

## COMMEMORATION

### Reflections on the Meaning of a Tragedy

#### Ephraim Nissan

The Editorial of the 2015 volume of *International Studies in Humour* is followed by a section of memorial tributes, made a tragic necessity by the events of 7 January in Paris, which made the new year an *annus horribilis* for the organised production of humour. Thanks to Nelly Feuerhahn, editor of *Humoresques*, the present journal is able to publish two memorial tributes from France, by Yves Frémion, an expert whom she introduced as “a friend of mine, a great specialist of *Charlie Hebdo* and other press”, and he in turn wrote to “suggest a brief history of this magazine and a portrait of the five cartoonists killed”. This indeed is the topic of his two texts published here, in that order.

He is in the process of completing a history of France’s political cartoons, and — to quote from an email, but see his formal biosketch in his first contribution — is

the president of the Institut de Zygomatique appliquée (research about humour), former columnist about humour history in ‘Fluide glacial’ (best comics magazine in France) and editor-in-chief of ‘Papiers Nickelés’ (review about comics, cartoon, illustration, stamps, popular images and engraving). My last publication in the UK was the Charb obituary in *The Guardian* in January.

At the very end of his second memorial tribute, Frémion points out what — apart from the specific losses for France, with the violent death of such veteran cartoonists as Cabu — arguably is the most important and general impact we are now witnessing: “Dessiner est devenu dangereux. Ce n’est pas le terrorisme qui menace l’humour français: c’est l’autocensure”. The impact is the behavioural change in the generation of political humour, with the imposition of self-censorship precisely in the expression of any critique of such domains that events have shown would be prone to elicit even lethal punitive reactions. In fact, also here in Britain one could on occasion read about developments in the team and policies of *Charlie hebdo* in its resuscitated form, with one surviving cartoonist, Luz, both announcing he would no longer touch upon the topics that provoked the massacre, and on the other hand, announcing his departure from *Charlie hebdo* because of its new, very cautious editorial course.

Outside France, too, one comes across some cartoonist’s self-assessment and avowal of a new course where a particular kind of risk will no longer be taken, a risk determined by the themes of the heretofore avoided expression. In Britain, such has been the case of an article by Martin Rowson.<sup>2</sup> Among the other things, Rowson admitted to both he and his newspaper discarding an intention he had of drawing a particular cartoon, and then turned to a personal note about his family:

Having discussed the implications of producing my first planned cartoon with my family, I also subsequently discovered that, despite initially agreeing to me proceeding, our children, both in their twenties, became sick with anxiety at what might befall me if I had (although, to his credit, our son did email me to say that if I was going to be assassinated, could I make sure it was him who did it. This, incidentally, was a joke). The hundreds of online posters who then accused me and *The Guardian* of unspeakable cowardice and appeasement [...]

<sup>2</sup> Martin Rowson, “Pushing Laughter to Its Very Limits”, *British Journalism Review*, 26(1), March 2015, pp. 19–26, doi: 10.1177/0956474815575451 The quotation block which appears on this page is from Rowson, p. 24. The quotation block which appears first on the next page is from pp. 23–24.

There is a facet of the events which in my opinion both Rowson and Frémion partly misconstrue. Rowson wrote:

Or the further irony of some of the world's grislier leaders "marching" in support of *Charlie Hebdo*, including a representative of Saudi Arabia, two days after Raif Badawi received the first 50 lashes of his 1,000 lashes [...] Also present were Binyamin Netanyahu, [...] and Mahmoud Abbas, [...]

Rather alike — though more benevolently and without the self-contradiction into which Rowson incurred<sup>3</sup> — Frémion wrote:

Morts le même jour et désormais transformés en icônes, ils auraient beaucoup ri des manifestations hypocrites en leur faveur. Voir défiler leurs pires ennemis (Netanyahou, Cameron, Bongo, le premier ministre de Poutine, les leaders des organisations musulmanes qui les avaient traînés devant les tribunaux, la classe politique française au complet) aux côtés de tous ceux qui ne les avaient jamais lus, ou entendre sonner les cloches des églises, les aurait fait hurler de rire.

I would hesitate very much, given the circumstances, to label almost anybody as hypocritical for taking part in the tribute which, mind you, was primarily for France, whose popular and institutional response had clearly shown the extent of the wound to her self-perceived constitutive image as a collectivity and polity. How not to love France? Or rather, how not to love what is lovable in France, upon witnessing her at her best and at her sincerest?

One does not need to agree with what *Charlie hebdo* published — specifically instance by instance, or as an editorial policy — to react viscerally to the fate of its staff. And this, because of how entrenched the transvaluation of freedom is in how we, as individuals and collectivities and particular groups, see and cherish ourselves. That is to say, the slain have become in their death what they could never hope to be in life. Let us admit that much. Their apotheosis is because of how we view ourselves and ideally our societies, and it is this that has made the slain internationally iconic.

As Rowson has aptly pointed out:<sup>4</sup>

Maybe that's one of the reasons why the murders at the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris on January 7 echoed round the world, and continue to reverberate: the size of the horror is graspable, and we know the names. They also took place in the heart of a Western capital city teeming with millions of people. Indeed, the murder of police officer Ahmed Merabet, a Muslim of Algerian descent like his murderers Said and Cherif Kouachi, was caught on camera. Mustapha Ourrad, a copy editor at *Charlie Hebdo*, was also of Algerian descent, and was also murdered by the Kouachi brothers, with what surviving witnesses described as calm, execution-style deliberation. Also murdered were Frédéric Boisseau, *Charlie Hebdo's* building maintenance man; Franck Brinsolaro, another police officer assigned as a bodyguard to the magazine's editor-in-chief; Elsa

<sup>3</sup> While turning to extol the case of a particular activist who is also a cartoonist, without spending one word to identify his ideological or military agenda, Rowson did apparently forget that on the previous page he had recognised that not anything expressed through cartooning is conducive to the betterment of humankind. "Then again, there's no evidence Julius Streicher, editor of the cartoon-heavy, anti-Semitic hate sheet *Der Sturmer*, ever for a single second contemplated the irony defence at his Nuremburg trial, at the end of which he was hanged" (Rowson, p. 23). In my own research, I have on occasion had to deal with the role of cartooning in promoting, for example in the 19th century or in the early 20th century, the mistreatment (or worse) of this or that ethnic or religious group. Unfortunately, cartooning is quite good at that, because of bypassing the need to articulate a rational argument — even though at its best, cartooning can precisely help a rational argument. Moreover, historically such cartoonists who have promoted obnoxious ideologies in order to oppress some particular human group have been technically quite talented. And it is not merely a thing of the past.

<sup>4</sup> Rowson, p. 20.

Cayat, a psychoanalyst who was also Jewish and the only woman killed in the atrocity, though the Kouachis specifically spared the lives of other women in the room; Bernard Maris, a Professor of Economics and shareholder in *Charlie Hebdo*; and Michel Renaud, a 69-year-old French journalist due to guest edit a future edition of the magazine.

And yet what made the *Charlie Hebdo* killings apparently so exquisitely, exceptionally horrific was the five other victims, who were all cartoonists. This, it seemed, was a brutal and bloody assault on laughter. Which meant it was also an assault on the very fact of being human itself.

One must never forget that it was not only *Charlie Hebdo* that was hit: in the same concerted constellation of attacks, customers at a kosher supermarket were also mowed down, and separately a policewoman was. A staff member at the supermarket who saved the lives of further customers, was prized with being granted French citizenship. Which brings us to the text quoted earlier, berating the appearance of the influx of foreign leaders. My own response to this<sup>5</sup> is revisualising mentally a long photograph from a newspaper. It was a line of premiers, presidents, and also a king with his queen. It was a colour photograph in which it was sometimes somewhat telling who was near whom, and which would make one indeed ponder, and wonder, about what in context the presence of the given person situationally meant. For some, clearly the tribute was to France, regardless of the values to uphold which, France was so spectacularly showing herself, through her demonstrating people, to have been wounded. For others in the photograph, ones from other solid democracies, their values could be expected indeed to be very similar.

And I have visualised in particular, the leader of the African country one of whose people was the supermarket staff member who was being hailed as a hero (which he was), side by side with, and looking at, another national leader who by his institutional duty had come *because* of the massacre at the kosher supermarket and the wounded community to which that supermarket was catering, and had come *also* because of *Charlie hebdo*, whose team and famous cartoonists were physically erased.

And yes, I hope also because of the slain policewoman who was slain for no other reason than that she was where she was, sporting an identity that made her vulnerable. Like the others who were slain during early January's Paris murderous sprees: they were denied their lives because of who they were, because of whether who they were born to be, or who professionally they had made themselves honourably be.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Apart from my own preference to resist dehumanising politicians especially when I dislike them, also because because of family memories I know that in private some of them can be very human.

<sup>6</sup> One comes across the distinction between these two kinds not only when comparing the murderous episodes from Paris in early January 2015, but even *within* the massacre on the premises of *Charlie hebdo*. Rowson, p. 20, writes: "Elsa Cayat, a psychoanalyst who was also Jewish and the only woman killed in the atrocity, though the Kouachis specifically spared the lives of other women in the room". Even conceding that that the perpetrators would generally spare women, they would not spare anybody they believed to be Jewish. Their declared allegiancy was to Isis, and Isis (grossly unorthodox notwithstanding its claims to the contrary) espouses genocide in both theory and practice.

There tends to be an overly emphasis on the supposed cultural otherness of the wellsources of such aberrant behaviours. I suspect that also the cartoonists at *Charlie hebdo* took extremists' proclamations too much at their face value concerning their claimed sources; hence *Charlie hebdo*'s choice of target for their satire. And yet, the ideology of the perpetrators stems, which is documented, from a syncretism with European far-right ideology not only from the Axis years, but at least as early as some European responses to the French Revolution. An acme was during the 1840 Damascus Affair, an especially notorious blood libel promoted by illiberal French clerics and even the wayward consul of the July Monarchy (J. Fraenkel, *The Damascus Affair*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Even as early as the spate, in Augustus III's kingdom, of blood libels followed by horrific executions in the 1730s–1760s, motivated by an urge to provide a network of shrines with the relics of supposed martyrs to attract pilgrims. It was obstructed by the enlightened condemnation by Cardinal Ganganeli.

It made much sense that those two representatives of two nations should be side by side, in that particular circumstance, considering the identities of both the hero and the perpetrator at the massacre at the kosher supermarket.<sup>7</sup> And no, it did not matter so much what specifically they were as politicians in their respective countries. Those two were a country trying to convey to another country something kind, just trying, through the two individuals representing them. What does this tell us about the broader picture, unless this is a *petitio principii*? We have seen the images of so many and so diverse people expressing their outrage in the squares of different countries. What they have accomplished is a great display of humanity where both the cause and the intended effect of the outrage had been the very negation of humanity.

There is a difference between derision obliterating somebody's humanity, and humour that stressed our shared humanity and invites us to take more humane looks at things. Whereas a humour magazine does not necessarily manage to accomplish the latter rather than the former, it nevertheless underscores the freedom to laugh.

There is a pivotal moment in time, on 7 January 2015, which has transfigured the dying staff of *Charlie hebdo* into an icon for what our free societies dearly mean to us. This is something that a cartoonist who survived the massacre because he arrived late

At any rate, events in Eastern Europe initiated an early spate of emulation in Ottoman lands for the rest of the 18th century. It was only very much later that that kind of ideology was carried over across the denominational divide, and then it was as a manifestation of *far-right modernity*, notwithstanding claimed antecedents in a rather ancient imagined past of manly unflinching cruelty. This however — the historical pageant — is part and parcel of some strands of Axis-era European ideologies. Just think of (Nibelungic) Sigfried through Richard Wagner's lens, as later appropriated by the Axis vision.

As for Algiers, the murderous riots that took place there under the mayor's lead during the Dreyfus affair were not the doing of the native population (even as the Maghreb often was intolerant, historically). In the 1490s, an Algerian cleric from Tlemcen, Muḥammad al-Maghīlī (taking a cue from the arrival of Jewish refugees from Spain, and arguably wishing to emulate Ferdinand and Isabel's intolerance), preached no more tolerance for Jews' presence. Another Algerian cleric issued a *fatwa* against him, as overturning the *dhimmi*s' status was deemed heretical. Al-Maghīlī had to abandon the Algerian coast, moved south, and his extremist activism erased Jewish communities from the southern Sahara (e.g., from the towns of Sijilmessa, Tamantit, Tuat, Tmimouna) and the Songhay empire in the 1490s. It is significant that al-Maghīlī could not remain in the coastal area, where *mainstream* attitudes were too strong for him to overturn. In the region of Timbuktu, al-Maghīlī still has a reputation as a prodigiously learned scholar, similar to that enjoyed by Maimonides (Aquinas' equivalent) in Jewish folklore. That was made possible by the Niger Bend's *peripherality* and the willingness of a new strong king, a general who had come back from pilgrimage, enacted a *coup d'état*, and established his own dynasty: Askīya Muḥammad, king of Songhay from 1492 to 1528, was receptive to al-Maghīlī's call to kill and ban Jewish merchants, and what clearly mattered most to him was the corollary of being able to confiscate their assets and those of their non-Jewish associates. Leo Africanus bears witness to greed, not only piety, being a motive of that king. Cf. J.O. Hunwick, "Al-Maghīlī and the Jews of Tuwât: The Demise of a Community", *Studia Islamica*, 61 (1985), pp. 155–183; Id., *Jews of a Saharan Oasis: Elimination of the Tamantit Community*, Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2006.

This is not to deny that al-Maghīlī could find a precedent in the Almohad conquest of the Maghreb and Spain, and that al-Qa'eda and Isis have the precedent of 19th-century Mahdism in Sudan, Senegal's Futa Toro region, and Yemen. But far-right ideas from Europe have also become enmeshed in the ideologies of some Middle Eastern actual or would-be regimes, both secular and clericalist. Free expression and tolerance historically became overriding values, at least ideally, in some Western societies. The late P.J. Vatikiotis and others analysed why this is far from being the case in the East.

<sup>7</sup> That the event at the supermarket has tended to be downplayed in relation to the equally shocking event at the editorial offices of the magazine is perhaps culturally conditioned: the subconscious idea that the prospective victims of the former episode "are used to it". The gaffe of the late Raymond Barre as prime minister, after the killings at a synagogue in Rue Copernique in Paris, is still notorious: he referred to a passer-by who was also killed, as an "innocent" victim. Were the others not innocent?

Rowson's paper we cited begins by pointing out how much of the terror death toll is unreported.

(it was his birthday, and he brought his colleagues a cake, a *galette des rois*, that in the end nobody ate), Luz (Renald Luzier), has pointed out in an interview (given to Anaïs Ginori<sup>8</sup> after he decided to abandon the theme<sup>9</sup> that triggered the fatal attack, but before he made his mind to leave the magazine for good): “I was scared by the symbolic strength of that demonstration [of mourners who proclaimed *Je suis Charlie*]. We have ceased to only be a magazine, and we became a date in history books”. Luz also pointed out that at any rate he, at *Charlie Hebdo*, has become bored with individual politicians, when it comes to drawing them. This is understandable: the enormity of what has happened has rendered some butts puny. He also stated: “In the hours after the massacre, I was thinking I would never again draw a cartoon”. But within 48 hours, he was holding again the felt pen. In the same interview, Luz answered Ginori’s remark that he had been able to imagine the perpetrators when they were children. He made this noble remark: “There had been a time when they, too, [being children,] used to make drawings. We cartoonists prolong this age of innocence. The Kouachi [brothers] abandoned their childhood to enter adulthood in the worst manner”. I can hardly imagine a more apt response than this to Brian Sewell’s<sup>10</sup> lamenting that the response to the massacre had ignored the puerility of *Charlie Hebdo*. Puerile it may have been. But puerility — from Latin *puer*, ‘child’ — is not always a bad word. A child’s eyes often perceive what *is* worth perceiving.

What I would like to stress again in particular is that it does not take agreeing with the line or lines or this or that choice of the pre-massacre *Charlie Hebdo* to respond viscerally to what was done to the staff on the magazine’s premises. I do not consider it relevant that (as more than one has remarked) some who attended the ceremonies in the aftermath were strongly disliked by the magazine. That is totally beyond the point. It is to their credit, that those persons also attended (as a due tribute to France, if not always to free society). This tragedy has happened not because of the specifics of *Charlie Hebdo*’s politics, but quite evidently as an attack on a free society and its freedoms: the freedom to live (hence the attack on the kosher supermarket), and the freedom to express oneself (hence the attack on *Charlie Hebdo*). This is why there was such an overwhelming, indeed glorious response to the events of 7 January 2015.

<sup>8</sup> I read and reread it in its Italian translation, which appeared in *La Repubblica* of 13 May 2015, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Luz stated: “I have held a conversation in my mind with my little man, [...]. We blamed each other. In the end, I understand the problem is neither me, nor him”. This is a deep insight. A historical character must not be confused with present-day aberrant use which some do thereof in order to promote a modern radical ideology clad as a historical pageant, in line with a tradition known from the Europe of the 1920s–1940s. I have already discussed this in the notes, but cannot hope to do the subject justice in this short compass.

<sup>10</sup> B. Sewell, “How Should We Mind Our Language?” (reviewing Mick Hume, *Trigger Warning: Is the Fear of Giving Offence Killing Free Speech?*, William Collins, 2015), *Evening Standard*, London, 18 June 2015, pp. 36–37. In the first column of that review, Sewell stated: “Hume begins with the Charlie Hebdo killings in January this year — a ‘murderous attack’ — but says not one word of that journal’s persistently infantile quality. Of course the writers and artists should not have been shot but I wonder how many of its immediate defendants were aware of its puerility. My own is that it was and always has been so silly and insignificant that it deserved only to be ignored [Luz conceded almost that much in the interview he gave Ginori], and those who attempted to destroy it utterly failed to recognise that it was a journal of no importance produced by and for bathetic sniggerers. ¶ The murderers succeeded in wrong-footing themselves and all who promptly assembled with their sharpened pencils in the urban squares of France. ¶ The only sensible response to such rubbish is to ignore it — and much of the rest of this book plays with this idea”. I feel this misidentifies the point of what made the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre as iconic as it is. It does not matter whether the publication was right or whether you could agree with it or find it mature. It is to its editor, Charbonnier’s, credit that he remarked explicitly that deeming a segment of the public (unlike others) unable to cope with it, is inferiorising that identity.