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# Long Live Charlie Hebdo! : A letter to the left leaning in wake of Charlie Hebdo shootings of January 2015

Sunday 25 January 2015, by [KAPOOR Harsh](#) (Date first published: 24 January 2015).

**The January 2015 terror attack on the Paris satirical weekly and its gross misinterpretation by people of Left liberal sensibilities in India and much of the world.**

We recently witnessed a devastating terror assault by fanatics who gunned down close to 200 children in a school in Peshawar. Was this a desperate cry of the dispossessed in Pakistan? I am glad that the various tiny fractions of the left in Pakistan stood up and condemned it openly, some in India also stood up for the first time. It provoked widespread shock and disdain.

But the terrorist assassination of 12 cartoonists, journalists and workers at *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris on 7 January 2015 has provoked very different reactions. Geographical location of the murder seems to drive this.

I am utterly astounded and shocked at the manner in which many in the left leaning and liberal circles in India have reacted to the devastating terror attack in Paris. Has a section of left gone mad? Why do they have to deflect a straight forward issue and start providing rationalisation for terror attacks from the Muslim fundamentalists. We are being given an endless spiel on French colonisation, the war for decolonization in Algeria, the exclusion of the so-called Muslim 'community' in France, the blowback for France's foolish involvement in the recent wars in Libya and Syria and so on. The role of poor and dispossessed is being invoked.

Commentators from the anglo saxon world and even our desi left intelligentsia who are waxing eloquent on the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre are making the most absurd amalgam between the French establishment and a truly radical far left wing magazine which shared absolutely nothing in common.

*Charlie Hebdo* is presented as the center of all evil that existed ever and that it had it coming, that their cartoons were racist and hurt sentiments. All this reminds me of 1989 and the Rushdie affair when this hurt sentiment industry made it big and has since become globalised. India's Picasso, M.F. Hussain, was forced to leave his country by the wrath of the Hindu Far Right, all in the name of hurt sentiments. Many of the same radicals who stood by M.F. Hussain are now shamelessly standing up with free rationalisation for the *Charlie Hebdo* killers. Why such different treatment for different religio-fundamentalist strands? Were the poor and dispossessed involved in going after M.F. Hussain or in the assassination of M.K. Gandhi? What about the assassination of Salman Taseer? Poor and oppressed, any takers?

*Charlie Hebdo* was born in rebellious times of May 1968 in France. It had been preceded by other radical magazines like *Hara Kiri* and *Enragé* and many others. But they are in many ways part of a

lineage of a very long historical tradition dating back to the French revolution and Jacobins of radical caricature making and mocking the powers that be — religious or other — in every sphere of life. The French revolution was the time of incredibly powerful irreverence and it gave birth to a very incisive form of satire and lampooning. Many magazines with satirical drawing accompanying text emerged during this time and have continued since. Later a much softer version of this developed in Britain and elsewhere.

The 1968 generation *Charlie Hebdo* has had an even more militant libertarian non conformist view of the world, groomed by a radical antipathy to the political power of religious authority, and a deep identification with ideas of the broad left. Pungent depictions the magazine runs are devastatingly funny that poke fun at everything, just every thing that makes for daily life. This vitriolic humour has come to be vital part of French intellectual and popular culture and there is a social acceptance for it. Millions read satirical comics, satirical newspapers, and magazines. Its anti religious politics takes apart the clergy, most of all the nuns, bishops, popes, rabbis, all who represent the high and mighty and, more recently the Dalai Lama, the new cults, and also in the recent times imams, mullahs as gate keepers of religion.

*Charlie Hebdo* has a bawdy, burlesque style of black humour. Not for the weak hearted. In 1970 *Charlie Hebdo* made fun of Charles de Gaulle, president and leader of the Resistance, on the day of his death, provoking demands from the Right for its ban. The publication ceased in 1981 and was revived in 1991. *Charlie Hebdo* and its cartoonists have faced hundreds of court cases since its creation. But it has continued to strike against powerful capitalists, bureaucratic and religious elites. The many targets of *Charlie Hebdo*'s cartoons and journalism have been the far right extremists, police repression, war mongering, the big corporate media, anti immigrant policies, capitalist and employer wrongdoing, the big banks and the stock markets, cuts in public spending and the military industrial complex, the nuclear industry, homophobia, conservative social values, denial of climate change, the food industry, the big pharma etc etc

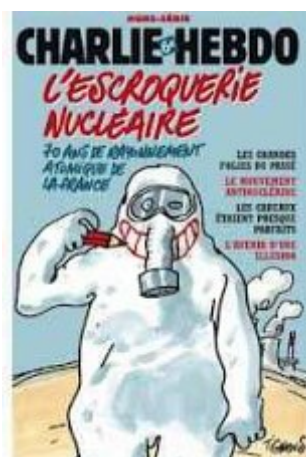
In the English speaking world, there is practically no tradition of satirical magazines like *Charlie Hebdo* or say a newspaper like *Le Canard Enchaîné* (A Duck in chains — Canard/Duck is French slang for newspaper) that deploy sardonic cartoons with investigative journalism and opinion pieces as standard fare. The kind of fiercely brutal cartoons that appear in *Charlie Hebdo* and the like in France have no chance of appearing in Britain, in the United States, Canada, Australia and most of the world. This would pass as obscene bad taste, it is matter of culture as to what is obscene or distasteful. In a country like India, the *Charlie* style cartoons would be unacceptable to both the left and right and the non ideological and unthinking.

Thanks to the French revolution, there are no blasphemy laws in France (except for Alsace and Moselle regions which joined France after the revolution). But however, France has strict laws on hate speech, on anti Semitism and on holocaust denial, so hateful activity is under the scanner.

Blasphemy or “religious insult” and racism are two different things. But with the rise of identity politics all over the world, there has been a successful push by many to collapse these into a single block that turn's religious identity into ethnic or racial faultlines. In keeping with this, all of French of North African descent get sweepingly described in the media as Muslims (less than 5% go to mosques, 20% are atheists) or Arabs (vast majority are from Berber origins) and all of the ‘white’ French get labeled as Christian, a huge mistake this — a misnomer for the French. But in this age of easy *clichés* (black and white) representation who cares for complexity — just an SMS does the fixing.

The politics of *Charlie Hebdo* has been progressive as it gets and informed by the new left around the world. They have been anti fascist, pro-abortion, pro-contraception in solidarity with the

feminists, they stood up with the anti nuclear movement unlike their own friends on the left. The main anti-racist platform in France, SOS Racisme, teamed up with *Charlie* for campaigns against anti immigrant policies. They denounced the Right Wing opposition to legalise gay live-in relations. During the 1990's war in Algeria when there were violent attacks from the fundamentalists on the local media and the artists, writers and cartoonists, many were forced into exile. *Charlie Hebdo* opened its doors to numerous Algerian journalists and cartoonists in exile. All this goes back in fact because people like Bob Siné (the anarchist celebrity cartoonist from the 1950s and 1960s, Siné one of the oldest cartoonists who worked for Charlie Hebdo magazine till 2008.) faced umpteen law suits for supporting Algeria's independence movement in the 1950's.



The massacre at *Charlie Hebdo*, has been condemned in France by the trade unions, by the anti nuclear movement, by women's groups, by organisations of homeless, by the immigrants organisations all have offered help and solidarity. Thousands [millions] of people attended the solidarity demonstrations in Paris and other cities across France to express their outrage. Tens of thousands of Franco-Algerian, Franco-Moroccan and Franco-Tunisians were present in the demonstrations, carrying flags from the countries of the Maghreb. Journalists in Algeria and the Tunisian Trade Union of workers in Graphic Arts (Syndicat des métiers des arts plastiques tunisien) have issued statements in support of *Charlie Hebdo*, saying they have faced and still face similar threats and attacks from fundamentalists.

In fact five of the cartoonists who died were people whose work appeared also in many weeklies, dailies and monthlies of left persuasion all over France. The French trade unions, the women's groups, the antinuclear movement carried their cartoons. They were household names.



Georges Wolinski who was very famous in France. He was one of the longest standing members of *Charlie Hebdo*, was very close to the communist Party of France and the president of the France-Cuba friendship association. Close to 80 books of cartoon we penned by him, they are prized possessions of millions in France, Spain and elsewhere.

Jean Cabut (pen name Cabu), was a class apart and extremely popular for his past with hilarious *Le Canard enchaîné* — the french precursor of WikiLeaks. His cartoon character Mon Beauf, a caricature of the racism, and sexism of an ordinary Frenchman, became so popular that the word 'beauf' (short for "beau-frère", i.e., brother-in-law) has entered French slang dictionaries. His work appeared in numerous newspapers, but many volumes of cartoons were sold on their own as best selling books. One of which was the 'Big blond with a black shirt' a lancet's knife lampooning of Jean Marie Le Pen, the leader of the extreme right National Front.

Tignous, had his cartoons appear every week in *Charlie* but also on the pages of the daily *l'Humanité* (news paper of the Communist Party) and in the CGT trade union paper *La Vie Ouvrière*, in *Telerama* and *L'Echo des Savanes*. Tignous was a member of Cartoonists for Peace. *Bella Ciao* the famous Italian song of the left was sung at the funeral for Tignous.

Stéphane Charbonnier (known as Charb) the murdered editor of *Charlie*, was a member of the French

Communist Party and a supporter of the Front de Gauche (the Left Front — a joint front of left groups), had opposed the 2005 proposed neoliberal European constitution. The 2009 book 'Marx: Mode d'emploi' (Marx: A User's Guide) by the late far left intellectual Daniel Bensaid was attractively illustrated with funny drawings by Charb. Charb was also well known for his four volume 'chien et chat anticapitalistes' (anti capitalist Cats and Dogs cartoon books). At his funeral they played the Internationale to bid farewell to him.

Bernard Maris (or Uncle Bernard to *Charlie Hebdo* readers) a 1968 radical was one of main shareholders of Charlie Hebdo, was part of the editorial group. He was a reputed left economist, on the advisory board of ATTAC [\[1\]](#), the social movement body opposed to corporate globalization. His work appeared in a wide range of magazine and was popular on French Radio. He appeared in a 2010 Jean Luc Godard film 'Film Socialisme'

Philippe Honoré had joined *Charlie Hebdo* in 1992. His work appeared in numerous magazines and papers including the Trade Unions Magazine, *La Vie Ouvrière* apart from *Charlie Hebdo*. He was self taught cartoonist, who was widely known for his book covers. He had a very funny book on Nicolas Sarkozy's Presidency called 'Je Hais les petites phrases'. His subtle humour stood out from his colleagues at *Charlie Hebdo*. They played the French song La Butte Rouge and the Bob Dylan Song Farewell Angelina sung by Joan Baez at his funeral at the Père La Chaise cemetery.

*Charlie Hebdo* magazine has been a well known and fervent opponent of Zionism and Israel's regular assaults on Gaza. It defended Roma / gypsy people against police crackdowns and deportation. *Charlie Hebdo* has been part of the cultural intellectual infrastructure (where with all) of the left in France. Killing them has been like a body blow to the left sensibilities and to the cultural sphere in France.

The murder of these left cartoonists and its obscene celebration by the progressives elsewhere is akin to the following hypothetical nightmare. That our international celebrity Marxist Tariq Ali, the radical broadcaster Amy Goodman, and our big time prof from Columbia all get assassinated by some Islamist nuts for being British or American and the progressive chatterati grotesquely take off talking about horrors of British and American imperialism and that this is blowback. Sad to imagine such a scenario.

The Islamist echo effect on *Charlie Hebdo* murders in Paris is still on; there are now big violent street demo's in North Africa (A report in *El Watan* of 17<sup>th</sup> Jan 2015 says 'the slogan heard in the demonstration in Algeria after the Charlie Hebdo massacre was "Ahlyha nahya, ahlyha namout, wa alayha nalqa Allah" (pour - l'Etat islamique - nous vivons, pour lui nous allons mourir et rencontrer Dieu) [English Translation: For an Islamic State - we are living, for which we will die and encounter God]) and the Middle East, also near home in Pakistan. I am now with sadness waiting for the ones that may happen in Delhi, in Bombay, in Calcutta and for the real prospect of our lefties joining them in solidarity with the hurt religious sentiment *walas*.

The left today is very shy of confronting Muslim Fundamentalism, lest it be seen as anti-Islam. It has become a taboo they better get rid of. The other malady afflicting the left leaning is xenophobic nationalism anti west-ism, becoming a reactionary instinct deployed to explain everything from road accidents to bad weather. Please wake up comrades: internationalism is the need of the day against rising tide of fascist movements that may spell the end of all democratic space.

The killers of *Charlie Hebdo* grew up in areas where once there was a red belt of communist-run towns around Paris. Today the left, has pretty much ceded ground in these working class suburban towns. These are recruiting grounds for multiple forms of fascist and reactionary groups, armed with propaganda, satellite TV, hate-filled gospel and dress codes and moral conduct all blessed by

'authentic' religion and culture. Christian evangelical cults, Islamist preachers and the Far right xenophobes all promoting identity politics. Now it is time to mass mobilise against fascist formations in France as in India.

In India we have hate speech, violently communal speech, anti religious speech all co exist with virtually no real hand of the state successfully stopping it. We have unity and diversity of Fatwas and Farmans from Khaps, self appointed religious or 'community' leaders increasingly defining the landscape for speech, writing, film, dress and accepted behaviour. Blasphemy and hurt sentiment industry is flourishing. A slow poison is spreading.

It is time we promoted Freedom of Speech as a left wing issue, and differentiate it from hate speech; the space to speak is shrinking everywhere and most of all for people who represent subversive ideas of equality and secular democracy.

**Harsh Kapoor**, 24 January

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**P.S.**

\* <http://www.sacw.net/article10438.html>

\* A slightly edited version of the below article is appearing in Mainstream Weekly, 31 January 2015.

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## Footnotes

[1] <http://www.attac.org/>