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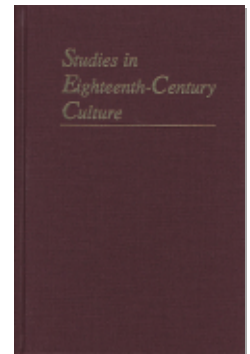
## On Giving and Taking Offense

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# On Giving and Taking Offense

ELENA RUSSO

Soon after the attacks of Friday, 13 November 2015 in Paris, John Kerry said this at a press conference:

There's something different about what happened [Friday] from Charlie Hebdo, and I think everybody would feel that. There was a sort of particularized focus... a rationale that you could attach yourself to, somehow, and say, okay, they're really angry because of this and that. This Friday was absolutely indiscriminate.<sup>1</sup>

Indiscriminate attacks against civilians, including children, have become wretchedly familiar. To be sure, the assassins are never at a loss for an explanation: tit for tat, retaliations for such and such military action. But Kerry was not wrong to make a distinction: the victims of Charlie Hebdo had been chosen with focus and rationale. Those killings were a response, a kind of barbaric message. That is why, in their wake, more than two million people marched across France. They carried signs bearing the image of Voltaire with which they told each other and the world that they rejected the logic of that response, even as they debated about free speech and satire; about the clash between religion and *laïcité*; about the culture of '68. After the November massacre, it was different. There were no mass gatherings, no discussions, no self-questioning. No posters of Voltaire. Only vigils and silence.

The ground seemed to have been pulled out from under those discussions after the more recent atrocities, whose motives seemed more baffling and

unmanageable than the murder-execution of the blasphemous cartoonists. Yet, we cannot remain silent and simply abandon the field to specialists, experts in mental health or, worse, the military. Understanding the connection between speech and violence is still our responsibility as citizens and students of the Enlightenment.

I am going to explore that connection by discussing the nature of our competing commitments to the sacred. For even within our broadly secular communities in France and the United States, there are areas of sacredness, places we do not want to go to for fear of saying the wrong thing. We are willing to invest a great deal of symbolic violence against those who, in our opinion, violate or desecrate these spaces. As crowds, journalists, and political figures rallied to defend the apparently sacred Enlightenment principle of freedom of speech, a competing sacrality soon came into play: the sacrality of feelings as a political factor.

When PEN awarded its Freedom of Expression Courage award to *Charlie Hebdo*, some of its members, including novelists Peter Carey, Michael Ondaatje, Francine Prose, and Teju Cole, boycotted the gala ceremony in protest. Carey declared: “A hideous crime was committed, but was it a freedom-of-speech issue for PEN America to be self-righteous about?” He added that PEN had shown itself to be blind to “the cultural arrogance of the French nation, which does not recognize its moral obligation to a large and disempowered segment of their population.”<sup>2</sup>

Teju Cole wrote that Charlie had gone “specifically for racist and Islamophobic provocations. [...] It is not always easy to see the difference between a certain witty dissent from religion and a bullyingly racist agenda, but it is necessary to try.”<sup>3</sup> Garry Trudeau, the author of *Doonesbury*, went a step further, arguing that the cartoonists were responsible for the deaths that occurred during the violent protests “triggered” by their drawings (as if only the cartoonist had agency, not the people protesting):

By *punching downward*, by attacking a powerless, disenfranchised minority with crude, vulgar drawings closer to graffiti than cartoons, *Charlie* wandered into the realm of hate speech, which in France is only illegal if it directly incites violence. Well, voilà—the 7 million copies that were published following the killings did exactly that, triggering violent protests across the Muslim world, including one in Niger, in which ten people died.<sup>4</sup>

The principle that satire ought to be punching *upward* against the powerful, not against the powerless, might seem unobjectionable. Early-modern French theorists of sociability always emphasized that *raillerie* – which covered a broad range of verbal and social transgressions from banter, mockery,

derision, to satire and lampoon – was to be handled with care, under the tactful supervision of an *honnête femme*, and that it was always to be practiced among equals in a context of reciprocity. At its best, *raillerie* could have a corrective, pedagogical function. At its worst, it could badly misfire. In Jane Austen's *Emma*, for example, the heroine cannot resist mocking Miss Bates, an older, unmarried woman who has fallen on hard times, for her chatty, compulsive cordiality. That wins her a stern reprimand from the well-named Mr. Knightley:

Emma... How could you be so unfeeling to Miss Bates? ... How could you be so insolent in your wit to a woman of her character, age, and situation?... Were she a woman of fortune... I would not quarrel with you for any liberties of manner... But, Emma, consider how far this is from being the case. She is poor; she has sunk from the comforts she was born to... Her situation should secure your compassion. It was badly done, indeed!<sup>5</sup>

But in what way did *Charlie's* satire, aimed at religion, target the disempowered?

In our secular societies, blasphemy is no longer recognized as a crime against God. Instead, it is seen as a grievous offense against the believers. When the offended community is being portrayed, all distinctions erased, as “a disempowered segment of the population” (and isn't that a tad condescending?), then the “French nation” chanting “Je suis Charlie” is being indicted less for offending the *other's* religious beliefs than for offending *our* own sense of the sacred. That is why “cultural arrogance” is considered a capital offense.

The *Charlie* cartoonist earned some strange reprimands from the Knightleys of our time. Yes, Cole acknowledged, murdering them was wrong; but, even though they had a right to life, and perhaps even to free speech, still “no sensible person takes a defense of those First Amendment rights as a defense of Nazi beliefs.”<sup>6</sup>

Of course, no one is obligated to *be* Charlie: one may condemn their murder and still dislike their work. But how exactly do the Nazis come in?

When you tar people with sweeping accusations of racism and *reductio ad Nazium*, you make them pariahs, enemies of humanity, blasphemers of everything we hold most sacred. Even if you reject their assassination as a matter of principle, you are expelling them from society, banishing them to the wilderness. Like the *homo sacer* of Roman times, their lives are tossed into the hands of the negligent gods.

We react from the gut to such perceived desecrations. When the cartoonist Plantu told Riss, a survivor of the attack at *Charlie*, that it was not blasphemy

that concerned him, but what people feel (*le ressenti*), Riss pointed out that believing oneself authorized to commit violence on the basis of how one *feels* is socially destructive.<sup>7</sup> But today, how people feel has become a legitimate political consideration. Political opinions are portrayed as deeply personal emotions that may be “triggered” by words and images. Those who disagree with us are not just wrong, they are malevolent. So, we become offended (and offense easily escalates to feeling disrespected, humiliated, discriminated against). Feelings are elevated to the level of ideas, and ideas are felt viscerally. This attitude is not limited to the communities of the disempowered, nor to the armed fanatics who claim to speak for them: it permeates Western, middle-class societies, including our college campuses (although its impact on free speech there has been overstated). Even so, we do not really expect our students to be “triggered” from such “trauma” into outright violence (although professors in Texas, where students are now allowed to carry concealed weapons on campus, might disagree).

Trigger warnings are not themselves the problem. Given our current mood, they may even be necessary. They signal students to approach a work like Voltaire’s *Mahomet* with an open, critical mind.<sup>8</sup> They allow us to teach students to become ironic readers and contrast the prejudices of the past, which seem so glaringly obvious to them, with their own, which tend to fly under the radar. That is why the kind of tolerance we badly need today is less that of Voltaire than that of Bayle, who challenged us to dare to open up to criticism the things that make us uncomfortable, no matter how heretical, blasphemous, and offensive they may “feel.”<sup>9</sup>

## NOTES

1. <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2015/11/249565.htm>.
2. *The New York Times*, “Six PEN Members Decline Gala Award,” 26 April 2015. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/27/nyregion/six-pen-members-decline-gala-after-award-for-charlie-hebdo.html>)
3. *The New Yorker*, “Unmournable Bodies,” 9 January 2015. (<http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/unmournable-bodies>).
4. George Polk Career Award, April 10, 2015. (<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/04/the-abuse-of-satire/390312/>)
5. *Emma*, Book 3, ch. 7 (<http://literatureproject.com/emma/index.htm>).
6. Cole, “Unmournable Bodies.”

7. Plantu (Jean Plantureux) and Riss (Laurent Sourisseau), 22 September 2015: *Le dessin de presse dans tous ses États*, 3 (videorecorded discussion). (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3GeqC0T8C8s>)

8. See Jeffrey Leichman, *infra*.

9. Mara Van Der Lugt, *Bayle, Jurieu, and the Dictionnaire Historique et Critique* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 250.