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Charlie Hebdo and Hyper Cacher

After the attacks on Charlie Hebdo and the Hyper Cacher Jewish supermarket: thinking through the new and rethinking the old

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- Debate - Paris, Brussels, responding to the attacks -

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We should start with a worrying observation.

Heads of state understood the importance of the events of January. Representatives of “democracies” and dictatorships alike, they came to Paris and locked arms together to show solidarity “at the highest levels”. A spectacular gesture if ever there was one!

On the other hand, a significant segment of the radical Left thought it was just business as usual. To be sure, some organizations published declarations of solidarity (and deserve genuine thanks for this) as well as articles grappling with the significance of the events. But many others felt it was enough to score debating points, correct as they may have been (against cross-party national unity, for example); or had as their first concern the need to distance themselves from the victims (declaring “Je ne suis pas *Charlie*” [“I am not *Charlie*”] in flagrant disregard for the message intended by those saying “Je suis *Charlie*” [“I am *Charlie*”]); or, far worse, felt the urgent task was to assassinate morally those who had just been assassinated physically.

Soon after the events, I co-wrote an article with François Sabado in which we specifically sought to understand what was so unique about the event and its implications in relation to our tasks. [\[1\]](#) No doubt, much more needs to be said on that score, but I’d like the text that follows (and which deals in large measure with the state of radical-Left opinion) to be read in conjunction with the previous one to avoid pointless repetition.

The unique character of the event

I’ll be referring in particular to an interview with Gilbert Achcar, with which I agree on many points of analysis, but which also contains a number of surprising blind spots. The first of these has to do with the unique character of the event. Gilbert seeks to trivialize the whole affair. “The reaction [to the attacks] has been what anybody would expect. [...] These were quite similar reactions from appalled and frightened societies [the USA after 911 and France now] — and, of course, the crimes were appalling indeed. In both cases, the ruling class took advantage of the shock [...] There is nothing much original about all this. Instead, what is rather original is the way the discussion evolved later on.” [\[2\]](#)

Gilbert is quite right to point out [elsewhere in the same interview] that it is extremely exaggerated to place the *Charlie Hebdo* attack and the September 2001 destruction of the World Trade Center Twin Towers on the same footing. And yet millions of people spontaneously took to the streets following the French events, unlike what happened following previous no less atrocious attacks, such as the murder of children in front of a Jewish school in Toulouse.

So, as far as the “national context” is concerned, the reaction to the January crimes is certainly not trivial and merits specific attention. Of course, there is something unpredictable and elusive about such a unique event. How to know which straw will break the camel’s back? Let me nonetheless suggest a handful of hypothetical answers. One feature of the attack was that it appeared to have been carried out by a trained military commando, and not by a “lone wolf” — evoking a planned action, organized by one or more movements (an impression subsequently borne out). Then there was the nature of the gory “message”: a warning to the press (which journalists clearly felt and understood). Then, with the attack on the Hyper Cacher Jewish grocery store, the perception (also borne out subsequently) that there were multiple targets. And the backdrop of all this: the crisis in Iraq and Syria, the growth of the Islamic State (even if

the attack against *Charlie Hebdo* was ordered by Al-Qaida in Yemen). A general feeling that we have entered a new and more dangerous phase. On this point, at least, the comparison with 911 is probably valid, but only if we factor in what has happened over the past decade and half (in particular the hope and despair of the uprisings in the Arab world).

We have to take this context fully into account. It makes the second unique feature of the January events all the more remarkable, as François Sabado and I said in the opening of our co-authored piece. The mass demonstrations in France expressed open-ended solidarity, massive opposition to racism and to equating terrorism with Islam. In the current context, is this a trivial matter? I don't think so. Quite significantly, in a survey carried out 10 days after the massacre, the Ipsos polling agency found there had been a big decrease in "tensions regarding Islam":

"We have to distinguish between levels and trends. With respect to levels, there are still 47 percent of people in France who, when considering the way the Muslim religion is practised in France, believe that 'this religion is not compatible with the values of French society' which is quite a high level. With respect to the trends, though, this level is 10 points lower – and not higher – than what we observed one year ago. This is where we can see that there has not been an increase in distrust." [3]

Let's just say that the January events have given rise to two contradictory trends within the population. On the one hand, a clear rise in the number of racist and Islamophobic acts, but from a *minority* segment of French society. On the other, a rise in fraternal feeling among the *majority*. [4]

There is a third unique feature that should be highlighted: the solidarity expressed by a number of organizations representing immigrants to France (from North Africa in particular), and from organizations and individuals in a number of Arab and Middle Eastern countries, despite the vicious portrait that has been painted of *Charlie Hebdo*. In our earlier article, we spoke primarily of the feeling of alienation found among marginalized and precariously employed young people, because this is of paramount importance with respect to our responsibilities and tasks. I'd now like to focus on the solidarity that has been expressed. It is one feature of a contradictory state of affairs, but it is nonetheless revealing of what the main issues are for those who are in the clutches of fundamentalism or feel threatened by it. These same issues are also systematically obscured by those who seek to put *Charlie Hebdo* on trial – when it is not about taking "the French" more generally to task, a combat sport very much in vogue in the Anglo-American world.

It is indeed a commonplace when governments take advantage of such events to enact a new series of freedom-destroying measures and dress up imperialism with talk of human rights. And it works, too, because security measures receive widespread support. On the other hand, the visit "en masse" and in the heat of the events by heads of state and their representatives is not a commonplace. This surprising development was a function of the international context and its novel character, and was definitely not prompted by a desire to defend civil liberties or give a leg up to François Hollande. And this is the fourth unique feature of the January events. It confirms our need for collective thinking about the evolution of the world situation and its implications. [5]

There is of course much in common between what happened in France and in other countries reeling from a devastating attack. So why is it important to underscore the unique character of what happened? To do justice to the event and grasp its complexity. This helps deal with new developments and avoid merely repeating what we have been saying for years. It enables us to more effectively tackle the question of our tasks by avoiding simplistic explanations and one-size-fits-all judgements.

So I'll focus my thinking on what I see to be new and complicated, and regarding which I often don't have tried and tested answers.

Religious fundamentalism here and there

To a large extent, the Western radical Left is ill-equipped to fight against religious fundamentalism, for a number of reasons.

For many years now, sections of the Western radical Left, and not minor ones, have cast the strong rise of fundamentalism in the Muslim world in a very positive light – as a (more or less distorted) expression of anti-imperialism, whereas they are actually (as in other religions) reactionary and counter-revolutionary currents.

More broadly, a number of currents have adopted the detestable habit of only defending the victims of their “main enemy” (their government, their imperialism), without worrying about the victims of the “enemies of their enemies” – in this case, fundamentalist Islam. They do so in the name of exclusive “priorities” or, worse, on the basis that defending such victims amounts to an act of complicity with imperialism. We should note in passing that the same kind of reasoning can be applied to victims of a so-called “anti-imperialist” dictatorship such as the Assad regime in Syria.

What’s more, wrong conclusions have often been drawn on the basis of a correct observation: the condition of populations identified as Muslim is not the same “here at home” as it is in majority-Muslim countries. “Here at home” we of course have to fight racism, state Islamophobia, the racialization of social discrimination, and so forth. However, there is no impenetrable barrier between “over there” and “here at home”. Even as “minorities”, non-state actors are in a position to practise oppression against other minorities or within “their” own “community” – against women, for example.

Finally, in a large majority of cases, the Western Left is not rooted within precarious layers of the population, even though many solidarity initiatives are organized (including in France, whatever some may say) in support of undocumented immigrants, the homeless, and so on. As Gilbert Achcar points out, this is a worrying state of affairs, without being specific to France. “What is usually called the ‘radical Left’ [...] has a poor record on relating to people of immigrant origin. This is a major failure” – though, of course, you can find similar situations in most imperialist countries.” This considerably limits our ability to act (or even to be well-informed), at a time when these same precarious layers are occupying an increasingly crucial place in a number of our countries.

I don’t place an equal sign between “precarious layers” and people “of immigrant origin” (for how many generations is one “of” some “origin” or another?). Both categories are heterogeneous. But if we were better rooted in these social layers, the question of relations with the precarious segment of the immigrant and immigrant-offspring population would at least be partially settled.

The role of political Islam in power (Egypt), and of “radical” Islamisms against popular revolutions in the Arab world, has largely clarified the debate about whether these political-religious currents are progressive or not. As to the impenetrable barrier between over there and here at home, it is actually rather porous after all. That was to be expected (and sometimes it was). The observation is unassailable: Salafism, Wahhabism and other fundamentalisms (including evangelical fundamentalism among Christians) now have roots in Europe. We shouldn’t take this question lightly. These movements are enemies of progressives, but also of “non-compliant” Muslims (that is to say, the large majority). They have to be fought with and for Muslims, as part of our project of a society based on solidarity. We have to fight on many fronts at the same time: against anti-egalitarian and discriminatory policies, against Islamophobia and racism, and against the far-Right and religious fundamentalisms that, in France, have become or are once again dangerous political forces (including in their Christian variants).

We’re not prepared for this complex fight. We’re aware of some of the causes, but only some of them. To move

forward, we can't be satisfied with truisms (however valid they continue to be). We have to closely examine things we're not used to talking about, including things that are unexpected and surprising. Here are two examples.

We never tire of repeating the fact that imperialist wars (such as the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003) have created the fertile ground on which the Islamic State has prospered. Quite right, and we have to keep repeating this so that no one believes that imperialist war is the answer. But another cause are the policies pursued by ruling classes in the Muslim world. A recent issue of the NPA's French-language weekly *l'Anticapitaliste* takes up this question, but only with great trepidation. [6]

After all, fundamentalist movements aren't just reacting to the behaviour of imperialist powers. They have become players in their own right, with their own plans, their own histories and their own roots. It isn't their barbaric acts that should prompt us to address the question of religious fascism. When Farooq Tariq, for example, characterizes some of these movements as representing a new form of religious fascism, he does so on the basis of an assessment of the way their social base has evolved in Pakistan. [7] Is such an assessment open to debate? Of course, but it should at least be taken seriously, coming as it does from a country torn asunder by sectarian conflict.

The backdrop for religious fundamentalisms is evolving rapidly and past analyses, however relevant they may be, have to be brought up to date. The Islamic State, for example, is a recent development and may itself be undergoing rapid change. To be sure, none of the affected countries resemble the Europe of the inter-war period. Still, these movements fulfill functions (against the Arab revolutions, for example) comparable to those of European fascisms (against the workers movement). Some of these movements, in Pakistan at any rate, have built a real mass base within extremely reactionary segments of the educated middle classes [8], and also within "plebeian" layers through Koranic schools. Perhaps we should speak of fundamentalist political-religious movements of a fascist type. It's not that I want to come up with a one-size-fits-all term, but I feel there is a need to update our analysis of fundamentalisms (in the plural).

Which brings me to my second example. We (rightly) stress that it's not religion that lies at the origin of the radicalization of young French nationals going to Syria, but social despair, the daily experience of discrimination, injustice, and the well-known double standard. Religion is only a "vector" and not a "factor", to use Julien Salingue's terminology. [9] But once the "vector" has led to sectarian involvement in a fundamentalist current, the latter becomes a "factor" driving forward a social vision (which includes power over women and the dehumanization of the "other") and cloaking barbaric acts with religious justification, whatever the personal motivations may be. We have to hone in on socio-economic questions to deal with root causes, but this settles neither the political question (new far-Right formations) nor the uses to which religion is put.

And then there are facts that don't fit in to our traditional analytical approach "and that too, whether or not one believes this approach is valid. For example, what to make of the significant numbers of converts to Islam one finds among the French nationals joining fundamentalist movements? Or the involvement of teenagers from stable families and backgrounds, including from quiet towns in the countryside? There are also highly-skilled young people who would have no difficulty finding employment and yet have chosen to contribute their know-how to the Islamic State (hackers, for example), not to mention those who are taken in by calls for humanitarian assistance in Syria. Indeed, how is it that the usual methods of sects and cults of all sorts – which cut off the targeted individual from their usual environment – work so effectively? I think we would do well to study these questions further to enrich and broaden our understanding.

In France, the bulk of our writing is aimed at countering our leaders' hypocritical claims and the lies of the dominant ideology. This is correct and necessary. The problem, though, is that with such an approach we risk repeating what we already knew and going no further. We have unambiguously condemned the murders, but often without drawing explicit conclusions in terms of tasks. And yet we have to create much stronger ties than before between solidarity

with progressive currents facing fundamentalists (and dictatorial regimes) from Syria to Pakistan, on the one hand, and resistance in Europe to the powerful upsurge of these new far-Right political-religious forces. This is something we have to do in our program and in our methods, *with* Muslims and in *their* defense. Otherwise, we won't be providing convincing alternatives to the security agenda and will be yielding this terrain to our adversaries, the state and the "Western" far-Right.

Is Charlie Hebdo the problem?

In some activist circles in France and, especially, in the international blogosphere (particularly in the English language), the "problem" appears to be none other than *Charlie Hebdo* itself. So much so that some even neglect to condemn the murderers, or support the victims in the way a noose supports a hanged man. I have learned to despise the phrase "of course, murder can never be justified," invariably followed by a lethal "but...".

I've had a few e-mail exchanges with an Indian correspondent who, having tried to find what in recent issues of *Charlie Hebdo* had "provoked" the attack, was surprised not to find anything. There's a reason for this: there was no controversy surrounding *Charlie* at the time of the attack. The magazine had fallen back into relative obscurity and was struggling to make ends meet.

If *Charlie Hebdo* hadn't existed, the January attacks would have taken place nonetheless, because they were a response to the role played by the French state in the Middle East and Africa. This is why France was chosen rather than Denmark, country of origin of the notorious Muhammad caricatures. [\[10\]](#)

The political targets were the press, the police and Jews. There is no wanting for physical and symbolic targets. Demonized as it was, *Charlie Hebdo* was useful, but in no way indispensable. So it was in no way indispensable to in turn "judge" *Charlie* in order to analyze the nature and scope of the attacks, the nature of the organizations that ordered them and the ways in which the international context has changed. But just as much as there has been a profusion of writing about *Charlie Hebdo*, there has been a paucity of commentary on these questions.

The organizations that ordered or inspired the January attacks spend a great deal of their time massacring Muslims. They manipulate religious feelings as others manipulate national feelings and feelings of identity more broadly. We're not talking about a bar room brawl between one of *Charlie's* illustrators and a French youth of Arab background hurt by his drawings! We're talking about politically rational acts given the goals pursued by al-Qaeda in Yemen and the Islamic State (as for the rationality of the individual perpetrators of the attacks, I prefer to take a more prudent approach than Julien Salingue has). But the political rationality has not caught the attention of many commentators let alone prompted them to investigate the matter further.

"Suis-je *Charlie*?" ("Am I *Charlie*?") has become the top question agitating the blogosphere. And the question can indeed be the starting point for an interesting series of reflections – but only based on an understanding that the question can feed a dangerous misunderstanding when counterposed to the statement "Je suis *Charlie*"; if it leads to stating "Je ne suis pas *Charlie*" ("I am not *Charlie*"), or something along those lines.

"Je suis *Charlie*" never meant identifying with the real or supposed editorial line of *Charlie Hebdo*, but was simply a statement of human solidarity with the victims. A straightforward form of solidarity, with no "ifs, ands or buts", as is called for in such circumstances – and not a political statement. Counterposing "Je ne suis pas *Charlie*" to "Je suis *Charlie*" means beginning to measure out one's level of solidarity according to one's level of political agreement. I know that this isn't the intention of some who have used this fashionable tagline. However, among many others, a desire to minimize solidarity with the victims, to undermine their standing, or even to put them on trial, has been plain

to see. And this is a very serious matter.

There are certainly many legitimate debates to be had about creative freedom, press freedom, freedom of expression and the responsibility of creators, journalists and the man and woman on the street. The reasons why French youth of Arab background refuse to identify with *Charlie Hebdo* are clear and legitimate. But here we're talking about Left political organizations and individuals who, in the aftermath of the attacks, determined that it was more urgent to proclaim "Je ne suis pas *Charlie*" – or even to counterpose the statement "Nous sommes tous des musulmans" ("We are all Muslims") to "Je suis *Charlie*". [11] We are to understand, then, that the *real* victims weren't the ones felled by the assassins' bullets, but rather those who had supposedly been the object of the murder victims' derision, because *Charlie Hebdo* was an "ideological representation" of oppression. Richard Fidler (who, it goes without saying, condemns the act of murder) issues the following extraordinary warning: "Above all, we must not allow ourselves to make the same mistake made by the *Charlie Hebdo* assassins – identifying the source of their oppression with its ideological representation, not its material, class basis." Themselves oppressors of Muslims, the assassins didn't make any mistakes as far as selecting targets goes. Their targets were perfectly in keeping with the goals of fundamentalist movements.

The British SWP pushed things particularly far in this area. The Central Committee statement released following the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre is written from start to finish in such a way as to minimize the responsibility of the assassins, even if the attack is described as "wrong and completely unacceptable" and the killings as "horrific". Alongside imperialism, *Charlie Hebdo* comes off as a major guilty party due to its "provocative and racist attacks on Islam," adding for good measure that while "that does not justify the killings, but it is essential background." The only task of the hour is therefore to "unite against racism and Islamophobia". [12] It's easy to understand why the SWP would react in this way, given that it has to erase its tracks and blind readers to its own responsibilities. It was one of the main organizations of the radical Left to describe the rise of Islamic fundamentalism as the expression of a new anti-imperialism. And when women in Britain itself called on progressive forces to support them against the fundamentalist threat, the SWP made it nearly impossible for them to get a hearing on the Left.

Is *Charlie Hebdo* racist?

Charlie Hebdo is a magazine, not an organization. It is put out by a number of journalists with a fairly wide range of opinions. Parts of its history have been turbulent and questionable, such as the chapter that followed the 9/11 attacks under the editorship of Philippe Val. I have to confess that I have never been a reader of *Charlie Hebdo* or the *Canard enchaîné*, although I very much liked the work of the murder victims – especially of Cabu, Wolinsky, Charb and Tignous. Their drawings regularly appeared in Left-activist publications, such as *Rouge*, my own organization's newspaper for many years. Others have written about the history of *Charlie Hebdo* and its illustrators better than I could. [13]

Was *Charlie Hebdo* the ideal victim? Perhaps not, but why should it be? The accusations levied against *Charlie's* murder cartoonists often sound like the charges directed at a woman who has been raped. Wasn't she dressed very scantily? Wasn't her behaviour provocative? Doesn't she have a wayward past? First comes suspicion then comes the indictment: *Charlie Hebdo* was racist. In much of the English-language blogosphere, the verdict has been promptly delivered, an open-and-shut case, repeated round-the-clock, indisputable.

Trial by falsification is a simple affair. You merely have to select those drawings that might seem racist while ignoring the much larger number that are explicitly anti-racist. [14] You describe any cartoon of Muhammad as Islamophobic, even when the point is to distinguish between Islam and fundamentalists – such as Cabu's famous cover illustration presenting the Prophet with his head in his hands bemoaning that "it's tough to be loved by fools". Incidentally, many English-language commentators display characteristic cultural imperialism when they refuse to take into account

French traditions of satirical cartooning and anticlericalism (or do so only to criticize these traditions).

In any case, many don't seek to understand complexity but rather to give a dog a bad name and shoot it. It's absolutely frightening to see this approach at work and to see where it can lead. After all, as Gilbert Achcar says, "Some of the people involved in *Charlie Hebdo* were very much on the left. Stéphane Charbonnier, known as Charb, the editor of the magazine, who was the principal target of the assassins, was, by any standard, someone on the left. He had close ties with the Communist Party and the general milieu of the Left. His funerals were held to the tune of 'The Internationale' [15] and his eulogy by Luz, a surviving member of the *Charlie Hebdo* editorial staff, included a bitter criticism of the French right and far right, and of the Pope as well as of Benjamin Netanyahu. In this respect, the comparison that some have made of *Charlie Hebdo* to a Nazi publication publishing anti-Semitic cartoons in Nazi Germany is completely absurd. *Charlie Hebdo* is definitely not a far-right publication – and present-day France definitely not a Nazi-like state."

Or as Michaël Löwy wrote the day after the massacre: "Infamy. That is the only word that can sum up how we feel about the murder of our friends at Charlie Hebdo. A crime made even more hateful because these artist comrades were people on the left, anti-racists, anti-fascists, anti-colonialists, sympathizers with communism and anarchism. [16] Just recently they contributed to a volume published in honour of the memory of a group of Algerians murdered by the French police in Paris on 17 October 1961. Their only weapons were the pen, humour, irreverence, and insolence" – including against religion, in keeping with the age-old anti-clerical tradition of the French Left. On the cover of the last issue of the magazine before they were killed was a cartoon against the Islamophobic French novelist Michel Houellebecq, and inside was a page of cartoons against religion...the Catholic religion. Let's remember that Charb, the editor-in-chief, was a cartoonist with revolutionary sympathies. He drew the illustrations for French revolutionary socialist Daniel Bensaïd's book *Marx: mode d'emploi* [Marx: A User's Manual]. Charb was also in attendance at the evening tribute event that was held for Bensaïd following his death, and drew a number of wry and affectionate caricatures that were projected onto the screen all through the evening." [17]

Some commentators even picked apart the issue put together by surviving contributors ten days after the massacre. Now I find this rather distasteful keeping in mind the psychological state the team must have been in while they worked. But read what Luz had to say [18] about the cover page he drew for the issue, depicting Muhammad holding a "Je suis *Charlie*" sign in his hands under the headline "All is forgiven" – a cover page that came into being with great difficulty. "[I thought about] the reason why part of the *Charlie* team was killed [the drawing of Muhammad on the cover of 'Charlie Hebdo'] and which also got our offices firebombed [in 2011]. I spoke to him. My poor old friend, I drew you back in 2011 and that caused us a lot of bother. In a way, it was almost like we were forgiving one another. As the illustrator, I was saying 'I'm really sorry about dragging you into this,' while he, as a character, who was forgiving me, was saying 'It's no big deal, you're alive, so you can keep drawing me.'" Is this what an Islamophobic racist would say?

As the imam and rector of the Bordeaux mosque Tareq Oubrou has said, "A cartoon is a cartoon. We are in a free country and it's thanks to this freedom that Muslims can express themselves and practise their religion. We shouldn't saw off the branch we're sitting on [...] The aim of these cartoons is conciliation; they're even an act of kindness. You have to see the cartoons as something external to the problem of depicting the Prophet per se. [19]

Riss has replaced Charb as *Charlie Hebdo* editor-in-chief. He was injured in the attack (a bullet in the shoulder). Interviewed while leaving hospital, he spoke about the massacre, the history of *Charlie Hebdo* (which "to our great surprise has been turned into a symbol of the fight for secularism") and concluded by saying, "People will eventually understand that all Muslims are not destined to become terrorists. You can be Muslim in a democracy, there's no problem with that. Only dishonest people equate Islam with terrorism. And we can see who's behind this. Terrorists have nothing to do with the overwhelming majority of French nationals of Muslim faith." [20] Is this what an Islamophobic racist would say?

All these remarks were made in the aftermath of an appalling ordeal. And yet our falsifiers don't care a jot about this. They carefully neglect to inform their audience about the victims' activist commitments or about the survivors' statements against equating Muslims with terrorists. These commentators also don't have much to say about the Jewish victims of the attacks. Empathy and humanity aren't their strong point. What kind of society would such people usher in?

Three questions to conclude

I've taken the time to defend the victims of the January 7th attack because this is what those of us who knew them personally and used so many of their illustrations owe them in the face of such slanderous accusations. [\[21\]](#)

Shortly after the massacre, Luz, one of the survivors, gave a doubt-laden interview that I think should be read by anyone seeking to understand. "We have been forced to shoulder responsibility for symbolic connotations that don't exist in Charlie's cartoons. [...] Since the publication of the Muhammad cartoons, the irresponsible nature of cartoons has gradually disappeared [...] our cartoons are read literally. Since 2007, Charlie has been scrutinized under the microscope of responsibility. Every one of our cartoons is now liable to being read through the lens of geopolitical conflicts and internal French political squabbles. These problems are laid on our doorstep. But we're simply a magazine that is bought, opened and closed. When people post our cartoons on the Internet, or when the media draw attention to some of our cartoons, that's their fault. Not ours. [...] Unlike Anglo-American illustrators or [Le Monde illustrator] Plantu, Charlie fights against symbolism. Doves of peace and other metaphors of a world at war aren't our cup of tea. We work on points of detail [...] and tie them into French humour. Sometimes cutesy, other times crass [...] Charlie is the sum of a number of very different people [...]. The nature of the cartoon changed depending on which cartoonist was working on it and their individual style, and on their political past in some cases, or artistic past in others. But this humility and diversity of expression no longer exist. Each cartoon is seen as having been drawn by all of us. [Becoming a unanimous symbol for national unity] helps Hollande rally the nation together. It helps [Front National leader] Marine Le Pen call for a reinstatement of the death penalty. Everyone can use this kind of broad symbolism in any way that catches their fancy. Even Poutine can agree with a dove of peace. But that's precisely what set Charlie's cartoons apart, since you couldn't do whatever you fancied with them. When we surgically lampoon different sorts of obscurantism, when we hold political positions up to ridicule, we are not becoming a symbol. Charb, whom I consider to be the Jean-Marc Reiser of the late 20th-early 21st century, was a social commentator. He drew what was under the gloss, slightly ugly people with big noses. Right now we're covered in a thick layer of gloss and I'm going to find that difficult." [\[22\]](#)

Creative freedom, freedom of expression and responsibility

"Complete freedom for art" is what we used to say. [\[23\]](#) It might be useful to revisit surrealism in light of current debates regarding the relationship between the creator (no pun intended) and responsibility. Luz places *Charlie Hebdo* in the tradition of the illustrator's limited responsibility. Responsibility ends with the publication of the magazine and doesn't take into account the possible uses that others will make of the cartoons for fear of stifling creation and getting mired in symbolism. Those more knowledgeable than I describe this as a matter of the ethics of conviction versus the ethics of responsibility. [\[24\]](#)

From an activist's point of view (which is not the same as a creator's), one cannot ignore the predictable consequences of one's provocations. Attacking the goody-two-shoes of all religions is a very good thing indeed. Still, in France, can you take the same approach toward Muslim upholders of righteousness as you do toward their

Catholic counterparts? I don't think you can, because it means ignoring the relationship of oppression that changes the way writing or illustrations are read. To my knowledge, this is a question that *Charlie Hebdo's* editorial team didn't want to take into account and this explains (but only in part) the intensity of debates within the French Left about *Charlie's* editorial line. Provocation becomes difficult when identity-based conflicts are on the rise.

I nevertheless disagree with advocates of self-censorship. We must be blasphemous. Otherwise, we are in practise agreeing with the guardians of virtue who criminalize blasphemy. It shouldn't be necessary to recall that the criminalization of blasphemy doesn't seek to protect believers but rather to suppress opponents, like the crimes of lèse-majesté and desecrating national symbols (one of my first acts of protest was to refuse to rise for the French national anthem).

Serious thinking about these questions is entirely legitimate. [25] I just doubt that its outcome can be a set of rules applicable everywhere and always.

Secularism, republicanism and post-colonialism

For Gilbert Achcar, the problem at hand stems in large measure from a tradition of "the Left's arrogant secularism" that maybe fed by anticlericalism rooted in the long history of the French Left. For others, it's about post-colonialism. Either way, there is supposedly a specifically "French problem". A Filipino friend quite innocently asked me if the failure to organize immigrant workers in France was due to the fact that the country hadn't come to terms with its colonial past – which implied that the failure was less obvious in other imperialist countries.

I was struck by the friend's question because we had just gone through the huge marches of January, which were remarkable in their rejection of xenophobia – whereas the US was nearly simultaneously rocked by the scandal of the raft of police murders of Blacks covered up by juries of peers. True, France's colonial past has not been resolved, and especially not the Algerian War whose reputation the Right would like to rehabilitate. But the major powers of the 19th and 20th centuries were Anglo-American. Britain's looting of the world produced massive famines. The US was built upon a genocide (of Native Americans) and in part also on the massive use of slaves. Where exactly in the imperialist world has this past been resolved?

Yes, the organization of immigrant workers in France has largely been a failure, in part due to the position of the Communist Party (PCF) during the Algerian War. But where exactly has it been a real success? A number of struggles by immigrant workers have taken place in France in recent years, especially through the creation of committees of undocumented workers on the basis of national or regional origin. They have been supported by trade unions (including the CGT) and ordinary citizens. The government was hoping to trap undocumented workers by taking their children hostage as they made their way home from school. In response, a very active network of parents and teachers was established to protect the children and their families from the police and deportation. All this is nowhere near enough, of course, but where is the situation qualitatively so much more wonderful?

My somewhat different starting point is the observation that integration policies have been a failure across the board. The far-Right is threateningly on the rise almost everywhere in Europe. This is the case even in countries which never (or barely) had colonies outside of Europe, so it's clear that the post-colonial explanation doesn't go very far. [26] The common explanatory thread running through all these countries is actually the universality of destructive neoliberal policies. In response, then, the arc of resistance has to be anchored in struggles around socio-economic questions.

To be sure, in France we have specific problems stemming from a specific history. My generation didn't learn how to

deal with questions of “identity” or religion because they weren’t raised in such terms during our formative activist years. North African immigrants, for example, had a working-class consciousness. As Olivier Adam has humorously said, we lived in a “blessed era” and a “world without God”. [27] *Charlie Hebdo* was also cast from this mould. Yes, we can learn from countries that have a different history. But the reverse is also true. Is it not a problem that so many European countries still have royal families and state Churches – not least for the non-Christians excluded from this highly “visible” history? Isn’t the relative radicalism of the separation between Church and State found in France a useful cornerstone for building equal citizenship for all?

Far more than an expression of support for cross-party national unity, the January marches were a show of republican unity – a specific, generous vision of the Republic and of shared citizenship. A vision, though, that is not recognized by those living on the margins, who know full well that equality is not the reality of the actually existing Republic. Indeed, the way the republic (and now also secularism) is conceived is a political battleground in France. “Secularism” (even “secularism *À la française*”) and “Republic” do not exist as monolithic entities. And this is why the banner of the “social Republic” is so important, as a way of refusing to yield to our adversaries a large swathe of popular history, which would ensure the victory of the Republic of the ruling classes.

Solidarity and identity

I’ve been really struck by the difficulty many organizations (and individuals) have had in standing back to assess the events of January. Many have analyzed the events solely through the prism of their particular areas of work – or of their own personal histories. I’m worried that this is merely a reflection of the level of fragmentation of activist thinking and action (and also, frankly speaking, of the individualism and narcissism inherent to the dominant ideology of neoliberalism).

This fragmentation is deadly. The current ruling order is entirely lacking in legitimacy, whether democratic (fostering increasingly authoritarian regimes), socio-economic (destroying social rights) or historical. Its main strength lies in the division of the exploited and oppressed. It therefore seeks to destroy old forms of solidarity and prevent the formation of new ones. To this end, it uses every arrow in its quiver: young against old, men against women, stable jobs against precarious ones, nationals against immigrants, Chinese against Arabs, long-established Arab immigrants against recent ones, one type of racism against another, to name a few.

From this angle, the attack on the Hyper Cacher Jewish supermarket may have serious consequences, setting “community against community” – cloaked under, and exacerbated by, the domestic impact of the Israel-Palestine conflict. Similarly, the government has been exploiting the January events to push through its program of bringing the schools to heel and imposing an anti-democratic and socially conservative agenda against young people. The target right now are young people who, in the absence of classroom discussion, refused to observe the minute of silence in memory of the *Charlie Hebdo* victims – most of whom happened to be of Muslim background. But the broader target are the “dangerous” classes and age groups, leading to a three-fold discrimination on the basis of “race”, generation and socio-economic background.

Unity of the exploited and oppressed will not be built by denying the important of specific discrimination faced by “visible minorities”, in a way that prevents them from effectively asserting their own rights. Nor will it be achieved by pursuing identity politics that prioritize difference over collective resistance. Without a common fight, the battle is lost before it has begun. Such a fight requires reciprocal recognition of shared rights, but also a common socio-economic underpinning. The choice is clear, well and truly strategic in nature – and has concrete implications.

There are many types of racism at work in France, and not just one. The Roma are indisputably the most oppressed

– scapegoats *par excellence*. Those identified as Arab and Muslim are the most broadly discriminated against and the target of the dominant narrative. Whatever their religion, Blacks remain Blacks, victims of a more prototypical form of racism. In the recent period, Jews have been the only ones to have been the victims of targeted assassinations (in Toulouse, Brussels and at the Hyper Cacher Jewish supermarket [28]). Some forms of racism are forged by the state, while others aren't – but all of them are poisonous, solidarity-destroying sources of division and dehumanization. And all of them must be fought in all-encompassing expressions of solidarity. So it would be better to avoid issuing anti-racist statements that fall short of this.

There are multiple victims. Let's defend all of them, within our means but with no pecking order, whosoever the oppressor may be. Should we defend Muslims *with* Muslims, shoulder-to-shoulder and without paternalism? Absolutely. That's how we should defend the victims of Islamophobia – and also women “of Muslim background” who are victims of both ordinary and fundamentalist sexism. Can we all agree on this?

We have a lot of work to do in order to bring ourselves up to date around a wide range of questions. But this work requires a guiding principle: the convergence of resistance, the building of solidarity, and the unity of the exploited and the oppressed.

Translation from French: Nathan Rao for [ESSE](#).

* Five footnotes have been added to the original French version: 4, 10, 14, 23 and 28.

[1] Pierre Rousset and François Sabado [Charlie Hebdo – And now what? The events, their impact and the issues at play.](#)

[2] [What caused the killings?](#). All quotations from Gilbert Achcar are taken from this interview.

[3] [Charlie & Hyper Cacher – Après les attentats. À « des clarifications qui ont fait baisser les tensions sur l'islam »](#). Since it's the same agency that has carried out a number of opinion surveys, it seems fair to conclude that the findings are indeed comparable.

[4] It's also worth noting that another poll has revealed that opinions in France about Muslims are the most favourable among all the European countries looked at, with 72 percent of favourable opinions against 64 percent in Britain (ranked 2nd). See: the blog French politics [“Facts about the Muslim Population in Europe”](#). Of course, all these polls have to be examined more closely, but one explanation of the apparent differences that exist between polls might be related to the question that is asked. In one case, the question is about Islam (the religion), and in the other about Muslims (the people).

[5] ESSF sections [“ Le monde aujourd'hui”:-<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?rubrique1452>] and [The world today](#).

[6] [“Du Moyen-Orient À l'Afrique: le djihadisme, enfant monstrueux des politiques impérialistes et libérales”](#).

[7] See in particular ESSF [“Pakistan: “It was an attack on Muslim children by Muslim fanatics” – Religious fanatics groups or the fascists in the making”><http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article33874>] and [“After Peshawar \(Pakistan\) and Paris \(France\) attacks: Challenge and response”](#).

[8] Among other things, the financial crises of 1997-1998 severely affected middle classes in a number of countries, creating a wave of social panic which radicalized urban middle classes to the right, going as far as an explicit rejection of democracy and the right of the poor to vote (in Thailand, for example).

[9] [“Racism: an outpouring of Islamophobia”](#).

[10] Since these words were written, an attack has indeed taken place in Copenhagen following the pattern in Paris: against freedom of expression (cartoonists) and Jews, causing two deaths. According to available information, it was an “aftershock”, an unplanned “copycat” attack in response to the Paris events and not a complex and minutely prepared operation such as what we saw in the French case. The case of Denmark is no less important, though, for understanding what is going on in European societies.

[11] Richard Fidler [“Je suis Charlie? Not I. Here's why...”](#).

[12] [“Socialist Workers Party statement on Paris killings”](#).

[13] On ESSF, see Ariane Chemin et Marion Van Renterghem [“À « Charlie », de menaces en fatwas – Regard sur une histoire”](#) or Philippe Corcuff [“Charlie Hebdo – Mon ami Charb: les salauds, les cons, l'émotion ordinaire et la tendresse”](#).

[14] Two sociologists have looked at 523 cover pages of the magazine from January 2005 to January 2015. The main target is the Right. Religion is addressed in only seven percent of coverpages. Of these, more than half are mainly about Catholicism and fewer than 20 percent Islam (for a total of 1.3 percent of coverpages in the last ten years). So religion was a minor topic, with Catholicism getting the lion's share of attention. See ESSF [“Les ‘unes’ de ‘Charlie’ analysées sur 10 ans: Non, À « Charlie Hebdo » n'est pas obsédé par l'islam”](#). Other sociologists have taken a different approach and come up with different numbers. But they all acknowledge that the lack of serious studies “leaves the door open to simplistic interpretations and solutions”. Unfortunately, snap judgements about Charlie Hebdo are all over the place, leading in particular to one-sided condemnations from organizations and individuals who haven't actually read the magazine, hadn't heard of it, and are unaware of any serious review studies about it (with good reason, since none exist).

[15] The Italian partisan song “Bella Ciao” was sung at Tignous's funeral.

[16] Some of them, such as Tignous, were also personally involved in solidarity work with the struggle of undocumented migrants.

[17] Michael Löwy, [“Infamy – That is the only word that can sum up how we feel about the the murder of our buddies at Charlie Hebdo”](#).

[18] Luz is still alive because he arrived late for the editorial meeting. He saw the assassins run out and found his friends dead or dying. “We needed belts to stop the bleeding. I realized that I didn't have one. So now I wear a belt.” See ESSF [“À « La majorité des musulmans s'en foutent de Charlie Hebdo »”](#).

[19] Tareq Oubrou [“En ‘une’ de Charlie Hebdo – Tareq Oubrou: ‘L'intention de ces caricatures c'est l'apaisement’”](#).

[20] Riss, editor of Charlie Hebdo : [“À « Tout le monde n'est pas obligé d'aimer ‘Charlie’ »”](#).

[21] See also Camille Emmanuelle, ESSF [“Charlie Hebdo : Être aimé par des cons, c'est dur, Être haï par des amis, c'est pire”](#).

[22] Luz, [“Luz, survivor of Charlie Hebdo: ‘We are being made to carry a symbolic responsibility \(while\) Charlie fights against symbolism.’”](#).

[23] [“Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art Signed: André Breton and Diego Rivera”](#).

[24] See ESSF [“Charlie Hebdo, liberté d'expression, démocratie, responsabilité”](#).

[25] On this point and the next one, see also Samy Johsua, ESSF [“Après Charlie: des principes et des actes – liberté d'expression, la cité, déségrégation”](#).

[26] On this topic see Samy Johsua, ESSF [“Postcolonialisme – Lettre à un camarade : Une pensée simpliste n'aide pas dans une situation complexe”](#) and [“Que faire ? Après Charlie, éléments de réflexion stratégique”](#).

[27] ESSF [“Quand Dieu n'existait pas – ‘Une époque bénie’”](#).

[\[28\]](#) and now Copenhagen...