

Civility, Fraternité, and the Frames of Democracy

Chantal Nadeau

The discourses of civility and civil society entail commitment to the rhetorics of civilization, and by extension to the logics of “born-again racism.”

—David Theo Goldberg

JANUARY 7, 2015. PARIS. Two self-proclaimed soldiers of the Islamic State force their way into the headquarters of the French satirical weekly newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* (hereafter, *CH*) and shoot dead twelve members of the staff and editorial team, including the head editor, Stéphane Charbonnier (also known as “Charb”). In the following minutes, another shooting takes place outside as the gunmen leave the building. *La mort en direct* of two police officers shot by Chérif Kouachi and Saïd Kouachi quickly becomes associated with a new era of jihad, which *New Yorker* correspondent John Cassidy refers to as the “Clash of Civilizations.”¹ However, in the turbulent days that follow, it becomes very clear that civilizational plurality does not exist. Only one civilization matters: the secular one promoted by Western democracies such as France.

Chantal Nadeau is Professor in the Department of Gender and Women’s Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her work centers on the ways that desire, sexuality, and identity are bound up with the legal and political imaginary of the nation. Author of *Fur Nation* (2001), her work has also appeared in journals such as *GLQ*, *Multitudes*, *Screen*, and *Journal of Communication Studies*. She recently coedited a special issue of *GLQ*, “Queering the Middle: Sexual Diasporas, Race, and a Queer Midwest,” and is currently working on a book project in which she examines how the nexus of queer politics, nationalist discourses, and the logics of immunity shift through various invocations of courage.



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¹ John Cassidy, “Charlie Hebdo and the ‘Clash of Civilizations,’” *New Yorker*, January 8, 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/john-cassidy/charlie-hebdo-clash-civilizations> (accessed May 19, 2015). *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Touchstone, 1996) is a book by Samuel Huntington, who argues that future world conflicts will turn on religion.

As we know, France has been a fierce advocate of unveiled politics for years. In fact, the French socialist government—along with the governments of Great Britain, The Netherlands, the United States, and, more recently, Canada—has taken a particularly vicious and repressive anti-Islam approach to the “problem” of Muslim immigration. The brutality and rawness of racialized state violence in a nation where anti-immigrant sentiment is on the rise (see the emergence of Marine Le Pen’s Front National as a mainstream political player) cannot be separated from the discourse of “freedom” circulating in the Republic. With an indefectible imperialism, the Western world and its allies have reduced civilization to a secular one, which must fight Islam and its followers at any cost. The “barbaric” quality of the soldiers of Islam (visible in the behavior of the Kouachi brothers) is epitomized by the coolness they display in attacks like that which took place at *CH* and its aftermath. As reported in the *New York Times*, “in the hours before the brothers died in a gunfight with the police, Chérif nonchalantly took a telephone call from a reporter to make sure the world knew they were carrying out the attack on behalf of Al Qaeda’s branch in Yemen.”² The *CH* headquarters raid—described by French president François Hollande as “un acte d’une exceptionnelle barbarie”³—was indeed brutal and raw, but so has been the war on terrorism circa the millennium. Yet the event has become one of a kind because the popular mediascape is such a particularly fruitful vector for (post)colonial amnesia. For days, social networks and virtual info hubs relayed an endless flow of images and words aimed at mapping, tracing, and walling off the attack against freedom of speech.

In a paranoid attempt to piece together the Islamist plot following a second attack—two days later on a kosher supermarket by Amedy Coulibaly—*CNN* and its like replayed, ad nauseam, images of Chérif and Saïd Kouachi strolling “coolly” out of *CH*’s bloody scene. Blood, ink, more blood, more ink. Black and red spilled everywhere in deadly dissonance. In the midst of this bloody noise, two public mantras developed: (1) Islamist extremists had struck at the heart of the French Republic and—by default—at the foundation of freedom of speech, and (2) France vowed to strike back via the surprising resurrection of the zombie Hollande, who was supported by an imposing reality show of diplomatic solidarity consolidated in a mock march. Against barbarism, the Free World adopted a position of (sly) civility.⁴ France, for one, relishes the belief that *la guerre des mots*—which includes the Constitution, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, and the protected freedom of speech—is the outmost sign of civility. Yet, as David Theo Goldberg reminds us, “Civility itself is a form of presumed homogeneity, or at least predicated on a set of presumptive homogeneous commonalities.”⁵

The issue is that civility nurtures not only the frames of war, to paraphrase Judith Butler, but also the frame of democracy itself. One of the most powerful examples of this frame is the Eurocentric iteration of #jesuischarlie adopted in solidarity with the *CH* staff. The hashtag #jesuischarlie constitutes a clear dispossession and reappropriation of #iammikebrown in the

² Rukmini Callimachi and Jim Yardley, “From Amateur to Ruthless Jihadist in France,” *New York Times*, January 17, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/18/world/europe/paris-terrorism-brothers-said-cherif-kouachi-charlie-hebdo.html> (accessed May 19, 2015).

³ François Hollande’s declaration at the press conference held in the hour following the *CH* attack, January 7, 2015, <http://www.ouest-france.fr/charlie-hebdo-hollande-denonce-un-acte-dune-exceptionnelle-barbarie-3099823> (accessed May 12, 2015).

⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, “Sly Civility,” *October* 34 (Autumn 1985): 71–80.

⁵ David Theo Goldberg, “‘Killing Me Softly’: Civility/Race/Violence,” *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 27, no. 4 (2005): 341.

aftermath of the uprising to protest white police violence in Ferguson, Missouri, in the fall of 2014. However, there is a fundamental difference between the two movements. While #iam-mikebrown activated a deep mobilization against the conditions by which the racial state (in this case, both the state of Missouri and the United States) cracks down on its black minority, #jesuischarlie was born out of a gesture to reassert the legitimacy of a secular France against Islamist terrorism. In making whiteness the center of the public outcry, #jesuischarlie was a push-back against the string of public protests against racism and state violence in the United States fed by a series of police arrests and shootings of black citizens. Indeed, such mediatization of secularism quickly made a market for the instrumentalization of freedom of speech as the thing that separates democracies from the rest of the world. Poster democracy went viral and was activated through the circulation of t-shirts, cupcakes, billboards, and a host of other commodities, which were displayed and consumed as a sign of freedom of speech's unassailability. In a gesture of brotherly love with *CH* and the French Republic, the so-called Free World became one nation under the name "Charlie."

This sudden claim to share with France and the *CH* team a community grounded in blood was, in fact, an act of democracy. It is reminiscent of what Jacques Derrida introduces as the triad of democracy-friendship-fraternity, or democracy-as-friendship. Derrida reminds us that since ancient Greece, the figure of the friend in politics often appears under the traits of the brother. As such, democracy as a political regime defined by friendship is "rarely determined in the absence of confraternity or brotherhood."⁶ The tradition of linking democracy with nation and sameness or identity is suggested in the French motto itself. Yet, in the *CH* context, the brothers of democracy are mostly representatives of states that claim the status of civilized/civil societies over the nonsecular ones. The affinity civility/democracy/secularism is crucial here because it refuses the Kouachi brothers and other Islamist partisans the status of brothers of/for democracy. The Kouachi brothers were no brothers of the democratic regime they lived in. In the language of the French politicians, they were no "ordinary Muslims." They were in fact closer to the trope of Muslim brothers as *butcher boys* because they were a reflection and a refraction of the perverse face of fraternity made in France.⁷ And what could be better than exposing the evidence of this as the clash of civilizations, to echo the *New Yorker*, between civility and uncivility. It was as if suddenly last January the Republic remembered that blood was shed for its freedom. Within days of the attack, Voltaire and his treatise on tolerance were resurrected to expose the roots that led to a free and religiously tolerant Republic (read France).⁸ As we know, Voltaire wrote the *Traité sur la tolérance* as a response to the torture and execution of Jean Calas that took place in Toulouse, France, in 1762. Calas, a Protestant merchant, was found guilty and condemned to death for the murder of his son. However, Voltaire refutes the parricide/matricide/fratricide plot that sealed the verdict and exposes that the legal sentence was based on religious grounds

⁶ Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* (London: Verso, 1997), viii. Quoted in Jaco Barnard-Naudé, "Post-apartheid Fraternity, Post-apartheid Democracy, Post-apartheid Sexuality: Queer Reflections on Jane Alexander's *Butcher Boys*," in *Queer Theory: Law, Culture, Empire*, ed. Robert Leckey and Kim Brooks (New York: Routledge, 2010), 69–85. I thank Barnard-Naudé for his inspiring evocation of Derrida's triad in his text. However, in the context of this article, I deliberately overlook Derrida's proposal to conceive of democracy as a radical alterity, focusing instead on the historical triadic structure of what I call the idea of democracy. See Barnard-Naudé's essay for an inspiring queer reappropriation of Derrida's theory in the postapartheid context.

⁷ Barnard-Naudé, "Post-apartheid Fraternity."

⁸ See Voltaire, *Traité sur la tolérance*, 1763, <http://boutique.liberation.fr/products/voltaire-traite-sur-la-tolerance> (accessed May 17, 2015).

and public hostility, if not vendetta, toward a Protestant figure. Voltaire pleads that tolerance—as a godly attribute—should have prevailed over intolerance, which for him leads to arbitrary judgment and barbarism. Ironically, many saw in this account of religious intolerance a tragic reminder of the present. However, the apparent symmetry of the two events that was drawn in the public discourse and the perverse association that was articulated with secularism as the contemporary guardian of the French motto *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* illustrates the perversity of the idea of democracy. One wonders how this post-Voltaire renaissance and success (the book became *la lecture du jour* on- and offline) validate the belief that tolerance is French, and so is democracy in its republican iteration. With the rhetoric of *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* and the 2015 remix on Voltaire’s denunciation of intolerance looms the shadow of the threat itself as constitutive of this so-called democratic vision of freedom.

Perhaps we should think of freedom of speech not as a fundamental right but instead as an entitlement constitutively under threat. If we adhere to the idea that freedom of speech is the ultimate expression of a civilized society, then anything that is likely to challenge that civility is by extension constituted as a threat. Yet the problem is that the threat is always perceived as being outside even when within. Hence the paradox: On the one hand, freedom of speech supposes a certain form of civility among the members of the *communis*. On the other hand, freedom of speech necessarily implies the existence of a certain degree of incivility. This is when things get a bit sly: to be uncivil is the prerogative of those who already are within a culture of civility itself. What I suggest here is that freedom of speech is made out of a culture where threat is both the target and the vector of its rooting. This is how the twelve *CH* journalists and two police officers who perished under the Kouachi brothers’ fire became unwilling figures of freedom of speech. Such serviceable figures⁹ include Muslim French policeman Ahmed Merabet and *CH* copy editor Mustapha Ourrad, who was of Algerian descent.

Interestingly, the *CH* editorial board’s decision to reprint in 2006 the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*’s 2005 editorial cartoons of Muhammad—a controversial decision often perceived as the moment that triggered the escalation of violence against the *CH* team—functions as a refusal to yield to censure as a means of protection against Islamic terrorist threats. In a twisted affinity of politics, the discourse of courage has become associated with the protection of French values and freedom. In other words, *CH*’s publishing strategy was never perceived as a threat to Muslims but rather as a gesture of courage. By this, I mean that the *CH* editorial line to sell secularism masqueraded as freedom of speech at any cost was hailed as one guided by the desire to protect and serve the ideological foundations of the Republic. In his address to the nation following the coordinated raids that led to the killing of the two Kouachi brothers and Amedy Coulibaly, Hollande commended the security forces for their “courage, bravura, and efficiency.” In the same address, Hollande described the three days of bloodshed as the worst episode of terrorism in France since the Algerian War of Independence and as the work of “madmen, fanatics,” who had created “a tragedy for the nation that we were obliged to confront.”¹⁰

⁹ I rework here a powerful argument made by Roderick A. Ferguson on disenfranchised subjects as “serviceable abstraction(s)” in light of politics of diversity in academic institutions. See <https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2015/05/12/self-portrait-2015-roderick-a-ferguson-university-of-illinois-chicago-may-8-2015/>.

¹⁰ Andrew Higgins and Dan Bilefsky, “French Police Storm Hostage Sites, Killing Gunmen,” *New York Times*, January 9, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/10/world/europe/charlie-hebdo-paris-shooting.html> (accessed May 19, 2015).

As I have argued elsewhere, the language of courage redirects our sense of who is under threat.¹¹ In using the rhetoric of courage to describe *CH* employees who died for the sake of secularism and freedom of speech, we discredit those who have lived for years in a climate of state and democratic violence, often under precarious conditions, negotiating threats and fears at the expense of their collective and personal safety. In using the rhetoric of courage to describe the soldiers of secularism, commentators portray courage as an aristocratic virtue rather than a political value at the service of social justice.

One of the most disturbing aspects to have emerged from mass reactions to the *CH* massacre is how, following Judith Butler's argument, certain lives are more grievable and some are more disposable than others.¹² In the aftermath of the brutal shooting, it became obvious that discussions of death were framed by an implicit rhetorical and ideological strategy of focusing on lives that "really" matter: #jesuischarlie. There was no doubt that those who perished that morning—meaning the twelve *CH* staff and two police officers—would be remembered as national heroes. They were instantly portrayed as having sacrificed their lives for the murky notion of democracy rechanneled into the vox populi of freedom of speech, defined here as the very act of speaking for life. Akin to a form of exceptionalism, those who show courage are celebrated as virtuous. And because courage calls for self-abnegation, it resonates with self-sacrifice. It is not coincidental that courage has been celebrated for centuries as the very fabric of warriors, soldiers, pioneers, heroes, and leaders of great nations across the political spectrum. In other words, courage is outside the rubric of moral approval or disapproval. Courage is also beyond abjection or inclusion since courage can be acknowledged even in one's fiercest enemy.¹³

Paradoxically, those who perished a few days later—the three perpetrators of the attacks—were framed, literally, as those who deserved to die. There were no brothers but only gunmen and terrorists. Same event, two different frames. One frame embellishes the ideal of freedom of speech and *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* while the other provides a disturbing and unsettling snapshot of what awaits those out there who are bad copies of the killers. In the response to the *CH* killings, what we witness is, in Goldberg's words, that "[t]he apocalyptic connection between civility and civilization has been quickly resurrected."¹⁴ At the end, the issue is not the lack of civilization of a barbaric Islamic threat but instead the effort of the socially, politically, and economically disenfranchised to make a point when civil discourse about civil rights and equality can't be heard. A

¹¹ In my current book project, *Queer Courage: The Birth of a New Nation* (University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming), I argue that the invocation of courage functions as a currency in the regulation of queer legal subjectivities. See also my response to the institutional discourse on civility in the context of the Salaita affair at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign: "On Courage," response to "Academic Freedom and Political Dissent: A Conversation with Katherine Franke and the Community," Independent Media Center, Urbana, IL, September 18, 2014, <http://uiucfaculty.blogspot.com/2014/09/chantal-nadeaus-on-courage-response-at.html>.

¹² Judith Butler, *Frames of Life: When Is Life Grievable?* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2009).

¹³ Courage refers in many ways to a very Arendtian understanding of politics as presenting oneself to the public through one's actions rather than, say, acting on the basis of one's social/cultural identity (which is pride) or having an instrumentalist orientation to politics (with its focus on evaluation or end results). Arendt argues: "It requires courage even to leave the protective security of our four walls and enter the public realm, not because of particular dangers which may lie in wait for us, but because we have arrived in a realm where the concern for life has lost its validity. Courage liberates men from their worry about life for the freedom of the world. Courage is indispensable because in politics not life but the world is at stake." See Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 155.

¹⁴ Goldberg, "Killing Me Softly," 338.