



Charlie Hebdo and Intercultural Dialogue

Guest post by Peter Praxmarer

Dear readers of this page:

As so many all over, I am following the unfolding of the dynamics of the Paris events. I do not think that I have particularly much to say about this, but I do want to share some thoughts that trouble me. They have to do with the Paris crimes and with intercultural communication; “intercultural communication” here understood as a research field in contemporary social science and/or the humanities, as a professional practice, and as the social practice of living together in a multifaceted and diversified society.

I do not want to enter into the debate about free speech vs. obscurantist or fundamentalist religious faith, but would like to draw your attention to the possibly problematic relationship between limitless free speech and expression on the one hand, and respect for the dignity of all human beings on the other. This problem is very well addressed in a series of discussions provided by “Democracy Now” (<http://publish.dvllabs.com/democracynow/ipod/dn2015-0108.mp4>, take it from 11:59 onwards). Separate interviews/contributions/debates with Art Spiegelman, Gilbert Achcar, Tariq Ramadan and others can be downloaded (<http://www.democracynow.org/>). For those who read German, these reflections of a Swiss historian (http://www.nzz.ch/meinung/debatte/mit-zauberlehrlingen-in-einem-boot-1.18459682?extcid=Newsletter_13012015_Top-News_am_Morgen) may also be of interest.

More succinct, but equally telling, are the caricatures (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2015/jan/09/joe-sacco-on-satire-a-response-to-the-attacks>) by Joe Sacco of *The Guardian* (caricature against caricature, so to speak), who takes a different stance than the one taken now by the hardcore provocateurs-and-proud-of-it, in the name of unbridled freedom of expression or in the name of xenophobia or utter racism.

What happened in Paris very much involves satire, also satire as a form of communication. The question: “To what culture does satire pertain?” or headings such as “The satirical differences of cultures” are probably idle ones, at least in this context, even though some people hail satire as a hallmark of a culture of democracy. Likewise, speculating about that particularly vitriolic “French” form of satire, developed since the French Revolution, which some see as typically *Charlie Hebdo* sarcasm, does probably not yield too much in this respect. At any rate, I think one can make some points regarding satire as a form of (intercultural) communication.

When analyzing acts of speech, argumentation – indeed, communicative utterances in all forms and communicative (re-)actions –, certain questions are all too seldom asked: “*cui bono*” or “*cui prodest*”, and the question “why”. Why do we communicate what and how we do, for what reason, to what end and purpose, and to whose benefit? Analyzing the *Charlie Hebdo* caricatures (and the earlier Danish ones) by asking these simple questions, one could come to the conclusion that efficiency as well as effectiveness of communication can also be measured in terms of the underlying reason and purpose. Seen in this way, a superior and refined intercultural communication competency would be, to say it with J.M.C. Le Clézio: (*Coexister, c’est*) *comprendre ce qui peut offenser l’autre*.

Considering all this, I am not so sure if I can without reserve underwrite “*Je suis Charlie*” – it depends on what Charlie stands for: if Charlie stands for the journalists and the others murdered, yes, then I can indeed identify with and proudly defend Charlie, just as I could say *Je suis Ahmed*. If Charlie stands for the right and license to provoke, to offend, to denigrate, in the name of free speech seen as universal, absolute and unilateral human right without corresponding duty and obligation to respect the Other, then I would not like to be seen with this sign in my hands.

A number of points could still be made while reflecting on, and trying to analyze and interpret, these Paris events. Let me just refer to two, which I think are particularly important for those who deal, professionally or in other ways, with intercultural communication:

First, we have to resist any attempt to construe this barbaric act as a clash of cultures or civilizations, or religions, as “Islam against the West”. Even in its more qualified form of “Radicalized Islam”, “Islamic Terrorism” or the like – let’s leave Islam, the Moslems, and indeed culture, out of this. The fact that some individuals use the terminology of a religion and profess to be violent and criminal defenders of a faith does not mean that that religion and its faithful are violent and criminal. Any analysis of this in terms of legitimization and ideological justification is much more explanatory than in terms of culture or religion. No cultural essentialism here – this may be a hard blow for those interculturalists who live off and by culturalizing anything and everything, including conflicts and violence. Equally, any appeal to identity, “Western”, “Christian” or other should be carefully avoided in this context – identity anyways being a very problematic concept that one anthropologist (Francesco Remotti, 2010) considers “poisonous”, while a famous economist, Amartya Sen (2006), warns us about the potential of violence inherent in what the French call *repli identitaire*.

Secondly, what happened is clearly a failure of inclusion, of integration – socially, politically, economically, psychologically and, why not, “culturally”. In a wider context: the free-market-consumer-capitalism-cum-liberal-democracy model of integration does not work anymore (not my thought alone, but the thought of such prominent scholars as Joseph E. Stiglitz (2012), Thomas Piketty (2015), Tony Judt (2011), Richard Wilkinson (2011), Immanuel Wallerstein (2006), Richard Sennett (2003), Colin Crouch (2004), and a host of others). France, as other European countries, has been unable to give to all of her immigrants the space and opportunities where to develop, where to grow into and together with society. Add to this the stigmatization and all too often outright enmity towards Muslims in today’s Europe – the veritable construction of an inner and outer enemy, as exercised daily by xenophobic and populist-nativist (usually right-wing) political parties and certain media – and then you get that type of social climate and political

culture, in which violence thrives. Moreover, this climate in Europe is exacerbated by what happens in many of the Muslim majority countries, from corrupt or utterly undemocratic regimes backed by the (capitalist) West for economic or geopolitical reasons, to direct, almost always US-led, military intervention in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and elsewhere. And, in the specific case of France, consider that nation's colonial past, particularly in North Africa.

I think that we, as interculturalists, cannot ignore the wider, indeed global, context of what is happening (in Europe and elsewhere) in the name of Islam and anti-Islam, but should be well aware of the fact that there are other than "cultural" reasons, factors and dimensions that fuel this conflict.

The only way out of this, and here our contribution and the very name of, and idea behind, the *Center for Intercultural Dialogue* come in, is to search for (new and original) ways of understanding, dialogue and inclusion – intercultural communication as science (or is it an art?) and practice of human understanding and dialogue, to put it loftily...

Cordially yours,

Peter Praxmarer

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