Charlie Hebdo *and the Aftermath: Islamophobia and Judeophobia in France*

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Translated from the French by Dominic Thomas

The rising popularity of the National Front (Front national) Party in France, recent electoral successes at the 2014 European and 2015 departmental elections, and a resurgence of anti-Semitism have been interpreted by a number of researchers as nothing more than a return to the 1930s. According to this school of thought, the dominance of Right and Far Right ideas in the public arena and the more widespread confusion in political and intellectual debates reproduce events previously associated with the period leading up to the Second World War: namely, the existence of "seditious leagues," of an anti-Semitic press, and finally of a shift in intellectual positions from the Far Left to the Far Right.

However, present-day forms of anti-Semitism, which we might also call "Judeophobia" so as to distinguish it from its earlier incarnations, appear to have characteristics of their own. These are inscribed in the particular context associated with new post-Second World War circumstances marked by the birth of the State of Israel, the oppression of the Palestinian people, decolonization, and the emergence of multiculturalism and postcolonialism. While old forms of anti-Semitism were for the most part the domain of a predominantly "white" Far Right, and although this form still exists, present-day Judeophobia is primarily connected with "black" and "North African" minorities who have themselves been discriminated against and originates in perceptions of double standards. In this framework, both Jews and Muslims feel that they are treated unequally or, at the very least, that a double standard applies to them. The former are

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believed to benefit from favorable public opinion, to stand above all criticism, and to enjoy complete protection by the authorities, whereas the latter are compelled to weather every conceivable snub (Islamophobic insults, the harassment of veiled women, and persistent attacks on mosques) without anyone rushing to their aid. According to this new trend of Judeophobia, Jews benefit from the protection of a rich and powerful Zionist lobby that controls the economy and the media in Israel as well as in Western countries, notably France.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict therefore looms large in present-day anti-Semitism in France, to which must be added the colonial past, which, because it remains for the most part hidden or unacknowledged, persists as the foundation of a postcolonial alliance between black populations and those of North African extraction. The perceived pro-Israel attitudes across party lines in recent administrations and President François Hollande's "anti-Muslim" policies in Mali, Central Africa, Chad (France has presumably provided "indirect" support in the fight against Boko Haram, especially to the Chadian army, with whom it has long-standing historical ties), and Iraq in the name of the fight against "terrorism" have also played their role in motivating the kinds of anti-Semitic acts that have plunged France into mourning in recent years. Evidence of this can be found in Mohamed Merah's attack on a Jewish school in Toulouse in 2012, the attack by French national Mehdi Nemmouche on the Jewish Museum in Brussels in May 2014, and the massacres carried out by the Kouachi brothers in the name of the fight against "Jews" and as "crusaders" against *Charlie Hebdo* and by their accomplice Amedy Coulibaly at the kosher supermarket at the Porte de Vincennes in Paris.

The problem is that these odious attacks and crimes have served to reaffirm the prejudice that gave rise to them in the first place while simultaneously being instrumentalized by various political constituencies. For example, the Israeli government used the excuse of the attacks as a way to justify the implementation of new measures aimed at accelerating the migration (aliyah) of French Jews to Israel, and the French government has continued to provide support for Jewish institutions in France as well as for the Israeli government during its recent offensive against Gaza, while at the same time prohibiting certain pro-Palestinian demonstrations. Likewise, President Hollande, amid dwindling poll numbers and with upcoming general elections in 2017, seized the opportunity to launch a massive public relations offensive that culminated in the historic unity march held on January 11. The *Charlie Hebdo* rallies that were held were fronted by mostly Western heads of state; the president of Mali, Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, and the Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, were close at hand, the latter standing at President Hollande's side later that day during prayer at the Grand Synagogue of Paris, an event held solely to honor the Jewish victims of the Paris attack. These actions were contrary to fundamental republican principles of secularism and religious neutrality and exacerbated tensions and the aforementioned perception of double standards.

One did not have to wait long for reactions to come from anti-Semitic postcolonial circles. The controversial actor and polemicist Dieudonné, some of whose performances had already been banned by the Ministry of the Interior, proclaimed, "Je me sens Charlie-Coulibaly," posting on Facebook the popular slogan while referencing the jihadist who carried out the attack on the kosher supermarket. Dieudonné may be fined as much as thirty thousand euros for his statement and charged with publicly supporting terrorism, but one cannot ignore the fact that his comments were well received by some black and North African minorities precisely because of the perceived hypocrisy when it comes to freedom of expression: why is Dieudonné prohibited

from responding with humor to the attacks when *Charlie Hebdo* has and continues to publish caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad? In reality, what is effectively being requested by those who feel discriminated against and who point to the existence of a double standard is effectively a form of what the French call *positive discrimination*, in other words, the preferential treatment of a religion—in this instance Islam—a religion that is increasingly associated with the oppressed. However, misunderstanding will never cease as long as secularist militants at satirical newspapers such as *Charlie Hebdo* and *Le canard enchaîné* refuse to understand that their universalist claims to the right of anticlericalism will remain unacceptable to those seeking special consideration for a religion they see as discriminated against. Whether one likes it or not, Islam has become, much in the same way as other religions (e.g., Pentecostalism), a religion for the oppressed, and not just for black and North African minorities but also for French people from non-Muslim families who find in it a substitute for universalist ideologies that have for the most part disappeared from political and intellectual realms.

If there is one lesson we can draw from these events, it is that the attacks and massacres carried out by the jihadists Chérif and Saïd Kouachi and Amedy Coulibaly on January 7 and 9, 2015, will have had the paradoxical effect of uniting a deeply divided French population and strengthening consensus around such values as secularism and freedom of expression. The danger of course is that these reactions could be interpreted as hostile toward France's Muslim population, who will find themselves inadvertently held to account for acts they did not commit. This was evident in a heated exchange that took place in a televised debate on RTL on January 8 between the right-wing journalist Ivan Rioufol and the writer and activist Rokhaya Diallo.[1] This may have been the jihadists' ultimate aim: namely, to underscore the impossibility of achieving a peaceful Islam at a time when their Palestinian "brothers" are being crushed by the Israeli military and suffering at the hands of settlers and while the US-led coalition is launching air strikes against the Islamic State (ISIS).

Emotions have subsided since the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, and those signs of national unity around the slogan *Je suis Charlie* have partially dissipated. Similarly, the initial hope that French people would regain a degree of confidence and exorcise their demons has also vanished. Intellectual and ideological fragmentation is once again the order of the day, hand in hand with an increasingly racialized political climate. Islamophobic statements are ever more common, whether those made by Roger Cukierman, the president of the Representative Council of French Jewish Institutions, or by the right-wing journalist Philippe Tesson.[2] In the political sphere, the last departmental elections were characterized by Islamophobic political one-upmanship: the right-wing mayor of Chalon-sur-Saône issued a ban on school lunches in his district that did not contain pork, just as Nicolas Sarkozy wasted no time rekindling the subject of national identity that remains so dear to him and that helped him win the 2007 presidential election, emerging

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1 Pauline Graulle, "Attentat: Rioufol ouvre le bal des 'dérapages,'" *Politis.fr*, January 8, 2015, http://www.politis.fr/Attentat-Rioufol-ouvre-le-bal-des,29616.html (accessed April 14, 2015).

2 See "Roger Cukierman assume ses propos sur les jeunes musulmans," *Libération*, February 23, 2015, http://www.liberation.fr/societe/2015/02/23/malaise-apres-des-declarations-du-president-du-crif-sur-le-fn-et-marine-le-pen_1208335 (accessed April 14, 2015); and "Philippe Tesson admet un 'dérapage' sur les musulmans," *Le Monde*, January 22, 2015, http://www.lemonde.fr/actualite-medias/article/2015/01/22/musulmans-philippe-tesson-admet-un-derapage-mais-se-defend-sur-le-fond_4561148_3236.html (accessed April 14, 2015).

triumphantly from these midterm elections and thereby bolstering his bid to regain the presidency.[3] With these factors in mind, the recent surge of the Far Right can be inscribed in a broader context of *droitisation* or *extrême-droitisation*, namely, a kind of mainstreaming of Far Right policies on the French intellectual, political, and ideological landscape. In many ways, even if Marine Le Pen and the National Front Party of which she is the leader have very little chance of actually being elected anytime soon, one could say that she has nevertheless won the battle of words since the entire political establishment is currently obsessed with the question of national identity, including the Left and Far Left. As a way of partially explaining low voter turnout and the rise of the Far Right, the French prime minister, Manuel Valls, recently lamented the deplorable state of the French *banlieues*, equating living conditions in these suburbs with a "territorial, social, and ethnic apartheid."[4] Having said this, one should not forget that just a few years ago he had also bemoaned the fact that there were not enough "whites" or "blancos" (whiteys) residing in the town of Evry, a southern suburb of Paris, where he was mayor at the time, thereby drawing on terms indebted to the lexicon of apartheid.[5] Similarly, President Hollande, reacting to the desecration of several graves in a Jewish cemetery in Sarre-Union, made the inadvertent statement that the culprits, coming from non-Muslim families, were of "pure French stock," thereby adopting terms of reference indebted to the National Front.[6] To the Far Left of the political chess board, Jean-Luc Mélenchon himself, someone who is usually careful with his choice of words, did not think twice before lashing out at a German Christian Democratic Union member of the European Parliament because of her "*boche*" (Kraut) accent, a pejorative term previously used in the multiple Franco-German wars to designate the longtime enemy. It would therefore seem that republican universalism, in its most positive incarnation, even if heavily criticized or derided elsewhere in the world and in particular in Anglo-Saxon countries, has for the time being deserted the French intellectual, ideological, and political landscape.

Political debate has become not only increasingly racialized but also the site of a full-scale race war opposing not so much religions (Islam, Judaism, Catholicism) but rather a range of racialized entities in which these different religions stand in for various "races." In this configuration, the "Muslim" symbolizes the "North African" or "Arab," the "diasporic Jew" now represents the figure of the Eternal Jew summoned by Netanyahu to return to the ancestral land, whereas in the "Catholic" we find those folks of "pure French stock" who join in the "Manifs pour tous" (Demonstration for All) so as to defend the patriarchal family, fight against the legalization of same-sex marriage, and protest against the supposed teaching of "gender theory" in French schools. But this "race war" is fueled by the Left and especially the postcolonialist Far Left, comprising the New Anticapitalist Party (Nouveau parti anticapitaliste, NPA), which has endeavored

3 Cécile Bourgneuf, "Plus de menu sans porc à Chalon-sur-Saône: Une décision politicienne," *Libération*, March 17, 2015, http://www.liberation.fr/societe/2015/03/17/plus-de-menu-sans-porc-a-chalon-sur-saone-une-decision-politicienne_1222492 (accessed April 14, 2015).

4 Sylvia Zappi, "Manuel Valls, l'apartheid et les banlieues," January 26, 2015, *Le Monde*, http://www.lemonde.fr/banlieues/article/2015/01/26/manuel-valls-l-apartheid-et-les-banlieues_4563754_1653530.html (accessed April 14, 2015).

5 "Pour Manuel Valls, il manque 'quelques blancs' à Evry," *Le Monde*, June 10, 2009, http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2009/06/10/pour-manuel-valls-il-manque-quelques-blancs-a-evry_1205322_823448.html (accessed April 14, 2015).

6 Dominique Albertini, "'Français de souche': Hollande reprend une expression qui fâche," *Libération*, February 24, 2015, http://www.liberation.fr/politiques/2015/02/24/francais-de-souche-hollande-reprend-une-expression-qui-fache_1209111 (accessed April 14, 2015).

to connect the class struggle with the struggles of oppressed ethnic and gender minorities, and groups such as Natives of the Republic (Indigènes de la République) or the alter-globalization Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions and Aid to Citizens (Association pour la taxation des transactions financière et l'aide aux citoyens, Attac). Together they have relied on evidence of a double standard and, in their objective of combating Islamophobia, have neglected the equally crucial fight against anti-Semitism and all other forms of racism. The most recent demonstrations organized by the postcolonial and multiculturalist Far Left did not fail to mention the victims of the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks and of the shootings at the kosher supermarket, but they did emphasize the "real victims": namely, those Muslims who are the victims of a kind of state-sanctioned racism and who, unlike Jews, are not protected by "state philo-Semitism," a variation of the "Zionist lobby" promoted by Dieudonné and the anti-Semite essayist and filmmaker Alain Soral.[7]

However, the very belief that a double standard is operative might well seem all the more perverse since it does not ultimately address the real fundamental problem of societal racism that must be denounced and contested in all its forms. To this end, laying the blame for all France's social problems exclusively on the slave trade or colonialism prevents engagement with unrelated forms of racism, such as anti-Semitism and anti-Roma racism. To me at least, recognizing different forms of racism and attributing equal importance to them constitutes the first step in the process of achieving a new kind of universalism and the best way to avoid the self-defeating tautology that is to be found in competition between victims. This is why I find adherence to the idea of the existence of the double standard embraced by Far Left postcolonial organizations so empty and most conducive to exacerbating tensions between groups that are victims of discrimination, and therefore creating those apartheid-like conditions that both Nicolas Sarkozy's Far Right branch of the Union for a Popular Movement (Union pour un mouvement populaire, UMP) and Marine Le Pen's National Front would like to establish. A

7 "Meeting contre l'islamophobie et le climat de guerre sécuritaire," *Union juive française pour la paix*, March 6, 2015, http://www.ujfp.org/spip.php?article3907 (accessed April 14, 2015).