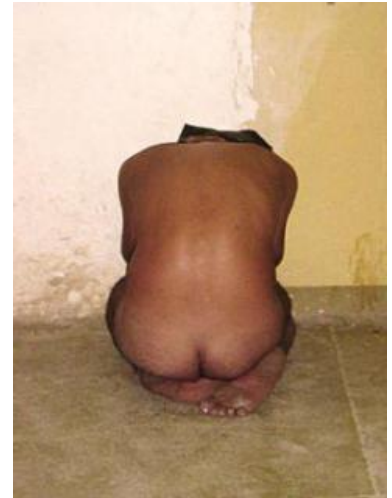
Their nakedness had acquired a metaphoric significance: there lay the bodies of people stripped not only physically but also, and perhaps more importantly, in terms of their dignity and their rights. Some of them were forced to adopt postures similar to that of the caricature. Nakedness in these instances denoted/symbolized aporia, vulnerability.

It is hard not to see some affinity between the systematic depiction of the naked prophet (literally undressed by the caricaturists) and the piles of naked bodies tortured in Abu Ghraib, at least the possible subconscious connections. 'The Prophet' is naked, forced to bear all to the magazine's giggling readers, to adopt the same posture of the 'poor naked wretches' of Abu Ghraib.

In the eyes of many Muslims in Europe the target of such 'humour' is themselves and their communities, their difference, the perceived belatedness of their cultures and values – that is what they have been divulging during our research for our book, *Islam in Europe*, and that is what they keep telling us.[2]

Even non-religious 'Muslims' perceive such instances as attempts to alienate, exclude, minoritize and racialize. They take them personally, insofar as they constitute daily referenda on the continued questioning of their status in the societies which many of these people have known as their only home. Incidentally, the treatment of the Abu Ghraib detainees has often been raised by young European Muslims as something they took as a personal affront, as something that troubled them deeply.

We cannot and should not become modern lotus-eaters, content with our assumed superiority while we condone and participate in the systematic denigration of hundreds of thousands, or millions of our fellow citizens by continuously asserting the 'barbaric' character of their cultures. We need to understand that our freedom of expression ends when it threatens fellow citizens with physical and cultural elimination. The murderers of last Friday are after all rightly condemned for attempting exactly this: killing both the human beings and the cultural institution, the magazine.



Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom - Pier Paolo Pasolini

I know, this is turning into a monologue but a final point. Upon reflection, in both Abu Ghraib photos and several of the naked Muhammad drawings *Charlie Hebdo* hosted in its pages, one can discern the aftertaste of Marquis de Sade's *120 Days of Sodom* and, more importantly, the sinister biopolitics of the book's filmic rendition in Pasolini's *Salò o 120 Giornate di Sodoma*.

I would argue that it is this instrumentalization of the bodies of 'the wretched' and the desire to exercise absolute power over the body of the 'Other' examined by de Sade and Pasolini that we see in the European Libertine and Libertarian traditions and that have inspired *Charlie Hebdo's* approach to Muhammad (as well as those of Fortyn, Van Gogh and many others').

Although the torturers of Abu Ghraib are unlikely to have seen Pasolini's film or read Sade, I am quite certain that Coco who drew Mohammad with a star had. And more, importantly, Coco and the other slain caricaturists of *Charlie Hebdo* were probably aware of the effect of repeatedly depicting a religious symbol naked, in sexualized contexts. His systematic stripping and denigration has sought to alienate France's Muslim citizens as long as they remained reluctant to succumb to the dominant expectation to leave their cultural baggage outside of the public sphere, to be subjected to what effectively amounts to their dissection in cultural terms in order to benefit from the vague and highly conditional promise of eventual inclusion as equals.

**Umut** – I understand your points, and find the Abu Ghraib analogy and your allusions to Sade and Pasolini quite telling – in fact, a bit chilling. Still, I think your narrative depicts only one side of the picture, and this is what I meant when I said, at the outset, that 'this time it is different'. This certainly has a personal aspect; I would not have taken issue with your account, say, five years ago. But today I feel that it is incomplete.

Let me try to explain. First, while it is true that your arguments make perfect sense in the context of European Muslims, i.e. where they represent an 'emasculated' minority, I am not sure the extent to which we can extricate *L'Affaire Charlie Hebdo* from the broader global context, marked by, among other things, the sensational failure of Arab revolutions, the rise of the notorious Islamic State, the European economic crisis and the concomitant rise in several countries of anti-immigrant feelings and the parties which claim to represent these grievances.

Now, I am aware that some of these developments contribute to the marginalization of European Muslims as well, hence there is no simple causality at work here. But, and this is my second point, Muslims are not a minority everywhere, and the experimentation of post-revolutionary regimes with democracy and freedom has not been terribly encouraging. Take the case of Turkey, the country I was born and raised in, which was hailed as a successful 'model' to the Middle East and North Africa region in the wake of the 2011 revolutions. Much ink has been spilled in the last two years to document the authoritarian tendencies of the AKP regime, so I am not going to dwell on these; in any case, this is not my main point. What I find more troubling than the regime's vicissitudes is the reaction of a substantial number of pious Muslims in Turkey (or at least who present themselves as such) to the *Charlie Hebdo* killings. Hence *Türkiye*, a 'relatively moderate' Islamist newspaper, broke the news of the attack with a tweet which read 'An attack on the magazine which insulted our Prophet'; a troll account associated with the AKP, Gizli Arşiv (@GizliArsiv), openly threatened *Charlie Hebdo's* sister magazine *Leman* which it claimed insulted President Erdoğan, asking them to take a lesson from this attack; a columnist in the notoriously anti-semitic and unabashedly racist *Yeni Akit*, Ali Karahasanoğlu, wrote 'Do not expect me to condemn the attacks in France'. Even more 'liberal' figures – including by the way the Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Çavuşoğlu – resorted to conventional clichés, e.g. 'this is not real Islam', 'this is a natural result of racism and Islamophobia', preferring to shift the blame onto 'the West' and their domestic 'secular' stooges.

My question is, and this is not only a question to you, but also to myself, 'haven't we gone too far'? Can't we criticize 'really existing' political Islam without being branded as 'Islamophobic'? When Anders Breivik committed the twin attacks of Oslo and Utøya, we did not ask the Norwegians to apologize on behalf of him, yes - many did, by the way, as most people do in the case of Muslims - but we did not try to 'understand' his motives either; we did not say 'this is not real conservatism' or 'this is the natural result of anomie and atomization', and so on.

In other words, we did not cut him some slack because of his convictions. Why are we so reluctant to criticize religion, and here I say religion deliberately since the issue is not only Islam? Why has *Charlie Hebdo* been sued 13 times by Catholic organizations and only once by a Muslim one (until 2011)?<sup>[3]</sup>

You may of course retort by pointing, again, to the subordinate status of Muslims, their systemic inequalities which render them voiceless, etc. But as I have noted above, Muslims are not a minority everywhere. And in fact, the *fatwa* to kill Salman Rushdie was issued by the leader of a powerful state, an Islamic republic indeed, not some esoteric imam in a remote French village. Was it so difficult for an oil rich regime to hire the most expensive lawyers and sue *Charlie Hebdo* for example, irrespective of the outcomes of the process?

I am aware that these questions would make me 'blasphemous' in the eyes of a political correctness-loving (liberal) Left, but as 'one of them', I believe it is time to raise these questions, to engage in some soul-searching, rather than hiding behind the abstract principle of freedom of expression, which in this case should extend to my freedom to ask these questions as well. Am I wrong?

**Spyros** – Undoubtedly such questions have to be asked. I cannot but notice a problematic element in your discourse though: you (as most of us) attribute crimes such as the one we are discussing to a religion and, by extension, to the people associated with it, but you do not do so in the case of Breivik. In fact the courts recognised Breivik's individual agency, his responsibility for acting on the basis of his own rationalization of the situation.

In the case of 'Muslim' perpetrators of violent acts, we tend to adopt a preference towards collective responsibility. By doing so, we also reify and homogenize Muslim cultures. We see in every Muslim an Ayatollah Khomeini or a jihadi – rarely do we recognise an Ahmed Merabet who understood Islam in a markedly different way from that of the Kouachi brothers.

Many Muslims tend to accept they are part of the European societies they live in often despite the obstacles to their integration on the grounds of their religion and provenance; others see in Islam a language of articulation of grievance and of protest and – I need to be clear here – by protest I am not referring to the heinous murders we are discussing. I would go even further: a not negligible minority of 'Muslims' (even secular ones) respond to their perceived marginalization and racialization by others, by mobilizing Islam as an 'ethnic' as well as a religious label. For many young Muslims I talk to, cartoons, pig heads in front of mosques, slanderous graffiti are seen as part and parcel of racist violence, not religious offence.

We tend to homogenize these diverse groups and diverse modes of interaction of Muslims with the broader societies they are part of and we tend to apply the principle of collective responsibility and punishment to them. This is clearly against any notion of *égalité* to mention the term flashing on our television screens these days.

Regarding the issue of freedom of expression, this is obviously a conceptual and practical minefield. Freedoms are not unlimited but who, when and how we can limit them is a question that we need to explore very carefully and sensitively. A lot has to do with acquiring a civic consciousness. Understanding where my freedom ends ultimately constitutes my responsibility – this is not a novel concept; it originates in traditions of liberalism that have been long established. *Charlie Hebdo* itself had in the past accepted that unfettered freedom might cause harm when its previous editor, Philippe Val, asked cartoonist Sine to issue a public apology, and when that failed, sacked him, when in 2008 he faced charges of 'inciting racial hatred' for a column he wrote in the magazine regarding president Sarkozy's son's wedding to a Jewish heiress.

We definitely need better civic education that ensures we do not discriminate against some citizens and we definitely need to develop 'institutions of hearing' as Alberto Melucci suggested, institutions where vulnerable, minoritized citizens can articulate voice and feel included and empowered.

What we need most is the revitalization of our political cultures, not new enforcement institutions – our justice system should be able to

protect the dual values of freedom and coexistence. This is a debate we need to have but the current binary logic bundles together our achievements and excesses in the face of Islamic fundamentalism and has the danger of further minoritizing our Muslim fellow citizens.

**Umut** – First, to correct a misunderstanding, I was not attributing crimes to religion (or to a collectivity), but problematizing, in a deliberately provocative way, the lack of criticism on the part of liberals or the Left of religion, or any form of communitarianism for fear of falling into the trap of political incorrectness. But let's leave this for now. I am more interested to know your views on the future. Where do we go from here? There is the issue of surveillance which will probably come to the forefront of public debate again. Then there is the issue of struggle against anti-racism, discrimination and bigotry, of all hues, minority or majority...

**Spyros** – Our societies are societies of surveillance and the issue of Islamic fundamentalism has played a central role in creating this type of Panopticon society where specific segments of the population are treated with suspicion and are subjected to constant scrutiny. I cannot argue that surveillance is redundant, although I am very uncomfortable with the idea – both Islamist terrorism and the Oslo-Utøya massacres indicate that this is impractical.

Islamic fundamentalist violence (in fact, any type of violence) cannot be eradicated but it can become a non-option for the majority of the population if we provide opportunities for voice and hearing. I think that part of the solution is better understanding of 'the standpoint of the collective other' as Iris Marion Young has put it. We need to build, all of us together, more spaces for interaction and inclusion between relative strangers as this is what we have sadly become.

It is important to note that contrary to the views of the extreme right and those in its sphere of influence, adaptation is not capitulation. Democracies cannot be based on reified notions of the national interest – we have a long tradition of adaptation and flexibility that has culminated in the incorporation of the working class, women and other 'minorities' into the European body politic. We just need to find ways to rejuvenate these capacities.

As for the struggle against racism, I think we are at a crucial juncture. We are facing a multiple crisis. As you have pointed out earlier, our faltering economies, the aggressiveness of Muslim militant fundamentalism – these are seen as the major facts that have lured European electorates to political parties that unashamedly revive some of the worst facets of our totalitarian past. We perceive this crisis as an economic one, or a (Muslim) immigration and a security one. But, more importantly, this is a crisis of democratic deficit, the product of our inability to live with each other and to respect each other. The attack on *Charlie Hebdo*, the arsons against mosques in many European countries, the Pegida rallies, the rise of the spectre of Nazism in Europe tell me this is the moment we need activism, we need to regain lost audiences and to reconnect with those who are becoming more and more marginalized. It is a moral, political and practical imperative.

**Umut** – I am not as optimistic as you are. For one, and I apologize for bringing this up again, I started to have serious doubts as to the willingness of Muslim populations, where they constitute a majority, to listen to 'the standpoint of the collective other'. Maybe my experience of activism in and on Turkey is clouding my judgement here, but I am concerned with the 'democracy deficit' in Muslim majority countries as well. It is as if there is tacit collusion between right wing regimes, radical or mainstream, Muslim or non-Muslim, everywhere when it comes to basic rights and freedoms. A vicious circle of racism, Islamophobia and fundamentalism, intermeshed, feeding each other into a spree of violence, physical or symbolic. Yes, there is a moral and political imperative to fight against the forces which represent the worst of humanity. But on a more practical level, our task has never been harder.

This reminds me of Bergman again. In one of his rare interviews, he talks about his personal demons which he claims are behind his most famous films. The trick, he says, is to create some beauty out of the ugliness, and adds: 'Lilies often grow out of carcasses' arseholes'. This may be a fitting image of our struggle, don't you think?

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[1] <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/09/opinion/david-brooks-i-am-not-charlie-hebdo.html>;  
[http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/politics/2015/01/charlie\\_hebdo\\_the\\_french\\_satirical\\_magazine\\_is\\_heroic\\_it\\_is\\_also\\_racist.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2015/01/charlie_hebdo_the_french_satirical_magazine_is_heroic_it_is_also_racist.html).

[2] [http://www.palgrave.com/page/detail/?sf1=id\\_product&st1=695605](http://www.palgrave.com/page/detail/?sf1=id_product&st1=695605)

[3] <http://qz.com/322550/charlie-hebdo-has-had-more-legal-run-ins-with-christians-than-with-muslims/>