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Qui est Charlie…? A Sociological Perspective on *Charlie Hebdo* and the Culture of Comics

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Abstract In this paper, I will argue for key role played by the global culture of comics, of which the French publication *Charlie Hebdo* is but one small part, in the development and aftermath of the Paris terrorist attacks of 2015. I begin by exploring and elucidating this culture of comics that exists across France and other comic book producing nations and its associations with youthful rebellion, anarchy, and, more recently, misrecognized privilege and bigotry. A sociological perspective on the cultural history and practice of comics publishing through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries adds important context to the *Je Suis Charlie* movement and its place in the public discourse—while also further problematizing it.

Keywords Alternative, underground, and indie comix · Art Spiegelman · Nerd entitlement · Political cartoons · Comics publishing

Introduction

On the morning of Wednesday, 7 January 2015, brothers Cherif and Said Kouachi entered the Paris editorial office of the satirical news magazine *Charlie Hebdo* and demanded to see editor and cartoonist Stephane 'Charb' Charbonnier and four other staff cartoonists, Jean 'Cabu' Cabut, Bernard 'Tignous' Verlhac, Georges Wolinski, and Philippe Honore, by name. These five men, along with six other men and one woman, were then shot and killed. According to the BBC, 'Witnesses said they had heard the gunmen shouting "We have avenged the Prophet Muhammad" and "God

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is Great" in Arabic while calling out the names of the journalists' [4]. The Kouachis were both shot and killed by French police after a protracted standoff on 9 January.

Further attacks and shootings in Paris and its surrounding environs soon followed, including a hostage situation at a supermarket and a series of retaliatory anti-Muslim attacks. International outpourings of sympathy and solidarity quickly followed news of the tragedy; '*Je suis Charlie*' (trans. 'I am Charlie'), which had appeared on the *Charlie Hebdo* website shortly after the shootings, became the slogan of choice for those who would condemn what was quickly framed as a violent, terrorist suppression of free speech. The slogan was prominently displayed at vigils, and the hashtag #JeSuisCharlie became one of the most popular in Twitter's history [16]. On 10 January, the mayor of the city La Tremblade even officially renamed a public square *Je Suis Charlie Place* [11].

Although few apart from the most radical Islamists would condone the murder of journalists for any reasons, the *Je Suis Charlie* movement was not without its critics. Conservative *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, for example, pointed to widespread hypocrisy among Western nations in their tolerance for some uncivil, offensive voices but not others: 'Public reaction to the attack in Paris has revealed that there are a lot of people who are quick to lionize those who offend the views of Islamist terrorists in France but who are a lot less tolerant toward those who offend their own views at home' [9]. And the BBC reported on the ambivalence of French Muslims, quoting one informant: '[*Charlie Hebdo*] set out to provoke people for its own amusement. It attacked their religion. Make fun of yourselves if you will, but leave others alone. The media is like a car: you need to have a licence to be on the road, otherwise you will be a danger to others. Charlie had no licence to put people's lives at risk with their provocations' [3].

The 'provocations' which arguably lead to this massacre in the first place were of a very specific nature and medium of print: satirical cartoons. By 'cartoons' I do not refer to the animated cartoons of film and television but rather to the blending of drawn image and word otherwise known as comics, and the magazine's covers, which always feature its distinctive and deceptively simple, but often grossly irreverent, brand of comic art, are eponymous. *Charlie Hebdo* first came under criticism for its editorial decision back in 2006 when the magazine reprinted controversial Danish cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad, which Charbonnier, in his editorial capacity, publicly defended on an Al Jazeera broadcast in 2012. The magazine's newsroom had also been firebombed in 2011 for publishing a cartoon portrait of Muhammad titled, 'Charia Hebdo.' In fact, it is arguable whether the title is a reference to famed French statesman Charles de Gaulle or to famed American comic strip series *Charlie Brown* by Charles M. Schulz. An international tradition and culture of comics are at the very heart—the raison d'etre, even—of *Charlie Hebdo*.

Yet amidst the debates about the limits of the freedom of speech and the role of civility in public life that have emerged in the wake of this tragedy, the contentious cartoons at the heart of the magazine and its close encounters with violent controversy have fallen for the most part by the wayside. If they are important, it is because they happen to be drawn images of the Muhammad, a creative practice some Muslims consider sacrilegious [2]. Alternatively, the fact that the objects of

contention are cartoons is merely chalked up as one more local manifestation reflective of the ubiquity of comics, known as *bandes dessinees* (trans. graphic albums), in contemporary France. Had *Charlie Hebdo* been publishing satirical prose in lieu of satirical images, one might conclude, these should be a source of equal ire.

However, to dismiss the key role of the global culture of comics, of which *Charlie Hebdo* is but one small part, in the development and aftermath of the Paris terrorist attacks of 2015 would, in my view, be a grievous mistake. In this article, I will elucidate this culture of comics that exists across France and other comic book producing nations and its associations with youthful rebellion, anarchy, and, more recently, misrecognized privilege and bigotry. Ultimately, I will argue, a sociological perspective on the cultural history and practice of comics through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries adds important context to the *Je Suis Charlie* movement and its place in the public discourse—while also further problematizing it.

Understanding Comics Culture

It may be readily argued that the human penchant for sequential art predates the historical record, and the combination of words and pictures into a single, coherent narrative is as old as literacy itself [24]. While precisely what counts as the very first comic is contested, generally speaking, the contemporary medium of comics is thought to originate sometime, somewhere in the nineteenth century [29]. Since then, the production and consumption of comics has expanded and diversified, and today the three countries most widely recognized for their robust indigenous comics culture—and the cultural authority to export it abroad—are the United States, Japan, and France.

Most in-depth comics research focuses on one of these three national territories, although British comics are also a subject of considerable interest, perhaps because of the de facto dominance of the English as global language and scholarly lingua fraca. In recent years, significant scholarly attention has been paid to the Franco-Belgian *bande dessinee*, particularly from literary and historical perspectives (e.g. [5, 20, 26]). However, there are serious methodological limitations to defining one's unit of analysis by national context, particularly given the globalized realities of twentieth and twenty-first century post-industrial societies, and it is especially problematic for comics, when creators like the Japanese Osamu Tezuka was borrowing from the American Disney [30] and the French *Charlie Hebdo* may have been named after the American *Charlie Brown* [13].

In fact, the most important comics creator turned comics theorist, Scott McCloud, sees comics in *Understanding Comics* [25] as a universal mode of communication which, following the medium theory of Marshall McLuhan and the Toronto School, inheres not to external national proclivities but rather to the medium itself. Similarly, French comics theorist and museum curator Therry Groensteen draws upon a wide range of international materials in the development of his canonical theoretical text *The System of Comics* [18] and the more recent follow up work

Comics and Narration [19]. I do not presume to judge the merit of these theories here but note them and their originators, rather, in order to demonstrate that even comics creators and cultural gatekeepers see comics as a global phenomenon.

Combining consideration of the ways in which comics have been framed intellectually as an international—if not universal—culture with the everyday realities of symbolic exchange and shared practice across national boundaries, it would not, in my view, be possible to understand *Charlie Hebdo*'s satirical cartoons as products purely of Franco-Belgian *bande dessinee* culture. They ought to be situated instead within the context of wider global cultural field of comics, and there are two distinctive features of this culture which are, for the purposes of this article, of particular importance. The first of these relates to the comics underground and its presumption of youthful rebellion, protest, and even outright anarchy. The second is the transformation of comics into a culturally and artistically privileged medium, which, because of its historical links to the underground, is now plagued with new forms of inequality. I will explore each of these in turn.

In the period immediately after the Second World War, comics were a cheap, mass-produced medium targeted mainly at children. But in the decades to follow, some of the children who had been raised on a steady diet of sanitized, legally censored comics were, in a spirit of enthusiastic rebellion, to begin creating their own comics—targeted not at children but rather at the adults they had become. These 'alternative' or 'underground' comics movements, known by a variety of names, are well documented in many different countries, including the France [5, 20], Japan [21, 30], the United Kingdom [17, 29], and the United States [23, 28]. The works produced were all characterized by variously irreverent, absurd, grotesque, sexual, and/or violent content, and the magazines which specialized in them were typically run on shoestring budgets and had small circulations. Famous examples of these indie publication outlets include the Euro-American magazines *Heavy Metal* and *Raw*, the Japanese magazine *Garo*, and *Hara-Kiri Hebdo*, the French magazine which would eventually be reborn in 1970 as *Charlie Hebdo*, after its previous incarnation had been banned for sale to minors. It must be underscored that the vast majority of these 'alternative' or 'underground' comics publishers, writers, and artists, such as the infamous Robert Crumb, were men—and some of their contemporaries felt that the rebellious socially- and politically-incendiary visions expressed in their works crossed the line into outright hatred and bigotry. One female comics creator, rumoured to be Trina Robbins, has been quoted saying, 'It's weird to me how willing people are to overlook the hideous darkness in Crumb's work… What the hell is funny about rape and murder?' (quoted in [29]).

Yet in spite of such reservations, by the 1990s, the underground comics movement and its successors—now commonly referred to as 'indie,' short for 'independent' with reference to dual symbolic dimensions as non-corporate as well as free-thinking—had become culturally legitimated and consecrated by critical acclaim and museum exhibitions. Famed underground comics writer Alan Moore's *V for Vendetta*, *From Hell*, and *Watchmen* are all commercial successes which have been adapted into big-budget Hollywood films. Contra Pierre [6] 's distinction between autonomous and heteronomous fields of cultural production, *Watchmen* is both the bestselling graphic novel of all time *and* widely regarded to be the best ever

published [7, 14]. Just last year, similarly, the British Library hosted its first ever comics exhibit, and its subtitle was 'Art and Anarchy in the UK' [17]. The curators positioned comics as an 'inherently anarchic medium' and reported having actively 'sought out comics that question conventions, challenge acceptability, provoke debates and sometimes court controversy' [17]. In the United States, there is even a charitable organization called the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, which specializes in protecting comics creators, retailers, and consumers from prosecution for possession of 'obscene' or otherwise adults-oriented comics. The CBLDF's steady stream of new cases contributes to a continued sense of embattlement in comics culture, combined with a continued perception of gross misogyny in the field at large. In 2011, one female comics industry insider characterized 'one of the biggest indie cartoonists in Canada' Chester Brown, whose graphic novel *Paying For It* documents his long time patronage of prostitutes, as 'elitist, privileged, oftentimes hateful' [8].

The individual comics artist who perhaps best exemplifies the trend from rebellion toward consecration is Art Spiegelman. He began his career in the underground scene as editor of *Raw* and is today best known for the publication of *Maus*, which has won a numerous critical awards including an Eisner and a Pulitzer and is the single most frequently studied and taught comic book in the academic world [22]. While not known for the grotesque, often sexually, violent output of his contemporaries, Spiegelman, besides being a secular Jewish-American living in New York City, has been one of the most spirited defenders of the Danish cartoonists drawing Muhammad a decade ago [32] and the French cartoonists of *Charlie Hebdo* this year [10, 13] on the basis of speech freedom, not aesthetic merit. Specifically, he writes, 'I do believe in the right to insult even if it sometimes puts me in the position of feeling personally insulted. It's just that cartoons are most aesthetically pleasing when they manage to speak truth to power, not when they afflict the afflicted' [32].

Who *Is* Charlie, Really…?

'Of course,' Spiegelman is quick to clarify, 'every individual or group on the receiving end of a barbed cartoon feels afflicted' [32]. But this statement emphatically does not mean that Spiegelman believes affliction is a purely subjective state of social being. Unfortunately, as recent debates about 'nerd entitlement' in Silicon Valley demonstrate [12, 27], others in the field are not so discriminating: some heterosexual white men working in 'nerd' and 'geek' industries such as the tech, games, and, yes, comics industries do not understand their own high social status and see themselves as victims. Such embattled sentiments become heightened as they find the content of their comics subject to censorship, government prosecution, and/or death threats. In other words, they think they are virtuously punching up when, in reality, they are punching down.

Their targets are not, however, deceived, and the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons and cartoonists must be understood in the wider context of this chauvinistic, often cruel, culture. Indeed, in this light, it comes as no surprise that the only cartoonist Cherif

and Said Kouachi spared that morning was Corinne 'Coco' Rey, a young woman [33]. The middle-aged—outright elderly, in some cases—white men at home in their own country who felt entitled to insult a religious/ethnic minority group facing genuine and durable inequality (e.g. [1, 15, 31]) were the *real* subjects of the assailants' perceived grievance. They, and not the 32-year-old Rey, fit the archetype of the angry but now aging, white, heterosexual male comics artist perfectly.

The complex, often unpleasant, realities of contemporary comics culture do not, naturally, excuse violence. But in the weeks, months, and years to follow, a sociological perspective on the culture of comics ought, in my view, to inform the political and public discourse on the Paris attacks and their implications. It should not be forgotten that the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoonists operate in a chauvinistic, sexualized, and violent symbolic landscape, one whose youthful history of rebellion and anarchy has matured (or soured) into a present rife with misrecognized privilege and a widespread sense that its actors are still embattled victims of power and therefore entitled to go on the attack. They should not be placed on a martyr's pedestal uncritically, any more than a suicide bomber should. And finally, those from many different countries and walks of life quick to rush in with expressions of *Je Suis Charlie* solidarity would do well to ask first, 'Who *is* Charlie, really?'…and more importantly still, 'Do I *want* to be him?' Serious and well-informed answers to these two questions might yield some very different conclusions.

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