



Charlie Hebdo: Islamist Terrorism, Republican Racism

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The 7 January attack on the offices of the French satirical weekly Charlie Hebdo, in which 12 people were killed, must be condemned without equivocation. It was an attack carried out by advocates of a reactionary political philosophy rejected by the overwhelming majority of France's Muslims as well by French workers and young people. It was followed by further incidents which left another five people dead. Our sincere sympathy and condolences go to the families and colleagues of the victims.

Whatever the motives of the perpetrators of the attack, its consequences will be a strengthening of racial and religious oppression. The statements of France's political élite make clear that they are determined to use the atrocity to justify the very policies and practices of the French state that create the breeding ground for Islamist terrorism. France's President, François Hollande, claimed, "We are threatened because we are a country of freedom." His predecessor, Nicolas Sarkozy, stated that, "It was a declaration of war on civilisation. Faced with barbarity, civilisation must defend itself." Neither of these assertions is true.

The French state has its own line in "barbarism" which it has visited on the Arab and Muslim peoples of North Africa and the Middle East, from the Algerian War to its present interventions in sub-Saharan Africa. These dwarf terrorist atrocities like those at Charlie Hebdo. The wars and occupations of the last decade and a half, waged by the Nato Allies, the genocidal attacks by Israel on the Palestinians, especially those in Gaza, have all acted to alienate and outrage many people from Muslim backgrounds. So too did the banning of the hijab in French schools and denying Muslim children the right to an alternative to pork in school canteens. To all this, we can add President Nicolas Sarkozy's own threat to "karcheriser" (steam clean) the banlieues, which contributed to a wave of rioting by youth whom he referred to as "racaille" (which a slang dictionary defines as "thuggish criminals generally of Arab origins").

The regular police harassment of Arab youth in the banlieues, the racist agitation from the growing forces of Marine Le Pen's National Front, all add to the background in which Charlie Hebdo's deliberately provocative cartoons succeeded in providing an "excuse" for individual terrorism, which in turn could lead to mosque burnings and even pogroms from the far right. Moreover, by publishing racist caricatures of Muslims or Africans, the magazine reinforced, even legitimised, the wave of Islamophobia developing not only in France but across Europe.

To argue, as some on the left in France and internationally have done, that the central issue is the need to defend free speech and secularism, which are supposedly under attack from (Muslim) religious obscurantism, is completely wrong and totally ignores the context of imperialism, racism and the war by the Nato powers to continue to dominate and plunder the oil reserves of the Middle East. Recognising the right to free speech and free expression does not mean condoning all exercise of those rights. Like all such formal rights, their exercise has to be limited by the right of others not to be endangered, as Muslims and other communities will now be endangered.

In France, secularism and satirising religious ideas and authorities have a long tradition rooted in the great revolutionary movements of the 18th and 19th centuries. At that time, the target was the still tremendously powerful Catholic church, which backed the counter-revolutionary forces opposed to the republic. Defence of that tradition has become a central plank of the ideology of the French bourgeoisie, a fundamental part of its claim to represent modernity and civilisation. However, to equate attacks on the religion of the old ruling class with attacks on the religion of oppressed minorities is to side with the oppressors.

Democratic rights

Socialists defend the principle of a secular state against all attempts to give religion privileges in public life. We defend the freedom to criticise religion as vigorously as we denounce any such criticism which takes on racist overtones. In fact, right across Europe, racists are sidestepping anti-racist laws by claiming they are just criticising Islam as a religion. They are taking up the issues of misogyny and homophobia too as weapons to create a picture of Muslims in general as reactionary and dangerous alien elements. This incitement to Islamophobia, that is, hatred and fear of Muslims, is just as bad as anti-Semitic incitement, of which France has had such bitter experience.

Of course, Charlie Hebdo is not a far right wing or a generally racist magazine, indeed, it has called for banning the Front National and virulently satirised the Le Pens, father and daughter. Its defenders point out that it has also mocked the Pope and other religions including Judaism. But its attacks on Muslims and Islam are in a different class and cannot be regarded as anything other than virulent Islamophobia. These cartoons were not a brave defence of freedom of expression but a cowardly attack on a persecuted and disadvantaged minority.

Whatever its initiators intend, the social media campaign #JeSuisCharlie, which seeks to deluge the web with the magazine's offensive cartoons, can only have reactionary consequences. Its message is clear, either one declares identity with Charlie Hebdo and asserts the right to publish racist caricatures or one sides with the Islamists who carried out the attack. Not only does this give a boost to the racists but it is very likely to goad some of the victims of Islamophobia to further attacks, thus starting another cycle of atrocities.

We defend both the right to criticise religion and the right to practice it free of discrimination or abuse. These rights give a limited protection to the working class and socially oppressed groups in a society where economic, political and ideological power, the power of the press and the other media, is concentrated in the hands of a ruling class that manipulates religious and ethnic differences to its advantage.

To defend these rights consistently, however, means rejecting the perspectives and the ideology of the French ruling class. In particular, it means rejecting the claim that official French laïcité represents an objective defence of the rights of all citizens. This is a false universalism. By raising secularism to, as it were, a sacred principle, it effectively says that anyone who does not worship it is not really part of French society. Likewise, we reject the fantasy that bourgeois secularism is a bastion of universal enlightenment values and European culture that is now under siege by backward religious reactionaries.

National unity

Neither secularism nor freedom of religious criticism are seriously under threat in France or anywhere else in Europe. The centrality of secularism to the French state is not challenged by an attack such as that on Charlie Hebdo. Indeed, the nature of that attack reveals very clearly the social and political isolation of its perpetrators. Such terrorism is the weapon of the weak. By contrast, baiting and demonising a national and religious minority in the name of satirical criticism is a cowardly tailing of the dominant ruling class ideology. The laudable past record of journalists satirising the French religious and reactionary right is no mitigation.

The unconditional support for Charlie Hebdo by the media and political establishment makes it perfectly clear that the main task of socialists at the moment is not opposition to self-censorship or defence of the right to criticise religion but opposition to the whole idea of a unity of interests between all citizens of France. This is the real content and purpose of the major forces right across the political spectrum, from the Communist Party to the Front National. The huge rally in Paris on Sunday 11 January, though boycotted by the FN because it was not formally invited, is a celebration of the unity of the nation. Though many muslims or French citizens of Arab origin will doubtless take part, the invitation to Benjamin Netanyahu, the mass murderer of Gaza, is an obscenity.

France is a country where the 12 per cent Muslim population accounts for 60-70 per cent of the prison population, where they are denied basic religious rights. The police fine women for wearing the burka in the street. Fascists physically attack them. Pupils are denied Halal food and their parents are banned from school trips. To pretend that secularism has not been intertwined with and put at the service of racism, something that has invaded the popular consciousness, is simply a shameful excuse for failing to fight it. It leaves a powerful weapon unchallenged in the hands of our class enemy.

Conclusion

Socialists condemn without equivocation attacks on freedom of expression. We are the implacable enemies of the political project of Al-Qaida and ISIS. But we also totally reject any accommodation to official racism which suggests the struggle to be waged is defending bourgeois democracy as embodied in the French Republic against clerical fascists trying to Islamise Europe.

The mocking of Islam and prominent Muslims in the context of a generalised rise in racist violence and religious intolerance absolutely reinforces the efforts of the ruling class to portray 'Islamism' as an existential 'enemy within'. It is doubly and triply damaging if socialists play with this fire.

The successful mobilisations in Germany, against the Islamophobic movement 'Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the West' (Pegida, from its German initials) show what can be done. By highlighting the racist content of the supposed 'defence of European civilisation?', anti-racists there focussed public attention on the real problem and brought some 30,000 onto the streets against Pegida's 18,000. Like their French counterparts, the German bourgeoisie is already trying to present this as a demonstration of shared values but, at the very least, the movement has established that it is the racists who are the danger, not muslims.

Across Europe, the left and the working class movement must stand shoulder to shoulder with muslims against the racist populist and fascist parties and prove that they will not be fooled by racism masquerading as defence of free speech and secularism. If we do that, the alienation and feelings of persecution, which will surely generate more terrorist outrages, can be countered. Within Muslim communities, a struggle can be generated against the reactionary Islamist ideology which will be a hundred times more effective than the efforts of the security services of the imperialist state.

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