Is Solidarity without Identity Possible? – On the Charlie Hebdo Attack

written by Cinzia Arruzza | January 11, 2015

The time I saw Charb in Paris was January 24, 2010, the day of the crowded commemoration of the French philosopher and activist Daniel Bensaïd at La Mutualité. During the speeches, Charb kept drawing and projecting vignettes about his comrade Daniel, whose book, *Marx: Mode d'Emploi*, he had illustrated a year earlier. In the deep sadness that filled the big room his vignettes constantly reminded us of Bensaïd's subtle humor, of his little malicious smile with which he used to charm us all, slowly helping us to heal the loss. Director of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, Charb was one of the ten cartoonists and journalists killed, together with two policemen, in the ferocious attack of January 7, 2015.

Since then messages of solidarity stating "Je suis Charlie" — I am Charlie — have been flooding the web and other media, a massive manhunt to capture the killers is taking place, shotguns have been fired against two mosques, a kebab shop has been bombed, and all French political leaders have appealed to national unity in defense of the République. Sadly enough, this means that the attack might have been a successful one. Of all the targets the attackers could choose, they deliberately chose a magazine that, in spite of the controversies about the quite Islamophobic vignettes it published, still had credibility among the French Left. A magazine, moreover, that embodied a distinctively French tradition of secularist irreverence, the distinctively French pride of being free to satirize both God and the King, enjoying dwelling in the trivial obscenities of the genre. The target was politically and carefully chosen. The narrative about the direct correspondence between the publication of irreverent vignettes of Muhammad and the attack, as in some sort of mechanical cause-and-effect connection, is over-simplistic. Nor is the narrative about attacks on freedom of speech and of press sufficient to understand what is really happening.

The strategy behind the attack aims at a polarization of French society, at an escalation of the conflict, and above all at the resuscitation of the mantra of "the clash of civilizations." It further isolates the Muslim population in France (around five million people) and exposes it to a further escalation of the already worrying and rampant Islamophobia. It is pushing the white population to gather behind the banners of the national republican unity and identity perceived as under attack from the *new French*, that is, the Muslim French. And, in order not to leave any option of resistance other than radical Islamism to the Muslim population, it is hitting the French Left, the only barrier against an uncontrolled proliferation of Islamophobia in the country, where it hurts the most: in its troubles in dealing with France's colonial past and legacy and in reformulating universalism in such a way as to give full inclusion to Arab and Muslim people.

Charlie Hebdo is an extreme symptom of the troubles of the French Left. Its covers alternate denouncing and criticizing French policies against immigrants and Houellebecq's Islamophobic paranoia with an endless series of vignettes targeting "les islamistes." Following the killing of a thousand Muslim Brothers in the 2013 Rabaa massacre in Egypt, *CH* published a cover with a vignette saying: "Le Coran, c'est de la merde, ça n'arrête pas les balles" (The Quran is a piece of shit: it doesn't stop bullets). Its defenders, in the wake of the criticisms and accusations of Islamophobia *Charlie Hebdo* started to receive, kept pointing out that its satire was addressed to all religions indiscriminately. Whether this is true or not (and I think it is not entirely true), this answer shows a fundamental misunderstanding about context — that same misunderstanding that led part of the French left to capitulate in favor of an abstract republican secularism on the occasion of the discussions regarding the scarf law.

Muslims are not only a largely oppressed and exploited minority in France, they are increasingly becoming the scapegoat of the economic crisis, the mirror upon which white Europeans project their deepest nightmares and fears. Every single week in Germany several thousands of people gather in various cities under the organizational denomination of PEGIDA for demonstrations against the "Islamization des Abendlandes" (*PEGIDA* stands for "Patrotic Europeans against the Islamization of the West"). An Italian rightwing newspaper published the photo of the attack on *Charlie Hebdo* under the title "This is Islam," and a large part of the Italian population would be perfectly happy to let Muslim immigrants sink without help in the Mediterranean. In this worrying, and honestly scary, context, the repeated publication of vignettes caricaturizing Islamists by adopting religious symbols and stereotypical representations that by the same token identify five million oppressed people living in France was not an act of courage.

In spite of my very dear memory of Charb's sweet, humorous, and moving vignettes about Daniel Bensaïd, I cannot bring

my self to participate in the choir and say that “I am Charlie.” But here is the problem. This attack and these murders push people like me into a corner, as they make it extremely difficult for us to say that we find this act of violence disgusting and unacceptable, that we deeply loathe the politics, strategy, and means of radical Islamists, that we are in pain for the people who have been murdered, but that yet we cannot identify ourselves with *Charlie Hebdo*. And we cannot deploy the expected slogan of “We are all French” in this moment in which a specific version of French national identity was mobilized to oppress those French citizens who cannot possibly identify with it.

This tiny space, the space for a solidarity capable of challenging identities, rather than reinforcing or restating them, *for a solidarity that does not need the affirmation of a common identity to express itself*, is the space that the attack against *Charlie Hebdo* risks closing, forcing all of us to participate, willingly or unwillingly, directly or indirectly, in the renewed farce of the clash of civilizations.

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