

# **THE CHARLIE HEBDO ATTACK - THE CAUSES, THE REACTION AND THE REPERCUSSIONS, 16.2.15**

**Richard Haley - Chair, Scotland Against Criminalising Communities (SACC),**

When I was asked to speak at this meeting, I thought that the passage of time since the attack in Paris would help to give some perspective on it. The murders in Copenhagen over the weekend mean on the contrary that the issue is still a raw one. The background to the Copenhagen incident remains unclear and the repercussions are still to be seen, so I'm going to focus on the Paris attack last month.

The men who carried out the attack in Paris weren't simply some hotheads outraged by Charlie Hebdo's depiction of the Prophet. The firebombing of the Charlie Hebdo offices a few years ago might perhaps be seen like that, but the attack this year was obviously more calculated.

It wouldn't have happened but for the wars instigated by the US and Britain that have been tearing the Middle East apart since 9/11. Possibly it still wouldn't have happened but for the fact that everyone seems to be expecting an escalation of the conflict with ISIS in Iraq in the next few months.

The attack was horrible, but it's important to keep it in perspective. It has been described as France's 9/11, but of course it was far smaller than 9/11 or the 2005 London bombings, and far smaller than the killings that are happening now in Nigeria and Syria.

What happened immediately after the Paris killings was another matter, and deserves a lot of thinking about. About 1.5 million people demonstrated in Paris that Sunday in solidarity with the murder victims. There were large demonstrations in other cities in France too, all mobilised in just a few days. The Paris demo was probably the biggest ever held in France. It was on the same kind of scale as the February 2003 demonstration in Britain against the Iraq war. But it wasn't remotely the same kind of thing.

Perhaps people would quite often march in their millions for murder victims, if they had the opportunity to do so and came to believe there was some momentum and purpose behind what they were doing. But that doesn't in fact happen. When two Kurdish women activists were assassinated in their Paris office in January 2013 – probably by agents of the Turkish state – nothing remotely like this year's demo happened.

The mass mobilisation this year can't be explained by empathy alone. It was focussed on symbols and ideas, not people. For a lot of the French media and political leaders, it was about the "values of the Republic." For their counterparts elsewhere in Europe, it was about "European values."

Even the phrase "Union Sacrée" was used – exactly the phrase used when French socialists capitulated to war fever in 1914. Whenever that phrase is used in France, you can be sure that something very dirty is afoot.

For all the people demonstrating with those cute pen symbols, it was about "freedom of expression." The only good thing to come out of the demo was that a lot of people noticed that

the world leaders lining up to be photographed in Paris weren't exactly champions of a free press, and that French law itself has a rather shaky grasp of freedom of expression.

I don't think it's quite right to see this as hypocrisy. Hollande and Netanyahu and the other world leaders who lined up in Paris knew that the freedom of expression thing was just a code for something else. The "freedom of expression" slogan was actually no more about the right to express yourself than the tricolour is about colour coordination.

If you want to understand what 1.5 million people on a state-friendly demo really means, you only have to listen to what the French Prime Minister, Manuel Valls, had already said.

He had said the day before the demo that France was engaged in "a war against terrorism, against jihadism, against radical Islam, against everything that is aimed at breaking fraternity, freedom, solidarity."

The war against terrorism isn't just a metaphor. It's a real war fought with planes and tanks and detention camps and torture. Manuel Valls seems to be proposing a war of that kind against radical Islam and anything thought to be un-French.

A symbol that was everywhere – on the streets of Paris and beyond - was the slogan "Je suis Charlie."

Charlie isn't much of a thing to be. The Charlie Hebdo magazine directed its satire at a lot of targets, some of them the kind of targets that satire washes off like water off a duck's back. But it seemed to particularly like targeting Islam, and Muslims, and Arabs. It did it with images that borrow from every nasty racist stereotype you've ever seen, and every islamophobic dog-whistle phrase you've ever heard.

What's called the right to freedom of expression really amounts to the right to colonial plunder. It goes something like this:

"You guys have got a Prophet? Right, we'll have some of that. You don't make images of your Prophet? Fantastic! Our images will have so much more impact."

It's just another form of cultural appropriation. It's interesting that some of the people who were quickest to see it were anti-racist activists in the US, especially people who had been active over Ferguson and the "Black Lives Matter" protests.

It used to seem that here in Europe our proximity to the Islamic world led people to take a more nuanced approach to the so-called "war on terror" than was usual in the US. That's changing, and it creates new dangers as well as some new opportunities to form progressive alliances.

Every time we hear the old "clash of civilisations" junk, we need to think back 3 or 4 years and remember how Tahrir Square became the inspiration for the Occupy movement, for movements against austerity in Spain, for movements against austerity in Greece. The way that the Arab Spring was subsequently undermined and destroyed and soaked in blood isn't very different from the strategy that we see working to destroy resistance to austerity here.

Charlie Hebdo's racism is a symptom of a wider problem in France.

At the moment, France is the most islamophobic country in the EU, in terms of state and institutional islamophobia. The extent of islamophobia in daily life is harder to assess, but the entrenchment of islamophobia in law, in politics and in public institutions is very clear.

The French left hasn't attempted to organise against the National Front and Le Pen in anything like the way UAF has managed here. Hand-in-hand with that, there's been a failure to challenge islamophobia within the left.

In the French municipal election last March, a lot of Muslims voted for the National Front. The media generally reported that as a backlash against gay marriage. But when I was at an islamophobia conference in London in December, organised by the Islamic Human Rights Commission, I heard a different story.

Muslims had voted for the National Front not because they believed it had anything to offer them, but in order to punish the left in the sharpest way possible.

It worked. The left began to take Muslims seriously.

But that was in December. Now the French Prime Minister is at war with radical Islam, people have been arrested in France for expressing vague sympathy with the Charlie Hebdo attackers, and there is a mass campaign in French schools requiring children to say "I am Charlie Hebdo." And inevitably there has been a spate of attacks on mosques and Muslims.

Most probably we'll soon see Hollande trying to use the theme of national unity and the "Union Sacrée" to prop up the austerity measures that caused his Socialist Party such losses in the March elections.

Here in Britain, we've seen the Charlie Hebdo attack used to give an extra push to the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act that was already being railroaded through Parliament.

The Act is potentially the most far-reaching and the most directly islamophobic and divisive of all the anti-terrorist legislation enacted over the last 15 years. There are still opportunities to resist it, especially here in Scotland where key parts of the Act depend on statutory instruments that are still to be agreed by Westminster, and that require consultation with the Scottish Government. We need to seize these opportunities.

### **Links**

SACC Statement on the Paris Shootings and Islamophobia  
- <http://www.sacc.org.uk/press/2015/sacc-statement-paris-shootings-and-islamophobia>

I am not Charlie Hebdo - <http://www.richard-haley.co.uk/charlie-hebdo/>

### **Discussion**

**Eric** pointed out the use that Netanyahu has made of the Charlie Hebdo affair. He was using it as part of the Zionist project to get Jewish people to leave Europe and come to Israel. Eric also asked Richard whether the Hebdo cartoon was itself racist?

**Richard** replied saying that the cartoon images were clearly racist in their portrayal of Muslims. Whilst Charlie Hebdo was prepared to attack other religions and politicians, the position of the Catholic Church or mainstream politicians was pretty secure in France. In contrast Muslims, the majority of whom were very marginalised in France, particularly those from North Africa, have been under sustained attack from the French state and the Right. This is the context in which the Charlie Hebdo cartoons should be seen. The same anti-Islamic theme had been taken up by the British Right.

**Pat** agreed with Richard. The cartoons seemed similar to the anti-Semitic cartoons used in Nazi Germany. They are a way of belittling and dehumanising people. They are a way of making them 'other', in order to make them easier to attack.

**Luke** said there had also been a fairly relentless series of attacks on Islam in the UK. He denied there is a right to free speech. Society puts a limit on this right. Sometimes free speech is used to push an agenda of intolerance.

**Allan** welcomed Richard's contribution, but said he said, with regard to Luke's contribution, that invoking "society" to limit free speech had certain dangers. Does 'society' attain this by demanding state limitations on free speech? The 1936 Public Order Act was ostensibly passed to curtail Mosley's Blackshirts. It was only used against Communists. There are times when socialists may feel the need to curb the activities of the Far Right, but we should organise to do this ourselves.

If Allan had been in France he would have wanted to join a demonstration against the jihadist killers. However, he would have wanted to have been on an independent demo, that also highlighted the complete hypocrisy of French state, and figures such as Netanyahu and the Saudi Arabian ambassador, attending the official event.

**Richard** said that we should certainly oppose those Muslims pushing for a state ban on blasphemy. The British government might well be prepared to go along with this, in return for winning greater legitimacy amongst Muslims. He also said that the attacks in Paris and now Copenhagen should be absolutely and unequivocally condemned. Furthermore, although the attack on the Jewish kosher supermarket may have been opportunist, the attack on Jews in Copenhagen was premeditated. This had given succour to Netanyahu's call for European Jews to settle in Israel, reminding us that it remains a settler state.

**Anne** said that Muslims must feel that the Western world is waging war on them. Israel was trying to appear as the victim. They are claiming there is a rise in anti-Semitism in Europe. This has occurred in the 7 months since the Israeli invasion of Gaza.

**Rocco** said that it was difficult to make criticisms of Israel. People were being denied freedom of speech. An Edinburgh councillor had told him that he was unwilling to come out in favour of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign, because of the Zionist pressure he would face.

**Eric** wondered how many journalists had been killed in Israel.

**Alan** said that the official demonstration on Paris had broken down the initial unity, which had been found in the communities. The official demo had nothing to do with freedom of speech, as could be seen by the official guest list.

Anti-Zionism is being equated with anti-Semitism.

**Irene** asked how we could challenge this?

**Donny** said one way was to join the solidarity demonstration called by the Greeks against Golden Dawn. This was being held in **Glasgow on March 21<sup>st</sup>**.

It also needed to be pointed out in the UK, that the source of recent violence was Tony Blair's decision to join Bush in his war on Iraq. The UK government is now trying to take advantage of a crisis caused by the UK state.

**Luke** said that as well as the March 21<sup>st</sup> demo in Glasgow, there is to be another in **Edinburgh on March 14<sup>th</sup>, against the SDL**.

**SAAC is also organising a Comedy Against Racism night on Sunday, March 8<sup>th</sup> in the Out of the Blue Drill Hall at 7.30pm.**

**Richard** replied by saying that the political situation in the Middle East is complex. However, there is a shared experience of divide-and-rule politics following on earlier colonial interventions. ISIS is not an anti-imperialist force, but part of this divide and rule strategy.

Europe is the cause of many problems in this area, not the saviour. What we are seeing is some convergence between the Establishment and the Far Right. However, the ruling classes are not so keen on the disruption that arises, and want to encourage Muslims to unite around 'our state' and 'our wars'.

It is worth pointing out that the term 'fortress' in 'Fortress Europe' not only means a defensive structure, but a means to control the surrounding areas, e.g. the Middle East and North Africa.

There is another North Africa and Middle East not much promoted by the media. Tahrir Square was at the centre of world affairs and the universal struggle for democracy.