Introduction: The *Charlie Hebdo* Attacks and Their Aftermath

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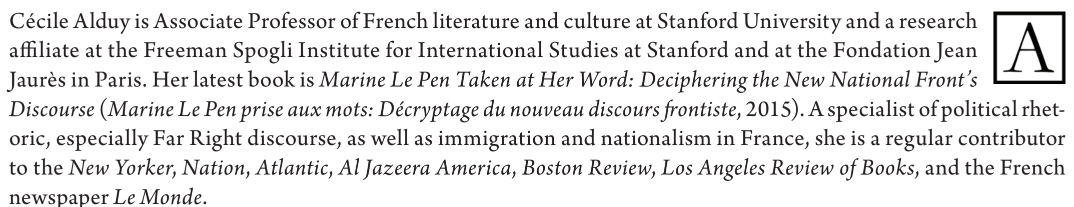
The journal *Occasion* is named both to signal the "event" of the convening and publication of a set of papers on a specific topic in interdisciplinary humanities and to prompt—"to occasion"—such collaboration and exploration. The debates surrounding the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks—"the event"—that took place in France in early January 2015 and their aftermath have proved complex to interpret, understand, and ultimately translate across national boundaries and, as such, have emerged as especially pertinent to the aim and objective of this journal "to occasion" exchanges and concerted analysis.

We have thus endeavored to bring together a group of international scholars, artists, writers, and activists whose insights offer multidimensional and interdisciplinary perspectives on what



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has become known as the “*Charlie Hebdo* affair.” Contributions have taken into account a range of political reactions. These include French prime minister Manuel Valls’s recourse to the term “apartheid” as a way of describing a range of “territorial, social, and ethnic” circumstances that many observers have drawn upon as a way of partially explaining the intensity of acrimony, discord, and violence in French society today. Others fastened on historical explanations or sought to situate the most recent terror attacks within a broader transnational network of radical jihadism. Yet others decoded the attacks in terms of an outcome of a historical amalgamation of conscious and unconscious administrative and social practices that have been at work since the process of colonial independence got under way and that are to be found in migration and urban policies in France since the Fifth Republic was enacted in 1958. There have of course been competing interpretations of the root causes of the attacks, as evidenced in responses from numerous writers and intellectuals, as well as from opposition parties such as the Union pour un mouvement populaire and the Front national. In fact, the attacks also underscored the ways in which political lines have become increasingly blurred on this and related cultural, political, and social issues not only in France and Europe but also in a more global framework.

The religious dimension has also been the subject of discussions, bringing into the conversation various advocacy groups but also providing much-needed engagement with what have been disquieting examples of “Islamophobia” and “Judeophobia.” These deliberations have yielded polarized assessments of *laïcité*—current French secularist principles founded on the 1905 Law on the Separation between the Churches and the State—and of its particular relevance to the social contract, as well as affirmation or questioning of the importance or limitations of French republican ideals and values.

The *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, somewhat paradoxically, have also served as a catharsis in the process of considering existing legal mechanisms pertaining to *freedom of expression*, especially in a broad comparative context in which one finds significant discrepancies. In the United States, for example, the First Amendment to the Constitution, adopted on December 15, 1791, “prohibits the making of any law respecting the establishment of religion, impeding the free exercise of religion, abridging the freedom of speech, infringing on the freedom of the press, interfering with the right to peaceably assemble or prohibiting the petitioning for a governmental redress of grievances.” In France, though, Article 11 of the Declaration of the Rights of Man of 1789 differs somewhat because of the introduction of juridical considerations: “The free communication of ideas and opinions is one of the most precious of the rights of man. Every citizen may, accordingly, speak, write, and print with freedom, but shall be responsible for such abuses of this freedom as shall be defined by law.” The situation becomes increasingly complicated because of the extension of these rights in the supranational context of the European Union, as decreed in Article 10, Section 1 of the European Convention on Human Rights, whereby “Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers,” as well as in Section 2, which makes additional provisions that cannot be ignored: “Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers.” These variations have served to bring attention to the fact that while communication technologies have dramatically enhanced the circulation of ideas and fostered greater levels of global interaction, standards and regulations when it comes to freedom of expression are far

from being universal, and their application and implementation remain uneven both across and within national boundaries.

These legal considerations have emerged as crucial elements in recent debates on the question of freedom of expression. France has an established tradition of enacting laws relating to freedom of the press, notably the Law on the Freedom of the Press of July 29, 1881. However, critics in France and elsewhere have emphasized the contradictory ways in which recourse to the law has been made—effectively *limiting* freedom of expression in order to *protect*—pointing to the Pleven Act of 1972, which restricts incitement to hatred, discrimination, and racial insults, or to the antirevisionist Gayssot Act of July 13, 1990, which outlaws the questioning, denial, or challenge of the existence of the Jewish Holocaust. The controversial actor Dieudonné, for example, has been repeatedly fined and his shows have been banned for what are considered public insults of people of Jewish faith or origin and for making defamatory statements, inciting ethnic or racial hatred, and denying crimes against humanity. Likewise, examples of intolerance to Muslims are plentiful, most notably the repeated attempts to ban or restrict the wearing of head scarves, veils, or the burqa, and what some see as the lack of respect for Muslim aniconic sensitivities relative to the use of images of religious figures. Such conclusions serve to fuel perceptions of asymmetrical political and social representation under the aegis of a Republic founded on revolutionary Enlightenment ideals of Liberty–Equality–Fraternity. These are indeed challenging issues and questions, which call for sustained, even uncomfortable engagement, precisely because they are the foundations of civic freedom and civil society.

Furthermore, as many are prone to argue, the assumed—or legally enforced—neutrality of republican civility in relation to identity politics has the effect of rendering moot some necessary conversations about race, white privilege, color blindness, and the racialized legacies of French (and European) colonialism today. This cultivated silence about the racial specificity of the privileged subject of republican civility and neutrality also fuels the anger and resentment expressed by important segments of the French social periphery, as was made evident by hostile reactions against public and political demands for all members of the citizenry to express their unwavering solidarity with *Charlie Hebdo* in the aftermath of the attacks. On the other hand, considerations about race also serve to intensify the reactionary defensiveness of others—both on the right and on the left of the political spectrum—against what is deemed to be the identitarian withdrawal or self-imposed factionalism and social alienation of the "*communautés*." Perhaps more than any recent events, the attacks on *Charlie Hebdo* have made visible and exacerbated such divisions and impasses within French *fraternité*. Importantly, these divisions also find echoes on the global stage, where the attacks (or "the event") acted as a catalyst for political leaders, journalists, and intellectuals to shore up and repurpose with a vengeance Enlightenment ideals of freedom, liberty, and civility across national boundaries.

Indicative of this tenuous situation is the controversy that arose around PEN's (the international literary and human rights organization) decision to grant *Charlie Hebdo* the 2015 PEN/Toni and James C. Goodale Freedom of Expression Courage Award. The PEN organization defended its decision, arguing that

> *Charlie Hebdo* has positioned itself in the firing line of this battle, refusing to accept the curtailment of lawful speech by those who meet it with violence. It is undoubtedly true that in addition to provoking violent threats from extremists, the Hebdo cartoons offended some

> other Muslims and members of the many other groups they targeted. Indeed, were the Hebdo cartoonists not satirical in their genesis and intent, their content and images might offend most or all of us. But, based on their own statements, we believe that *Charlie Hebdo*'s intent was not to ostracize or insult Muslims, but rather to reject forcefully the efforts of a small minority of radical extremists to place broad categories of speech off limits—no matter the purpose, intent, or import of the expression.[1]

The Australian novelist Peter Carey, in a widely reported e-mail to the *New York Times* on April 25, 2015, stated, "All this is complicated by PEN's seeming blindness to the cultural arrogance of the French nation, which does not recognize its moral obligation to a large and disempowered segment of their population." This position was later echoed by the Nigerian writer Teju Cole, for whom the issue could be framed in analogous terms:

> But it is possible to defend the right to obscene and racist speech without promoting or sponsoring the content of that speech. It is possible to approve of sacrilege without endorsing racism. . . . The *Charlie Hebdo* cartoonists were not mere gadflies, not simple martyrs to the right to offend: they were ideologues. Just because one condemns their brutal murders doesn't mean one must condone their ideology. Rather than posit that the Paris attacks are *the* moment of crisis in free speech—as so many commentators have done—it is necessary to understand that free speech and other expressions of *liberté* are already in crisis in Western societies.[2]

Although several writers questioned the appropriateness of the award, those who defended it invoked fundamental democratic principles pertaining to the right to speak out and, even, to offend or shock—in other words, to *the right to cause offense* and even *the right to be offended*. Receiving the award on behalf of *Charlie Hebdo*, the head of the French antiracist organization SOS Racisme, Dominique Sopo, reframed the question of offense by alluding to the landscape of contemporary French politics, in which increasingly harsh characterizations of ethnic minority groups have become commonplace, such that "[i]n everyday life, I am shocked by the things people say, but I don't ask for them to be prohibited. In my mind, what restricts freedom is not so much the fact that people may be shocked by what they hear but rather when words are used to place individuals or groups in danger. This is what we call racism or anti-Semitism."[3]

In many ways, the answer to so many of these questions can be located in the popular slogan *Je suis Charlie* (conceived by French artistic director and music critic Joachim Roncin and posted on Twitter) and to the multiple responses this slogan triggered. What, one may well ask in hindsight, inspired such a global response to the attacks? What processes of identification and disidentification, of "empathy, solidarity, and identification," were triggered by the attacks and contained in either *Je suis Charlie* (I am Charlie) or *Je ne suis pas Charlie* (I am not Charlie) that appeared almost instantaneously around the world, by what David Palumbo-Liu aptly described as a "tidal wave of demonstrations and social media campaigns that unabashedly and passionately

1 "Rejecting the Assassin's Veto," April 26, 2015, http://www.pen.org/blog/rejecting-assassins-veto (accessed July 3, 2015).

2 Teju Cole, "Unmournable Bodies," *New Yorker*, January 9, 2015, http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/unmournable-bodies (accessed May 12, 2015).

3 Dominique Sopo, 2015 PEN Literary Gala, May 15, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B4Bwrlo8XUE&feature=youtu.be (accessed July 3, 2015).

declare an apparently seamless bond of identification"?[4] A number of large-scale rallies were held on January 10 and 11 in France, the Manifestation pour une unité nationale (March for National Unity), collectively referred to as "marches républicaines" (republican marches). At the time, the question of inclusivity was already an issue because of the nonparticipation (exclusion?) of certain political parties, notably the Front national, as well as the presence of several heads of state and representatives of countries with appalling records on press freedom and human rights, such as Gabon, Turkey, Egypt, Israel, and the Russian Federation (as extensively documented by organizations such as Reporters Without Borders). French intellectual Emmanuel Todd would shortly thereafter publish a polemical book, *Qui est Charlie? Sociologie d'une crise religieuse*, reflecting critically on the initial outburst of empathy and underlining the glaring disconnect between the emotional process of identification at the time and the reality of marchers' political beliefs and interpretations of France today.[5]

In the end, we are left with a multifaceted web of interpretive grids, though nevertheless systems that share points of commonality around the idea of empathy. In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States, analogous modes of identification were expressed in, for example, Jean-Marie Colombani's front-page editorial for *Le Monde*, entitled "Nous sommes tous Américains" (We are all Americans), on September 13, 2001. But as David Palumbo-Liu reminds us in the wake of *Je suis Charlie*, "Now those in the west might shrug this off as edgy satire, but to not imagine that those whose religion was being parodied came from a different cultural background as those who produced the image, and to assert that those who might be offended should nonetheless read the satire as if they were not from an Islamic background, bespeaks arrogance."[6] Certainly, the potential for "arrogance" is there, but the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks confront us with another dimension: namely, the degree to which the history and background of *both* the attackers and the victims were in fact shared, the product of the same Republic, albeit exhibiting antagonistic trajectories and cartographies of cultural and social belonging. As Pankaj Mishra wrote in the *Guardian* on January 20, 2015, "There is a specific context to the rise of jihadism in Europe, which involves Muslims from Europe's former colonies making an arduous transition to secular modernity, and often colliding with its entrenched intellectual as well as political hierarchies: the opposition, for instance, between secularism and religion which was actually invented in Enlightenment Europe."[7]

We believe the diverse articles presented in this issue of *Occasion* can be especially helpful in providing the kind of contextualization that is very often lacking in the media and therefore in stimulating informed dialogue not only in the classroom and in academically informed debates but also beyond, in a more general manner, in the public sphere. We have been eager to highlight the challenging dimension of the issues at stake and have gathered articles that truly represent a variety of angles while also emphasizing the specificity of the French context as well as the broader historical background that can potentially offer a framework that can support and encourage the

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4 David Palumbo-Liu, "The Problem with 'Je suis Charlie': That Kind of Solidarity Comes with Baggage," *Salon*, January 11, 2015, http://www.salon.com/2015/01/11/the_problem_with_je_suis_charlie_that_kind_of_solidarity_comes_with_baggage/ (accessed January 12, 2015).

5 Emmanuel Todd, *Qui est Charlie? Sociologie d'une crise religieuse* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2015).

6 Palumbo-Liu, "The Problem with 'Je suis Charlie.'"

7 Pankaj Mishra, "After the Paris Attacks: It's Time for a New Enlightenment," *Guardian*, January 20, 2015, http://www.theguardian.com/news/2015/jan/20/-sp-after-paris-its-time-for-new-enlightenment (accessed January 22, 2015).

process of explaining, addressing, and acting upon a number of the key concerns confronting France and the Global West today. As we hope the articles confirm, this special edition has covered a large spectrum of the argumentative field on *Charlie Hebdo*/freedom of expression/religion and state/Islam and Judaism/race and racialization in current debates. [A]