

There Aren't Any Moderate Muslims in France

Written by Joel Vessels

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JOEL VESSELS, FEB 2 2015

At the risk of fanning the prejudice of those who only read headlines, I have taken the title of this post from an interview given by Stéphane Charbonnier – better known as “Charb” – the recently killed editor-in-chief of the French illustrated, satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo* (CH). The assertion, one that seems ripe for right-wing appropriation, is only a small part of a longer statement made in an interview that Charb gave at the end of 2011 in the midst of his public support for the Théâtre du Rond Point. At the time, the respected, avant-garde theater was facing demonstrations by “Catholic fundamentalists” during its production of Argentine playwright Rodrigo García’s *Golgotha Picnic*. In his support for the theatre, it is obvious that Charb is also responding to the recent firebombing of his journal’s offices following CH’s publication of a cartoon depicting the Prophet Muhammad.

I’m frustrated by the growing concern regarding moderate Muslims’ lack of engagement. . . . There are no moderate Muslims in France, there are no Muslims at all. . . . they are citizens. And as citizens, they do react, as they buy *Charlie Hebdo*, as they demonstrate with us and vote against these right wing assholes. What pisses me off is that they’re always called out as moderate Muslims.

This was not merely what passes as the French version of political correctness; this was an expression of radical republicanism that is quintessentially French. Absolutely nothing is to interrupt the relationship between *l’État* and *le citoyen*.

Alongside all the chatter of free speech and debate over whether the freedom *to do* something means one *should do* that thing, or even the critiques that CH was a bunch of white guys ‘punching down’, we should also consider not just Charb’s – and CH’s – political culture but the importance of critical cartoons in the history of modern France. After all, CH is hardly *sui generis* even if it is the most infamous example of a satirical illustrated press in the republic.

There’s a Swiss maxim that insists that if firearms are instruments of power, in a democracy they belong in the hands of the people. In Republican France the sentiment is similar, but the instrument of power is caricature. Relevant examples from the first half of the 18th century include Charles Philippon’s ribald depiction of the heavily-jowled King Louis Philippe as an overripe pear (*la poire* being slang for “fathead”) and Honore Daumier’s depiction of him as a grotesque Gargantua eating the food of the poor and shitting honorifics for the wealthy in the 1830s. Towards the end of century, commentators from both sides of *l’Affaire Dreyfus* made use of the most virulent caricatured stereotypes, taking sides in what was nearly civil war in the fragile Third Republic. Consequently, anything – person, practice, or institution – that was seen to be threatening the political place of the citizen within the republican firmament of the nation was subjected to the most savage rebuke. Caricatures were used not so much to “punch down” but to “punch up” and “out.” Famed caricaturist Charles Philippon, a frequent target of governmental censorship who was often charged with the crime of *Lèse-majesté*, suggested that the crown showed its weakness in fighting with a cartoon. However Philippon also valued the chance that such legal cases provided to France by allowing society ‘to excavate the ridiculous and make a justice of it’. This sentiment was reinforced at the start of the 20th century in the pages of another activist journal *L’Assiette au Beurre* which declared ‘How could one better [criticize abusive power] than by the drawing, which engraves an idea with an energy that the effort of the most powerful writer can never achieve?’

L’Assiette au Beurre likely is the most immediate ancestor of CH. In its pages the journal lampooned and challenged everything from foppish dandies to workplace safety; it targeted the moral compromises of colonialism and the

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devastating brutality of imperial warfare; and yes, even the venal economics of religion. It is in this long, substantive, critical, and controversial history that *CH* must be situated.

The illustrated political press has often played the role of public conscience (and sometime subconscious) in Republican France, raising and confronting important concerns in both domestic and international politics, lashing out at social injustice, and parodying public idiocy. This was the legacy of *CH* which found its real purchase in the early 1990s risibly critiquing the United States' first Gulf War and, later in the decade, directly challenging the electoral successes of Jean-Marie Le Pen's far-right National Front. In doing so *CH* was sounding the call of radical republicanism, the defining characteristic of French political rhetoric since the Third Republic. Returning to the thought that opened this piece, this mode of republicanism privileges nothing more than the rights and responsibilities of the individual citizen. The citizen is the political unit of measure and anything that interferes challenges the foundation of the Republic itself. This may sound grandiose, but in broad strokes it is the fact of the matter, and as we are all well aware the modality of *CH* is nothing if not broad strokes. The question that remains however is whether the deep assimilationist model of French citizenship itself is still possible in world defined by transnational flows of people, money, ideas, and media.

That is for later perhaps. For now, *Je suis Charlie*.

*A last note, this weekend is the annual BD festival in Angoulême and as I finished this I discovered that a special 'Grand Prix du Festival d'Angoulême' was awarded to *Charlie Hebdo* 'in homage to the artists killed and their necessary fight for freedom of expression, so that the work by all those who have contributed to this essential publication . . . will live on in our memories'.

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