

The Massacre at Charlie Hebdo



The mass murder at *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris is the leading news story in the world, and is universally condemned – rightfully so. In the left's condemnation of this brutal massacre of journalists and cartoonists for expressing opinions in satirical form, we need to express our dissent from some of what's being preached under the foggy cover of “*je suis Charlie*” (I am Charlie).

In the first place, these killings are widely described as “an attack on the values of the West” – this rhetoric, for example, from the U.S. administration that has threatened to jail James Risen, the *New York Times* reporter who refuses to finger the sources for his reporting on CIA misconduct. And as we well know, Washington would like to throw Julian Assange in a prison hole for life.

Let's cite some recent and forgotten history of targeting journalists. We recall the U.S./NATO bombing of the Serbian Radio and Television (RTS) in April 1999, killing sixteen people in the destroyed building. There was last year's killing of at least 13 Palestinian journalists during Israel's most recent assault on Gaza (<http://www.indexoncensorship.org/2014/08/gaza-journalists-israel-palestinians/>), backed and subsidized by the United States, and decades of systematic Israeli censorship and closures of Palestinian newspapers in the Occupied Territories.

We recall the U.S. sponsorship of Central American death

squads that murdered journalists en masse – along with tens of thousands of unionists, students, priests, peasant organizers and entire villages – during the 1980s. Without going through other examples – including the British record in the north of Ireland or the French in Algeria – it's important to say that freedom of the press is a vital and indispensable *democratic* value but not particularly some treasure of "the West."

Indeed, we on the left uphold press freedom and other democratic rights for real, in a way that imperialist states and governments never do and never will.

We see the murder at Charlie Hebdo not as "an attack on the West" but as an expression of the "clash of barbarisms" that has been astutely analyzed by Gilbert Achcar (see the interview on "Democracy Now," January 8, http://www.democracynow.org/2015/1/8/a_clash_of_barbarisms_after_paris). From the 9-11 attacks to the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, to the rise of the "Islamic State," the ongoing tragedies in Pakistan and Syria and elsewhere, and the rise of Islamophobia in European countries and the USA, racialized imperialism and the worst elements of religious-totalitarian fanaticism feed upon each other.

We deeply mourn the targets of the massacre at *Charlie Hebdo*, and that's not because we can claim "*je suis Charlie*." In upholding the precious right to ridicule those in authority – a right which is equally if not more important than the right to elect them – *Charlie Hebdo* seems to us to have sometimes sought to produce shock for its own sake, indeed sometimes resorting to mockery at the expense of communities that are marginalized and vulnerable to attack in France (as they are in the United States as well).

That is not our method – but that is not why the *Charlie Hebdo* staff were attacked. They were massacred at the hands of an extremist faction that seeks, first and foremost, to control the lives and the thoughts of Muslim communities in the Middle

East, in Europe and everywhere. Those communities are in reality the first targets of these killers, just as they will also be the likely victims of racist and bigoted revenge attacks. Above all, we stand in solidarity with those communities, and particularly with those who have bravely stood up to denounce the murders as a much worse attack on their people and their religion than any satirical or blasphemous cartoons could ever have been.

Press freedom and democratic rights are priceless in their own right, and for those fighting for liberation from racism and imperialism they are most important of all.

David Finkel is a member of Solidarity and an editor of Against the Current.

Photograph – Human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh of Iran shows her solidarity with the victims of the Charlie Hebdo killings.