Context versus Value

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There have been mostly two kinds of responses to the Charlie Hebdo killings. On one side are those who have simply seen it as a satire versus intolerance issue, with a subtext: Satire being seen as a western/universal (artistic) value and intolerance being a fundamental aspect of religion (more specifically: Political Islam). Others, who have also equally defended the right to free speech and condemned the killings, however pointed out to the often Islamophobic and racist provocations by the western media, including the murky history of Charles Hebdo, with a crude justification of aiming their guns at jihadis.

Those who have critically looked into the claims of free speech have taken recourse to concrete historical and political contexts of contemporary times. The recent examples of atrocities on Muslims in Europe and the Middle East are quite overwhelming. The concrete contexts around the debate seriously raise questions on the value judgment being passed on the limitations of Islamic societies to respond to anti-religious art against them by people of other religions and cultures. Though it is true, Islamic nations and societies don't have a good record of tolerance against anti-religious art and literature, that political fact and context does not absolve the western countries of their dealing with Muslims and Islamic countries. So there is clearly an overlap here, between how Islamic societies rule themselves and how the West has demonized them and violated their lifeworld at numerous instances. An argument against one fact cannot totally justify itself by overlooking the other fact of the matter. And yet, both these facts are separate, and both are ethically wrong. Islamic societies cannot have barbaric laws against free speech and art while the West cannot exploit, harass and kill Muslims in the name of dubious values equally western and deemed universal. Everything the West affirms may be or may not be valuable for the whole world (or even for everybody within their own world.). In fact, such affirmations can be plain intolerable. Zionist excesses as an excuse for Israeli paranoia against the Palestinian struggle is one such instance. Capitalism and its exploitative machinations is another obvious – "universal" – example. These examples are not simply political, hence contestable, but extremely value-laden and justificatory. The counter-universal values, in contrast to these exploitative regimes of power, would be workers movements and anti-imperialist resistances. Palestine, the Vietnam of our times, itself is a value. Its greatness lies in the fact that – despite bulldozers and air strikes – it exists.

The West is clever as always. Today it runs the same imperialistic business by using other phrases: For instance, "restoring democracy". In the name of restoring democracy, the West has used its military and political power to meddle with other countries. This is an old, shameless tactic of justifying imperialism using the rhetoric of democracy. The term "civilian" is today mostly used and heard along with another casually used term like "casualty". Civilians die casually, as a casualty, when the West goes out to restore democracy in countries with non-democratic regimes.

So the scenario seems to be, if your country or society suffers from a lack of free speech or democracy, the West is going to teach you how to go about it. It will caricature your gods, bully your governments and injure your people. You have to pay for not being democratic or free enough. This is not an argument, this is a writ, and it is passed without ado all the time. The crowd which celebrates free speech and democracy are often silent or not vocal enough when such violent transgressions are made upon other people's right to sovereignty. Marginal critics raising their voice are dismissed as "leftists".

If there is a problem with bearded jihadis blindly shooting at cartoonists, there is an equal problem with clean shaven soldiers shooting people like ducks from sophisticated warplanes. Let this

nonsense of medieval versus modern end with these two images. Both these images aren't medieval but modern images of violence in the name of both religion and democracy, carrying out mindless acts against each other. In fact, the jihadis seem more mindless than the soldiers who aren't so mindless – they have rational purposes at hand. Taking over other countries and governments are more sinister than killing cartoonists. After all, rationality is another modern, western (and now universal) value. When rationality kills, it sounds a little better does it? On the contrary, it sounds a little worse.

So arguments based on context are obviously murkier than arguments based on the basis of this universal value called free speech. Questions have been raised if we can expect free speech from people whose mindsets about others aren't free yet? Caricaturing is not an obvious sign of a free mind. In fact, cartoonists are often known to be conservative. Conservatives know to laugh and poke fun at the world as much as liberals and radicals do. So free speech and free art need not only be a liberal value. The conservative right can also claim to hold such values. In such cases, it will be wise enough for free speech defenders to be careful about considering what is free speech and art. The idea of free speech sounds more and more tied up to the context. Like any good Marxist will tell you, you cannot proclaim a value without clarifying the context.

Here we come to the last bit and raise the question left to ask: If all values are context-based, are universal values really not universal? Is the idea of the universal merely a western manufactured idea to rule over and decry others?

The idea of the universal, to begin with, is a consensual idea. Everyone has to believe in, trust and yes – love, that idea for it to be universal. If there is a great value in universal values then it is also important to see how these values are propagated and used to influence others. It is also important to consider and know how other religious and cultural traditions sanction and admit ways of self-criticism, which may not correspond to unbridled, secular insult, and despite that – and also because of it – teach us a few *other* aspects of free speech. A secular consensus on free speech cannot act in a hegemonic fashion if it also wants to be seen as a plural value, accepted by everybody. It is not the rest of the world's responsibility to stand by the values of the West (in the name of a universal consensus) without the West's equal responsibility to stand by the values of other worlds. There cannot be any universality without otherness, just as there cannot be truth without reconciliation.

If values deemed universal are pushed down people's throats and those not sharing the consensus are bullied into agreement or submission, then the value no longer looks or sounds attractive. No value, universal or otherwise, can be established through violence. If there is any universal value that comes before all other universal values it is an ethics based on a certain kind of nonviolence. Without a primary consensus against violence, no world based on universal values can be established. If that be the case, the West has to first admit how it fares on the charge-sheet of violence vis-à-vis the Islamic world. Only then perhaps, this blame gaming can end and we can debate on more substantive issues which, of course, has to do with how free speech and art can survive and thrive in this world of bizarre violence.

*Manash Bhattacharjee is a poet and political science scholar. He has contributed to *Guernica*, *Huffington Post*, *Outlook*, *The Hindu*, etc. His first collection of poetry, *Ghalib's Tomb and Other Poems* (2013), was published by *The London Magazine*. He is currently Adjunct Professor in The Centre for Culture and Creative Expressions at Ambedkar University, New Delhi.