

Charlie Hebdo and the Other Within (guest blog)

This article by LSE Media and Communications Associate Professor [Dr Bart Cammaerts](#)

A few days after the horror, brutality and destruction there is a slowly growing some space for some degree of rationalization of what happened last week. I have two main observations to make here: first and inevitably, freedom of speech needs to be discussed and contextualized, second coinciding processes of globalization and glocalization are occurring. Let me address these two points in turn.



Many [have stated](#), eagerly amplified and reiterated by all the western media, that this was a frontal attack by radical islamists on one of our most cherished liberal values namely freedom of expression and by extension on the freedom of the press. Personally, I have always argued that these two are not necessarily the same as the latter comes with much more social responsibility attached to it, but this debate is somewhat beside the question here. What is of importance though is to understand that this freedom has always been contested and was never absolute, not even in the US with its 1st amendment doctrine (see amongst others McCarthyism in the 1950s).

Furthermore, as so often, this freedom comes with responsibilities and as far as I'm concerned this freedom is not necessarily a primary right in all circumstance, it has to be balanced out with other rights and protections, for example the right not to be discriminated against, the right not to be racially abused. What the events of last week have highlighted are some very difficult questions about our western societies, such as: to which extent is religion part of these protections or not and whether insulting 'the other' is part of broader practices of discrimination and thus problematic from the perspective of anti-discrimination legislation or not and thus protected by the freedom of speech/press as a primary right.

Ridiculing Religion

There is a very long and important legacy of ridiculing (catholic) religion in Europe, through comedy, cartoons, pamphlets, and popular culture in general. This of course went hand in hand with political efforts to break the power of the church and the clergy 'men' and to rid our societies of their devious influence on our everyday lives. All this was an integral part of the secularization process Western societies went through. It is, however, not so long ago that many Western democracies still had anti-blasphemy laws in place. In the UK, for example, they were only abolished by the previous government, in 2008! This highlights that this is a highly sensitive issue.

I am personally very ambiguous about this; I think all religions are basically evil, deserve to be ridiculed and the world would be a much much better place without religions and above all without the conflicts they engender on a daily basis across the world. However, what deeply disturbs me about this debate is that the anti-religious discourse, which is shared by the left as well as parts of the right, becomes indistinguishable from an anti-ethnic discourse, from a discourse that essentializes 'the other' and depicts them as inevitably evil, as medieval – i.e. backward, and also as not belonging in 'our' secular society.

As both the mayors of Rotterdam (Ahmed Aboutaleb) and Antwerp (Bart De Wever), incidentally respectively leftwing and rightwing, [stated](#): 'If you don't like it that some comedians make a newspaper, fuck off' or 'if you reject us, fuck off'. This is of course not a new sentiment, but something that has been growing for quite a while and the public outcry after the Charlie Hebdo massacre has just re-emphasized this.

Intricate Freedoms

But there is also something else going on, in my view. Each year I give a lecture on freedom of speech/press in which I explain the intricacies of this concept and the tensions it provokes. The Danish cartoons is one of the cases I highlight in that lecture, but also *Stormfront*, the US-based neo-nazi website spewing hate. In the seminar, one of the discussion points is whether it is a democratic right to be a racist. Over 5 years ago you would get a clear split between the US students who take the position that hate speech is protected by the first amendment and the European students who defend a more relativist view on freedom of speech with respect for 'otherness' and anti-discrimination. In recent years, however and to my own horror, a majority of young intellectuals regardless of where they come from defend the right to racist speech thereby echoing extreme right parties across Europe that invoke freedom of speech to justify and legitimate racism.

We can also link this to the backlash against 'political correctness'. Those that say 'political correctness has gone mad' tend to say this as 'a kind of cover action to attack minorities', as comedian and critic Stewart Lee put it. Today it has thus become *bon-ton* (again) to insult all kinds of minorities, both religious and non-religious. Those that contest this and speak about minorities with respect and care are all of a sudden positioned as stuck-up progressive 'fascists' (cf. the many controversies relating to Jeremy Clarkson – see [here for a comprehensive overview](#)). The question I ask myself in relation to this is: even if we accept that there is or should be a right to insult, do we necessarily need to exercise that right to insult 'the other' on a daily basis? As the [New York Times pointed out](#) at the time of the Danish Cartoons controversy:

“The New York Times and much of the rest of the nation’s news media have reported on the cartoons but refrained from showing them. That seems a reasonable choice for news organizations that usually refrain from gratuitous assaults on religious symbols”

The second point I want to develop here relates to the intersection between globalization and glocalization.

Cultural products/content produced and published in the West adhering to Western values circulate and potentially have a global impact beyond the context in which they have been produced. This is above all true for audio/visual content which can easily go viral and elicit reactions and even violence elsewhere. This globalization effect means that media content and the discourses embedded within them are decoded in very different ways in different parts of the world. The question this engenders is whether increased globalisation also comes with responsibilities? Does this entail that in view of the deep-seated racist undercurrents in our societies, as described above, we need to be more respectful of difference, of otherness, more sensitive to other cultures' sensitivities?

Globalisation and Glocalisation

Besides globalization, there is also a process of glocalisation going on whereby struggles and conflicts in the periphery, to paraphrase Wallerstein, have a direct impact on the core. Wars and conflicts are exported to or contained in the periphery, but at times come and bite us in the butt, so to speak. Another way to approach glocalization in this regard is that our own societies have diversified enormously from the 1970-80s onwards amongst others due to decolonization and economic demands for cheap, but also for highly skilled, labour. The result of this is that we are now living in de facto highly diverse multi-cultural and multi-ethnic societies, which I personally think is an enrichment.

However, this also leads to tensions and simmering conflicts within western societies. It leads to reactionary sentiments of making *'the other within'* feel as if they are not like 'us', unwelcome, second or even third class citizens, and discriminated against on all levels of our societies. I would counter-argue that many of 'them' are part of 'us', hence the 'within'; many are born here, went to school here, speak western languages and even regional dialects, work here, pay taxes here, have a European passport, etc. The question we need to ask ourselves as a society in this regard is why it is that young people that have been born here, that went through our educational system, etc. are so prone to be radicalized to such an extent that they feel it is acceptable and legitimate to commit terrible crimes or horrific acts of terror for political purposes?

What does this ultimately say about our society and about how as a society we treat 'the other within'?

We should also ask ourselves the question to which extent just as Voltaire's anti-religious sentiments were a cloak for his anti-semitism, the anti-islamist discourses today are a cloak for deep-seated racist sentiments towards non-whites in general in western societies?

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