

**Bad American TV shows help me work
through some confusions about the
meaning of FREEDOM OF SPEECH
in this divided world in which
one man's satire is another man's
blasphemy**

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Frankly, I am confused about the contextual use of the phrase “freedom of speech” and the adjective “anti-Semitic” in the days since the horrific and unjustified attacks in Paris on the Charlie Hebdo cartoonists, police officers and the Kosher grocery store hostages by three killers claiming to be Muslims whilst perpetrating deadly crimes.

Barbaric bullets versus the Civilized Pen(cil): this is how the mainstream media quickly consolidated the dominant narrative, defining these attacks as yet another case of oppressive Islamic terror versus Western freedom of speech. Since 9/11, there have been systematic and sophistic attempts to declare that the West is on the side of freedom even when the exact opposite is true. There is something called the sovereign freedom of each nation to rule itself which the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq by the US and its NATO allies totally flouted. These invasions are called without apparent irony Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom. Whose freedom? Freed from what by who for whom?

So often, too often, the word freedom is flagrantly abused and what has happened thus far in 2015 is more of the same. In the wake of the Charlie Hebdo attacks, France has arrested more than 50 people, the majority for “condoning terrorism” through hate speech. A BBC article reports that “[French] Prime Minister Manuel Valls say[s] that freedom of speech should not be confused with anti-Semitism, racism and Holocaust denial”; “The justice minister said prosecutors should act firmly and quickly against anyone found condoning terrorism or carrying out racist

or anti-Semitic acts”; “...French daily Le Monde pointed out (in French) that French law limited freedom of speech and it did not extend to incitement to hatred or racism, anti-Semitism and homophobia.”

This is confusing because for many Muslims Charlie Hebdo’s satirical drawings of the Prophet Mohammed are blasphemous and what they describe as “provocation,” a deeply insulting form of hate speech. They ask if Charlie Hebdo satirizes the Holocaust as much as the Prophet and if mocking the Holocaust is deemed “anti-Semitic” and punishable by law, then why is poking fun at the Prophet not only permissible but cherished as the sacred right to Freedom of Speech. The 3.7 million people who marched in France in support of the victims and freedom of speech, the five million copies of Charlie Hebdo’s latest magazine with its controversial cover of the Prophet that sold out in Paris by 6:30 a.m. on the morning it was released are all read by many Muslims as further evidence of xenophobic anti-Islamism. But the contradictory operations of freedom of speech in France turn on a narrow and problematic definition of anti-Semitism because deep-seated Islamophobia is of course a virulent form of anti-Semitism.

ANTI-SEMITISM

Anti-Semitism is a word that also suffers from much ill usage to extremely dangerous ends. A Semite is according to the dictionary anyone who speaks a Semitic language: Arabic, Amharic, Hebrew. Therefore Semites include Arabs, Ethiopians and Jews among others. Now, we live in a complicated world, not all Jews speak Hebrew, not all Muslims speak Arabic and not all Muslims are Arabs but for some specious reason, anti-Semitism in colloquial speech is used in a very narrow sense to mean anti-Jewish. Anti-Jewishness is one appalling form of anti-Semitism and anti-Arabism and anti-Islamism are others. Anti-Semitism is furthermore often confused with anti-Zionism which allows for a Catch 22 situation in which critics of Israeli policies are conflated, in a tortured tautology, with those who are bigoted against Jews. The result often effectively silences any discussion.

Keep this more holistic definition in mind because if you, like me, shudder at any instance of anti-Jewish anti-Semitism, then let us try and understand that satirizing the Prophet Mohammed in the geopolitical context of today’s world is not understood by millions of Semites as freedom of speech but as a virulent form of anti-Muslim anti-Semitism. In response to the “Je suis Charlie” rallying cry, an Algerian cartoonist has responded with “We are all Mohammed.” If we attempt this from the outset, we might be able to begin a different conversation. If France observed this more holistic definition of anti-Semitism, French law might be applied in a more consistent manner...

ANTI-SEMITIC SATIRE IN THE CONTEXT OF WHOSE FREEDOM...

As a non-Arab/Muslim/Jew/Ethiopian, basically as a non-Semite and also as a non-man with a deep commitment to etymology and the power of words, the belief that

all forms of anti-Semitism against Arabs, Ethiopians and Jews are wrong and the conviction that freedom of the press is essential to democracy, led me, on first seeing the assassinations of the Charlie Hebdo staff to this intellectual thought:

I really wish Muslim terrorists would get a sense of humor!

That was the extent of my first reaction as I watched in horror the live coverage of the cold-blooded killings in France. Of course, if terrorists had a sense of humor, they might not be terrorists. The levity of laughter might mitigate their murderous intent. But as I watched the blanket, non-stop coverage on BBC World, MSNBC, TV 5, CNN International, Al Jazeera, France 24, something started bothering me about the quickly-established dominant metanarrative in which the principles of freedom of speech began to swell into a wholesale celebration of western-style democracy, the French Revolution's rallying cries of "liberte, egalite, fraternite" and Civilization tout court.

Yes, such humorless assassinations are ethically, morally, ideologically wrong and this fact is obvious to all sane people including the majority of Muslims who, like Christians, Hindus, atheists etc., believe that killing is wicked and yes, of course the media would be upset about the killing of some of their own but the rapidity with which the mainstream Western media consolidated their rather reductive one-dimensional party line was astonishing. They put the attacks in a box marked with the label: It's just a simple matter of freedom of speech. It's just that 'they' – the uncivilized - don't understand satire whereas 'we' – the civilized - do, n'est-ce pas? There is/was no attempt to understand a radically different point of view, to think outside this convenient box and think who drew it. Why do they have the monopoly on defining freedom and freedom of speech?

The fundamental problem is that one man's satire is another man's blasphemy.

And both satire and blasphemy derive meaning and relevance from the overall context from which they emerge.

CONTEXT

Context is everything. There are no absolute principles, only relative ones.

If I am in Saudi Arabia, I might take a stand against veiling as the perpetuation of patriarchal oppression. When in France, however, where the veil has been outlawed at educational institutions, I will protest for the right of any woman to have the choice to wear the hijab at school if she so chooses. The burqa is illegal everywhere in France. The French citizen who protested this ban in the European Court of Human Rights argued her right to wear the burqa on the grounds of "freedom of speech." The court did not find in her favor because the French government insisted that the burqa in the French context constituted an impediment to integration.

Integration in France is apparently a one-way cul de sac. Apparently 'they' should integrate to 'our' dress codes and adhere to 'our' notions of freedom (of speech, dress, lifestyle, belief) but 'we' should not be asked to adapt to 'them' by accepting that their freedom of expression is expressed by dressing differently from 'us' (you got it right, I can drop the quotation marks now, n'est-ce pas?).

It is not so much that the random but not arbitrary application of freedom of speech speaks to a double standard. Quite the opposite. It continually reinforces that there is really only one single dominant standard which defines freedom like anti-Semitism in distinctly singular terms. This single dominant standard achieves its power by presenting a singular point of view that digests all differences from itself only to regurgitate itself as The Last Word on All Freedoms. Where this is most evident is in bad American TV shows.

BAD AMERICAN TV SHOWS

One recent evening, I was unfortunate enough to find myself in front of a television playing the new show "State of Affairs." This most irksome series is part of a relatively recent genre of popular American TV shows like "Madame Secretary", "Homeland" and "Covert Affairs" in which slender, attractive, sometimes sex-crazy blonde females work for the US government's clandestine services like the CIA. They basically put a pretty face on US anti-terrorism measures ranging from drone strikes to gruesome torture. "Rendition the hell out of" is representative of the typical dialogue in these shows although in this particular case, the characters were referring to a Yemeni man.

"State of Affairs" bolsters its beautification/obfuscation of US imperialism by having a black female president dress it up in full multicultural, democratic costume: She is a former soldier who is now the Commander-in-Chief aka POTUS (President of the United States). If she makes mistakes, we're supposed to forgive her because she is black, she is a woman and she is a former soldier, therefore a patriot. In this episode I am unwillingly watching, she gives the slender blonde lead played by trying-to-forget-her-Rom-Com past Katherine Heigl, the go-ahead to rescue some Nigerian schoolgirls who have been kidnapped by an Islamic terrorist group - the show's version of real-life Islamic terrorist group Boko Haram in real-life Nigeria who are best known in the West for kidnapping 276 schoolgirls in April, 2014 but who massacred thousands of Nigerians just a few days before the Charlie Hebdo killings which received little media attention.

Please note these girls have not been rescued by the US in real life but in the show's fantasy version, the US is all-powerful. So despite the water-boarding and beatings being perpetrated by the cast on many suspected Arab terrorists, we - the viewing audience - are let into a secret. POTUS is really a good person and we should root for her when she tells slender blonde lead in not very practical stiletto heels to "Go get those girls." The moral of the story is that despite various abuses of human rights (if suspected terrorists are human), the US, unlike "backward" groups like

Boko Haram, the Taliban and those horrible Pakistanis who shot Malala, is for women's rights. Being for women's rights is part of being Civilized (except if the woman wants the right to wear the burqa, that is the limit of civilized women's rights). Keep this in mind.

"Madame Secretary" - which to be honest I watched with even less interest than "State of Affairs" - performs similar culture work. The Hillary Clinton-esque blonde female lead who is the current US Secretary of State goes to Venezuela to meet with the show's version of the late Hugo Chavez. Although Hugo did not want Hillary Clinton-esque blonde female formerly of the CIA to come to Venezuela, she changes his mind by promising to bring along one of his heroes, a famous Venezuelan American baseball player. When Hugo accuses her of being a US imperialist, she has no answer but the episode displaces the issue of imperialism by putting it in a wrestling match with gay rights. Gay rights, like women's rights and freedom of speech, are another emblem of Civilization. Baseball dude turns out to be gay and that becomes the focus of the episode when bad anti-imperialist Hugo turns out to be anti-gay too. The show asks us to ask: Does Venezuelan homophobia cancel out US imperialism? The answer is yes, it does, because all of these shows work with a simple narrative technique - point of view and the point of view is always from one angle, one perspective, one way of defining the context.

In a world in which one's man satire is another man's blasphemy and one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter, these shows make sure that we never see another point of view except in so far as to reassert our own as the ultimate horizon. Domesticating US aggression by putting it in jeans and a T-shirt makes it the new normal. When the satirical weekly program "Saturday Night Live" spoofs these shows it only serves to further domesticate and routinize terror, torture, drone strikes, black ops and the systematic abuse of human rights.

Satire can be used to poke holes in the flawed logic of hypocritical power brokers but it can just as easily be made to reaffirm a univocal point of view which masquerades as a dialogue. The mainstream media whether the news or new spy shows is the arena in which the cultural conversation is crafted except that it is never a genuine conversation. Oppositional points of view are brought in only to be displaced by the heroine's overarching viewpoint with which we are supposed to identify. This has the effect of reinforcing a singular narrative in which the West's military aggression is effaced by a focus on the soft values of various types of freedom - whether for women, blacks, the press or gays - which is the foundation, ultimately, of Civilization.

THE CIVILIZED POINT OF VIEW

I love Jon Stewart because his wonderful satirical program "The Daily Show" rescued me during the traumatic Bush years when the government's outright lies led to travesties like the Iraq War and Guantanamo to take but two examples. That's why I was disappointed when Stewart's response to Charlie Hebdo was

speechlessness. On the global edition, he declared that he could not make sense of such violence and that such an attack on freedom of speech made him realize that when he was critiquing his own government, no matter what their differences, they were all basically on the same side. He called it “Team Civilization.” According to the civilized point of view then, those other people are not, and should not, be in the conversation.

This is a problem and it is widespread.

The British-Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah in his book, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* makes the case for understanding cosmopolitanism as the appropriate way to live in this globalizing world but his point of departure is that Islamic “neofundamentalists” are the “counter-cosmopolitans.” They are opposite to us and therefore we cannot talk to them and so they are immediately excluded from the conversation.

I do confess that when I hear IS fighters interviewed about beheading people, I just want to jump out the window in horror and frustration because who are these crazy barbarians? Who are they? I don’t think I can have a conversation with them either but I think I should be able to because I believe that the ability to dialogue with difference, actual radical difference, a completely different point of view, is the first principle of being civilized and the last bulwark against barbarism.

But while there is a lunatic fringe of religious fundamentalists in any religion who represent a minority position of extremism, too often the majority of Muslims are painted with this brush. Even so-called “moderate” Muslims and their points of view which of course represent a continuum of divergent opinions like any other people are too often either implicitly or explicitly placed outside Team Civilization.

But civilization is another extremely slippery and ideologically-loaded term because it has been used as a euphemism for imperialism for a very long time. So in the irreverent spirit of Charlie Hebdo, in the vein of satire whose ultimate goal is to expose hypocrisy at every level, even the most sensitive, let’s start with our own. This has been going on for long enough.

In 1901, satirist Mark Twain wrote a wide-ranging essay, “To the Person Sitting in the Darkness,” which caricatured the atrocities of the Anglo-Boer War and the Boxer Rebellion before moving on to satirize the US annexation of the Philippines in which they claimed they were liberating the archipelago from Spain:

Dewey....[sent] out an army – ostensibly to help the native patriots put the finishing touch upon their long and plucky struggle for independence [from Spain], but really to take their land away from them and keep it. That is, in the interest of Progress and Civilization.

Twain lambasts the US, Germany, Britain etc. as colonial powers which portray themselves as the “Disseminators of Progress and the Blessings of Civilization” whilst trafficking in two types of civilization: the one practiced at home in the West and the one which is exported to other lands which are obliged to “buy [it] with [their] blood and tears and land and liberty.”

Liberty...freedom...whose freedom, whose enduring freedom and who is free to speak of these things without fear when freedom of speech is selectively applied?
